

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 you 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-sooth 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
2. not listened to
3. like my feelings got hurt
4. totally flooded
5. angry
6. sad
7. unloved
8. misunderstood
9. criticized
10. like I took a complain personally
11. like you didn't even like me
12. not cared about
13. worried
14. afraid
15. unsafe
16. tense
17. I was right and you were wrong
18. both of us were partly right
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
38. my opinions didn't even matter
39. there was a lot of give and take
40. I had no feelings at all
41. I had no idea what I was feeling
42. lonely
43. alienated
44. ashamed
45. guilty
46. culpable
47. abandoned
48. disloyal
49. exhausted
50. foolish
51. overwhelmed
52. remorseful
53. shocked
54. tired
55. *Other feelings ...*

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.*

