

**FROM CONFLICT TO**  
**CONNECTION**  
**MASTERING THE ART OF REPAIR**

# Aftermath of a Fight

*an adaptation of the "Aftermath of a Fight" process from The Gottman Institute*

## 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

- Criticism
- Defensiveness
- Contempt
- Stonewalling

### Antidote

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

## The 5 Steps: **Work through the following five steps together.**

1. **Feelings:** Share how you felt. Do not say why you felt that way. Avoid commenting on your partner or colleague's feelings.
2. **Realities:** Describe your "reality." Take turns. Summarize and validate at least a part of your partner or or colleague'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 page 8.*

*\*\*\*The Four Horsemen and their Antidotes are described on page 9 and 10.*

# STEP 1

## 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 or or colleague's feelings.

### Give voice to what you each felt.

1. Defensive
2. Not listened to
3. Feelings got hurt
4. Totally flooded
5. Angry
6. Sad
7. Unloved
8. Misunderstood
9. Criticized
10. Took a complaint 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. Unappreciated
25. Disliked
26. Unattractive
27. Stupid
28. Morally outraged
29. Taken for granted
30. Like leaving
31. Like staying and talking this through
32. Overwhelmed with emotion
33. Not calm
34. Stubborn
35. Powerless
36. I had no influence
37. I wanted to win
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 2

## Step Two: Realities: Subjective Reality and Validation

- A. **Take turns describing your perceptions**, your own reality of what happened during the regrettable incident. Describe yourself and your perception. Don't describe your partner or colleague. Avoid attack and blame. Talk about what you might have needed from them. 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 or colleague'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 doesn't mean you agree, but that you can understand even a part of their experience of the incident.
- C. **Do both partners or or colleagues 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 or colleague, "Did I get it?" and "Is there anything else?"

# STEP 3

## Step Three: Triggers

- A. Share what escalated the interaction for you. What events in the interaction triggered a big reaction in you? Going through the list below, **what were you telling yourself in the moment of conflict?**
- B. As you move backward in your memory, **stop at a specific point where you had a similar set of feelings triggered in the past.** Now share the story of that past moment with your partner or colleague, so they can understand why that is a trigger for you.
- C. Continue to **share your stories**—it will help your partner or colleague to understand you. As you think about your early history or childhood, is there another story you remember that relates to what got triggered in you, your **"enduring vulnerabilities"** or **"critical inner voices?"** Your partner or colleague needs to know you, so they can become more sensitive and understanding toward you.

### 1. Self-Worth + Self-Esteem:

"I am unworthy / worthless."  
"I am not valuable."  
"I am unlovable / underserving."  
"I am not enough."

### 2. Safety + Control:

"I am not safe."  
"I am helpless."  
"I am trapped."  
"I am out of control."

### 3. Trust + Relational:

"I can't trust anyone."  
"People will always betray me."  
"I am destined to be hurt."  
"I can't be vulnerable."

### 4. Competence + Abilities:

"I am incompetent."  
"I am incapable of success."  
"I am worthless."  
"I am not good enough."

### 5. Autonomy + Independence:

"I can't do anything on my own."  
"I am completely dependent."  
"I am powerless."  
"I have no control."

### 6. Emotional Expression:

"My feelings are not valid."  
"Emotions make me weak."  
"I should suppress my emotions."  
"It's not safe to feel."

### 7. Responsibility + Guilt:

"Everything is my fault."  
"I have to keep others happy."  
"I burden others."  
"I am responsible."

### 8. Identity + Self-Concept:

"I don't know who I am."  
"I am fundamentally flawed."  
"I am a fraud."  
"I don't matter."

### 9. Abandonment + Rejection:

"I will always be alone."  
"I am destined to be abandoned."  
"I don't deserve to be loved."  
"I am unimportant."

### 10. Vulnerability + Shame:

"I am deeply flawed."  
"I am fundamentally inadequate."  
"I am fundamentally unlovable."  
"I am bad."

### 11. Future + Hope:

"Things will never get better."  
"I have no future."  
"I don't deserve happiness."  
"I am going to die."

### 12. Belonging + Acceptance:

"I don't belong anywhere."  
"I will always be an outsider."  
"I am rejected by others."  
"I am unwanted."

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

# STEP 4

## Step Four: Take Responsibility

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

### What set you up for the miscommunication? What was your state of mind?

Share how you set yourself up to get into this conflict.

#### What set me up:

1. I've been very stressed and irritable lately.
2. I've not expressed much appreciation toward you lately.
3. I've taken you for granted.
4. I've been overly sensitive lately.
5. I've been overly critical lately.
6. I've not shared much of my inner world.
7. I've not been emotionally available.
8. I've been turning away more.
9. I've been getting easily upset.
10. I've been depressed lately.
11. I've had a chip on my shoulder lately.
12. I've not been very affectionate.
13. I've not made time for good things between us.
14. I've not been a very good listener lately.
15. I've not asked for what I needed.
16. I've been feeling a bit like a martyr.
17. I've needed to be alone.
18. I've not wanted to take care of anybody.
19. I have been very preoccupied.
20. I haven't felt very much confidence in myself.
21. I've been running on empty.

