



A COUPLES TOOL

THE AFTERMATH OF A FIGHT

Gottman's structured way to process a fight, a regrettable incident, or an old hurt after you've both cooled down, so it stops leaving residue. Take turns, one step at a time. The goal is understanding each other, not re-litigating who was right.

BEFORE YOU START

Ground rules

- Do this only when you're both calm, not during the fight or right after it.
- You're processing, not re-fighting. Talk about the fight from a distance, the way you'd review footage together, rather than stepping back onto the field.
- The goal is to understand each other's experience, not to agree on what "really" happened. Both realities are valid.
- If a Horseman shows up, criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling, name it and slow down before you go on.

THE FIVE STEPS

Work through them in order, taking turns. The line under each step is just a way in, and the words to choose from are prompts, so put it all in your own language.

1 Share how you felt

During that fight, I felt...

Name the feelings only, out loud, one at a time. Not why yet, and not your read on your partner's feelings. Borrow from the words below if it helps.

I FELT...

Defensive

Unheard

Hurt

Flooded

Angry

Sad

Misunderstood

Criticized

Worried

Alone

Overwhelmed

Ashamed

Blamed

Shut out

Unappreciated

Powerless

Disrespected

Anxious

Taken for granted

Exhausted

Guilty

Small

2 Share your realities

From where I stood, what happened was...

Describe only what you saw and heard, like a reporter giving the play-by-play, not what you assume your partner meant. Try "I heard you say..." rather than "You said..." which leaves room to be corrected. Then the other person summarizes it back and validates one true piece: "It makes sense you saw it that way." Check with, "Did I get it? Anything else?"

THE FIVE STEPS, CONTINUED

3 Name your triggers

It hit harder because it reminded me of...

Share the older story under your reaction, the memory or early experience that made this hit harder than it otherwise would. Your partner can't be careful with a tender spot they don't know about, so name it.

IT TOUCHED AN OLD NERVE AROUND FEELING...

Judged

Excluded

Controlled

Not good enough

Abandoned

Disrespected

Unsafe

Powerless

Not heard

Like a failure

4 Take responsibility

My part in it was... and I'm sorry for...

Own your piece, even a small one. First, what set you up, the state you were already in before a word was said. Then, what you actually regret. If you can accept your partner's apology, say so. If you can't yet, say what you still need.

WHAT SET ME UP...

Running on empty

Stressed and short

Not feeling appreciated

Half-present and distracted

Quick to take it personally

Hadn't asked for what I needed

Carrying something from earlier

Low on patience

Not making time for us

I'M SORRY THAT...

I overreacted

I was short with you

I got defensive

I shut down

I stopped listening

I made it all your fault

My tone was sharp

I dismissed what you said

5 Make one plan

Next time we head here, I'll...

Each name one specific thing you'll do differently next time you're heading toward this fight, and one thing you'd like from your partner. Keep it small and doable, and be as agreeable as you can to what they ask for.

IF IT HEATS BACK UP

OPTIONS MID-CONVERSATION

- Pause and say it out loud: "I'm getting flooded, can we take twenty?" Stopping isn't failing at this.
- When you come back, pick up at the step you were on, not the beginning. You don't lose your progress.
- If one step keeps reigniting the fight, you may not be cool enough yet. Give it another day and try again.
- Stuck on the same fight across several honest tries? That's a perpetual issue for couples therapy, not a personal failure.

WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE

One couple snapped at each other getting out the door and showed up late to a friend's dinner. A day later, calm, they sat down and walked the five steps. Yours will sound like you, but the five moves are the same.

■ **PARTNER A** ■ **PARTNER B**

1 · FEELINGS

PARTNER A | "I felt rushed, criticized, and kind of alone in it."

PARTNER B | "I felt embarrassed, anxious, and shut out."

2 · REALITIES

PARTNER A | "I was juggling three things to get us out the door, and 'we're going to be late' felt like it was all my fault."

PARTNER B | "So you were carrying a lot, and my comment felt like blame on top of it. That makes sense."
reflects back

PARTNER B | "I freeze when I picture walking in late. I kept staring at the clock."

PARTNER A | "So the lateness felt exposing, and you were stuck on the time. I get that."
reflects back

3 · TRIGGERS

PARTNER A | "Being told I'm behind hits an old nerve. I could never do things fast enough growing up."

PARTNER B | "Showing up late makes me feel judged, like everyone's watching. That's an old one for me."

4 · RESPONSIBILITY

PARTNER A | "I was already stressed and short before you said a word. I'm sorry I snapped."

PARTNER B | "My tone came out sharp. I'm sorry I made it sound like it was all on you."

5 · ONE PLAN

TOGETHER | "Next time we're behind, we say it as a team, something like 'we're late, what can I take?', instead of pointing at each other. For things that matter, we start getting ready earlier."

You're not deciding who was right. Two people can experience the same ten minutes completely differently and both be telling the truth about their own side. If the same fight keeps coming back no matter how you process it, that's a perpetual issue worth bringing into couples therapy. Adapted from The Gottman Institute's "Aftermath of a Fight or Regrettable Incident." My Mental Climb is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or certified by The Gottman Institute.

EDUCATIONAL ONLY, NOT THERAPY.