



A COUPLES TOOL

THE AFTERMATH OF A FIGHT

Gottman's structured way to process a fight after you've both cooled down, so it doesn't leave 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. Keep enough distance that talking about it doesn't reignite it.
- The goal is to understand each other's experience, not to agree on what "really" happened. Both realities are valid.

THE FIVE STEPS

Work through them in order. The phrase under each step is just a way in, so put it in your own words.

1 Share how you felt

During that fight, I felt...

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

Defensive

Unheard

Hurt

Flooded

Angry

Sad

Misunderstood

Criticized

Worried

Alone

Overwhelmed

Ashamed

Blamed

Shut out

Unappreciated

Powerless

2 Share your realities

From where I stood, what happened was...

Describe your own view, no blame. Then each of you summarizes and validates the other's side: "It makes sense you saw it that way."

3 Name your triggers

It hit harder because it reminded me of...

Share the older story or memory underneath your reaction, the thing that made this hit harder than it might have on its own.

4 Take responsibility

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

Own your piece, name what you regret, apologize where it fits. Even a small part of it counts.

5 Make one plan

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

Each name one specific thing you'll do differently the next time you're moving toward this fight.

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."

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.

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.

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