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

### Specifically what do you regret, and specifically, what was your contribution to this regrettable incident or fight? What do you wish to apologize for?

#### I'm sorry that:

1. I over-reacted.
2. I was really grumpy.
3. I was defensive.
4. I was so negative.
5. I attacked you.
6. I didn't listen to you.
7. I wasn't respectful.
8. I was unreasonable.
9. Other:

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

# STEP 5

## **Step Five: Constructive Plans**

What is one thing your partner or colleague can do differently to avoid an incident like this from happening again? Share one thing your partner or colleague 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 or colleague.

# Soften Startup

## **Complain but don't blame.**

You can be confrontational without going on the attack. Simply complain about a particular situation, not your partner or colleague's personality or character. However justified you may feel in blaming them, this approach is not productive. Even if it does lead them to what you want them 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 partner or colleague, 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 \_\_\_\_\_," say, "I seem to be the only one chasing after \_\_\_\_\_ today." Again, this will help prevent your partner or colleague from feeling attacked and waging a defence rather than really considering your point.

## **Be clear.**

Don't expect your partner or colleague 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 recycle for once?" say, "Please take out the recycle and bring in the bins later."

## **Be polite.**

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

## **Be appreciative.**

If your partner or colleague has, at some point, handled this situation better, then couch your request within an appreciation of what your partner or colleague 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.



# The Four Horsemen

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, as described by the Gottman Institute, are a metaphorical reference to four behaviours, that left unchecked, can lead to the demise of a relationship. Here's a description of each of the Four Horsemen and their respective antidotes:

## 1. Criticism:

Criticism involves attacking your partner's character rather than addressing specific issues or complaints. It's a personal attack on their core being, which can be hurtful and damaging to the relationship. The key is to differentiate between expressing a complaint and criticizing.

Complaint: "I felt scared when you didn't call when you were running late. I thought we had agreed to do that." Criticism: "You never consider how your actions affect others. You're selfish and don't care about anyone, including me." If criticism is a recurring issue in your relationship, it can pave the way for more destructive behaviours.

## 2. Contempt:

Contempt, the second horseman, involves treating your partner with disrespect, sarcasm, mockery, or name-calling. It makes the target feel despised and worthless, going beyond mere criticism.

Contempt assumes a position of moral superiority and often involves belittling your partner. Contemptuous couples may even experience health issues due to weakened immune systems. Contempt is the strongest predictor of divorce and should be eliminated for a healthy relationship.

## 3. Defensiveness:

The third horseman, defensiveness, often arises in response to criticism. It involves making excuses and playing the victim to avoid taking responsibility for mistakes.

Defensiveness rarely resolves issues and can escalate conflicts. A non-defensive response acknowledges fault, takes responsibility, and shows understanding of your partner's perspective. Defensiveness hinders healthy conflict resolution and should be avoided for effective communication.

## 4. Stonewalling:

The fourth horseman, stonewalling, often follows contemptuous interactions. It involves withdrawing from the conversation, shutting down, and not responding to your partner.

Stonewalling can manifest as tuning out, appearing busy, or engaging in distracting behaviours. It's a result of feeling emotionally overwhelmed and can become a harmful habit. To address stonewalling, ask for a break during a conflict to calm down and return to the conversation later when you're in a more rational state.

# Antidotes to the Four Horsemen:

**1. Criticism (Antidote: Gentle Start-Up):** Instead of attacking your partner's character, focus on specific behaviors and use a gentle start-up. Express your feelings and needs using "I" statements without blame. For example:

*Criticism:* "You always talk about yourself. Why are you always so selfish?"

*Antidote:* "I'm feeling left out of our talk tonight and I need to vent. Can we please talk about my day?"

**2. Contempt (Antidote: Build a Culture of Appreciation and Respect):** Contempt comes from a place of moral superiority and includes sarcasm, cynicism, and name-calling. Counter it by fostering appreciation, gratitude, and respect in your relationship. Maintain a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions.

*Contempt:* "You forgot to load the dishwasher again? Ugh. You are so incredibly lazy." (Rolls eyes.)

*Antidote:* "I understand that you've been busy lately, but could you please remember to load the dishwasher when I work late? I'd appreciate it."

**3. Defensiveness (Antidote: Accept Responsibility):** When faced with criticism, avoid defensiveness. Accept responsibility for your actions, acknowledge your partner's concerns, and understand their perspective.

*Defensive response:* "I was too busy today. You know how busy my schedule is. Why didn't you do it?"

*Non-defensive response:* "Oops, I forgot. That's my fault. Let me handle it."

**4. Stonewalling (Antidote: Take a Break):** When overwhelmed, stonewalling can occur. Take a break during conflicts to calm down and return to the conversation later when emotions have subsided.

*Request for a break:* "I'm feeling too angry to keep talking about this. Can we please take a break and come back to it in a bit? It'll be easier to work through this after I've calmed down."

These antidotes promote healthier communication and conflict resolution in relationships.