

# Aftermath of a Fight or Regrettable Incident

## The Gottman Institute (2013)

### **Introduction:**

This guidebook is for “processing” past fights, regrettable incidents, or past emotional injuries. “Processing” means that you can talk about the incident without getting back into it again. It needs to be a conversation – as if you were both sitting in the balcony of a theatre looking down on the stage where the action occurred. This requires **calm** and some emotional distance from the incident.\*

### **Before You Begin:**

Keep in mind that the GOAL is greater understanding – addressing the process and **how** the issue was talked about, without getting back into the fight. So, wait until you are both calm.\*

We assume that **each** of your realities has validity. Perception is everything. Don’t focus on “the facts.” The belief here is that there is no absolute “reality” in a disagreement but rather there are two “subjective realities”. This guidebook is designed to help you get at these two realities and to ease similar situations in the future.

Pay attention to the common barriers to communication and their antidotes as you move through the process. The “Four Horsemen” reference can help:

### **Stop the Four Horsemen (with their Antidotes)**

#### **Horseman Antidote**

- Criticism Use Softened Start-Up\*\*
- Defensiveness Take Responsibility
- Contempt Build Culture of Appreciation
- Stonewalling Do Psychological Self-Soothing

Work through the following five steps together:

### **The 5 Steps:**

1. *Feelings*: Share how you felt. Do not say why you felt that way. Avoid commenting on your partner’s feelings.
2. *Realities*: Describe your “reality.” Take turns. Summarize and validate at least a part of your partner’s reality.
3. *Triggers*: Share what experiences or memories you’ve had that might have escalated the interaction, and the stories of why these are triggers for each of you.
4. *Responsibility*: Acknowledge your own role in contributing to the fight or regrettable incident.
5. *Constructive Plans*: Plan together one way that each of you can make it better next time.

*\*Note: The Gottman’s define “flooded” as being triggered and in a state of “fight or flight.” Check and see if either of you is flooded. If so, take a break and self-soothe before continuing.*

*\*\*Softened Startup Description on last page of guidebook*

**Step One: Feelings:**

Share what you felt, but not why yet.

Each of you is to take turns describing what you were feeling during the disagreement. You may either chose from the list below or come up with your own description. Read **aloud** the items that were true for you during the fight. Remember to keep your comments simple and keep to the format "I felt..." - avoiding statements such as, "I felt like you...". Do not comment on your partner's feelings.

I felt:

1. defensive 38. my opinions didn't even matter 2. not listened to 39. there was a lot of give and take 3. like my feelings got hurt 40. I had no feelings at all
4. totally flooded 41. I had no idea what I was feeling 5. angry 42. lonely
6. sad 43. alienated
7. unloved 44. ashamed
8. misunderstood 45. guilty
9. criticized 46. culpable
10. like I took a complain personally 47. abandoned
11. like you didn't even like me 48. disloyal
12. not cared about 49. exhausted
13. worried 50. foolish
14. afraid 51. overwhelmed
15. unsafe 52. remorseful
16. tense 53. shocked
17. I was right and you were wrong 54. tired
18. both of us were partly right 55. *Other feelings...*
19. out of control
20. frustrated
21. righteously indignant
22. morally justified
23. unfairly picked on
24. appreciated
25. disliked
26. unattractive
27. stupid
28. morally outraged
29. taken for granted
30. like leaving
31. like staying and talking this through
32. I was overwhelmed with emotion
33. not calm
34. stubborn
35. powerless
36. like I had no influence
37. I wanted to win this one

**Step Two: Realities: Subjective Reality and Validation**

- A. Take turns describing your perceptions, your own reality of what happened during the regrettable incident. Don't describe your partner. Avoid attack and blame. Talk about what you might have needed from your partner. Describe your **perceptions** like a reporter, giving an objective blow-by-blow description. Say, "I heard you saying..." rather than, "you said..."
- B. Summarize and then validate your partner's reality by saying something like, "It makes sense to me how you saw this and what your perceptions and needs were. I get it." Use empathy by saying something like, "I can see why this upset you." Validation does not mean that you agree, but that you can understand even a part of your partner's experience of the incident.
- C. Do both partners feel understood? If yes, move on. If no, ask, "What do I need to know to understand your perspective better?" After summarizing and validating, ask your partner, "Did I get it?" and "Is there anything else?"

