

Repair Conversation Guide

How to come back together after an argument with a partner, friend or family member.

Every close relationship has conflict. Research on couples suggests what matters most isn't avoiding arguments, but how you start hard conversations and how you repair afterward.

First, check: are you both calm enough? If your heart is racing or you can't really listen, you're probably "flooded." Agree on a time to come back, then take at least 20 minutes to do something soothing (not replaying the argument).

1 Start gently

Describe one specific moment and how you felt, then say what you need. Skip "always" and "never."

Instead of "You never listen," try: "I felt hurt when I was talking about my day and you were on your phone. I'd love some time where we really talk."

2 Take turns: one speaks, one listens

The speaker shares their experience. The listener's only job is to understand, not to defend or fix. Then switch.

"What I'm hearing is _____. Did I get that right? Is there more?"

3 Validate, even if you see it differently

Agreeing isn't required. You're showing their feelings make sense from where they stand.

"It makes sense you felt alone, given how busy I've been."

4 Own your part

Name something specific you did. A real apology has no "but."

"I can see that I brushed you off. I'm sorry. I want you to feel heard."

5 Agree on one small next step

Pick one thing you'll both try. Small and specific beats big and vague.

"Next time one of us needs to talk, we'll put our phones in the other room."

Need help right now? If you or someone else is in immediate danger, call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department. Call or text 9-8-8 (Suicide Crisis Helpline, 24/7). Under 18? Call Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 or text CONNECT to 686868.

This is an educational self-help tool. It is not a diagnosis, and it is not a substitute for care from a regulated health professional.

Where this comes from: Gentle start-ups, repair attempts, breaks when "flooded" and the four patterns draw on John and Julie Gottman's research on couples, including Carrère & Gottman (1999), *Family Process*, 38(3), 293–301, on how the first three minutes of a conflict conversation predict where it goes. Wording and phrases are original to Clover Counselling.

When it starts going off track

A repair attempt is anything that slows things down or brings you back toward each other. It works best when the other person meets it halfway.

“Can we start over?”

“I’m getting defensive. Let me try that again.”

“Can you say that more gently? I want to hear it.”

“I see your point.”

“We’re on the same team here.”

“Let’s take a break and come back at 8.”

Four patterns that make conflict worse

Couples research points to four habits that tend to escalate arguments, and to what helps instead.

Pattern	What it looks like	Try instead
Criticism	attacking the person: “You’re so selfish.”	Complain about one situation, gently, with an “I” statement.
Defensiveness	excuses or counter-attacks: “Well, you always...”	Take responsibility for even a small part.
Contempt	eye-rolling, mocking, name-calling.	Share your needs, and keep noticing what you appreciate about each other.
Shutting down	going silent or walking away mid-argument without a word.	Say you need a break, take 20+ minutes to calm down, and come back.

Plan your conversation

What happened, and how I felt: _____

What I need: _____

My part in it: _____

One small thing we’ll try: _____

This guide is for everyday conflict. It isn’t meant for relationships with violence, threats, or control, where hard conversations can make things less safe. If you’re afraid of your partner, reach out to a professional or a support line. In Ontario, the Assaulted Women’s Helpline is open 24/7 at 1-866-863-0511. In an emergency, call 911.

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