**Step Three: Triggers**

- A. Share what escalated the interaction for you. What events in the interaction triggered a big reaction in you?
- B. As you rewind the video tape of your memory, stop at a point where you had a similar set of feelings triggered in the past. Now tell the story of that past moment to your partner, so your partner can understand why that is a trigger for you.
- C. Share your stories – it will help your partner to understand you. As you think about your early history or childhood, is there a story you remember that related to what got triggered in you, your "enduring vulnerabilities"? Your partner needs to know you, so that your partner can be more sensitive to you.

*Examples of triggers:*

1. I felt judged. I'm very sensitive to that.
2. I felt excluded. I'm very sensitive to that.
3. I felt criticized. I'm very sensitive to that.
4. I felt flooded.
5. I felt ashamed.
6. I felt lonely.
7. I felt belittled.
8. I felt disrespected.
9. I felt powerless.
10. I felt out of control.
11. Other:

Validation: Does any part of your partner's triggers and story make sense to you?

### Step Four: Take Responsibility

Under ideal conditions, you might have done better at talking about this issue.

1. *What set me up for the miscommunication?* Share how you set yourself up to get into this conflict.

Read aloud the items that were true for you on this list:

- a. I've been very stressed and irritable lately.
- b. I've not expressed much appreciation toward you lately.
- c. I've taken you for granted.
- d. I've been overly sensitive lately.
- e. I've been overly critical lately.
- f. I've not shared much of my inner world.
- g. I've not been emotionally available.
- h. I've been turning away more.
- i. I've been getting easily upset.
- j. I've been depressed lately.
- k. I've had a chip on my shoulder lately.
- l. I've not been very affectionate.
- m. I've not made time for good things between us.
- n. I've not been a very good listener lately.
- o. I've not asked for what I needed.
- p. I've been feeling a bit like a martyr.
- q. I've needed to be alone.
- r. I've not wanted to take care of anybody.
- s. I have been very preoccupied.
- t. I haven't felt very much confidence in myself.
- u. I've been running on empty.

2. *Specifically what do you regret, and specifically, what was your contribution to this regrettable incident or fight?*

3. *What do you wish to apologize for?* (read aloud)

I'm sorry that:

- a. I over-reacted.
- b. I was really grumpy.
- c. I was defensive.
- d. I was so negative.
- e. I attacked you.
- f. I didn't listen to you.
- g. I wasn't respectful.

h. I was unreasonable.

i. Other:

4. *If you accept your partner's apology, say so. If not, say what you still need.*

### Step Five: Constructive Plans

Share one thing your partner can do to make a discussion of this issue better next time. (*It's important to remain calm as you do this.*)

Then, while it's still your turn, share one thing **you** can do to make it better next time.

What do you need to be able to put this behind you and move on? Be as agreeable as possible to the plans suggested by your partner.

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### Softening the Startup

**Complain but don't blame.** You can be confrontational without going on the attack. Simply complain about a particular situation, not your partner's personality or character. However justified you may feel in blaming your spouse, this approach is not productive. Even if it does lead your partner to what you want him to do, it also leads to increased tension, resentment, defensiveness, and so on.

**Make statements that start with "I" instead of "You."** Phrases starting with "I" are usually less likely to be critical and to make the listener defensive than statements starting with you.

"You are careless with money," versus "I want us to save more."

"You just don't care about me," versus "I'm feeling neglected."

If your words focus on how you're feeling rather than on accusing your spouse, your discussion will be far more successful.

**Describe what is happening, don't evaluate or judge.** Instead of accusing or blaming, just describe what you see. Instead of "You never watch the baby," say, "I seem to be the only one chasing after Charlie today." Again, this will help prevent your spouse from feeling attacked and waging a defense rather than really considering your point.

**Be clear.** Don't expect your partner to be a mind reader. Instead of "You left the dining room a total mess," say, "I'd appreciate it if you would clean your stuff off the dining room table." Instead of "Would you take care of the baby for once?" say, "Please change Emmy's diaper and give her a bottle."

**Be polite.** Add phrases such as "please" and "I would appreciate it if..."

**Be appreciative.** If your partner has, at some point, handled this situation better, then couch your request

within an appreciation of what your partner did right in the past and how much you miss that now. Instead of “You never have time for me anymore,” say, “Remember how we used to go out every Saturday night? I loved spending so much time alone with you. And it felt so good knowing that you wanted to be with me, too. Let’s start doing that again.”

***Don’t store things up.*** It’s hard to be gentle when you’re ready to burst with recriminations [*to accuse in return; to counter one accusation with another*]. So don’t wait too long before bringing up an issue — otherwise it will just escalate in your mind.