

When an Argument Leaves Bruises

A step-by-step repair conversation for couples!

If you keep arguing, it doesn't mean your relationship is broken. You're likely feeling disconnected and discouraged. And if you're like most couples, you're trying to feel safe and understood again. This short guide gives you a structure for coming back together after an argument.

Inspired by a Gottman Method exercise (“Processing an Emotional Injury”), adapted into a more conversational framework.

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When to Use This (and When Not To)

This is not the conversation you force when you're both exhausted, flooded, or still heated. This is the conversation you come back to once things have settled and you're open to hearing each other again.

Use this when...

- You had an argument, and it still feels “stuck” between you and your partner.
- Someone feels hurt, dismissed, or misunderstood.
- The fight is over, but the *emotional weight* is still lingering.

Don't use this when...

- Either of you feels unsafe.
- Yelling, threatening, or mocking is still happening.
- Either of you is too overwhelmed to stay respectful.

Your goal is not to “finish the fight”

Your goal is to understand what happened emotionally between you, so future conflicts feel less bruising and overwhelming.

GROUND RULES

1. Read through the steps first, so you feel prepared for what you want to say
2. One person talks first, the other person only listens (no interrupting)
3. No attacks, blame, criticism, sarcasm, name-calling, eye rolling, etc.
4. No trying to *win*

The 6-Step Repair Conversation

(Sample Repair Conversation: Yelling at the kids)

Step 1: Pick a calm time and decide who goes first

If necessary, flip a coin to decide. The person listening sits back and takes it in without interrupting.

Partner A:

I need to talk about what happened earlier with the kids. I don't want to fight about it. I just want to share why I got so upset with you. Can we do that after the kids are asleep?

Partner B:

Okay, yes. We can do that.

Note: Partner B, it's okay to say, "Not right now." If you do, offer a specific time to come back to it (ideally within the next day).

Step 2: Name what you felt (only emotions) during the argument

Don't explain why you felt those emotions at this step. Just name them.

Examples of feelings:

- I felt dismissed.
- I felt embarrassed.
- I felt misunderstood.

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- I felt taken for granted.
- I felt disrespected.

Partner A:

Earlier today, when you yelled at the kids, I felt uncomfortable and, honestly, a little unsettled while it was happening. I also felt powerless, like I wanted to step in and protect them, but I also didn't want to make it worse. I just don't like how it felt.

Partner B: *Okay, keep going.*

Note: Partner B, you might not remember it the same way, and that's okay. For now, just focus on understanding your partner's experience. You'll get your turn next.

Step 3: Share your experience and what you needed

In this step, you let your partner know why you had those feelings and what you think could have helped you at that time.

Partner A:

What I remember most is how loud it got and the look on our kids' faces. The whole situation felt out of control. I tried to step in, and that didn't help because we ended up arguing.

I think what I needed was to see if I jumped in, you could calm down and stop yelling. I needed reassurance that even though you were angry, my voice could help you slow down. And maybe that you trusted that if I'm saying something, it was escalating too far.

Step 4: Name the trigger underneath your reaction

Often, what hurts the most isn't what *just happened*, but a memory or familiar feeling from somewhere in your past.

This doesn't excuse harmful behavior, but it does explain why something landed so heavily.

Partner A:

Again, I felt powerless. Like I had no influence over you. I'm sure I said this before, but yelling is a sensitive area for me. Growing up, yelling meant things were about to get worse. I start to feel like I'm panicking inside. When you raise your voice with the kids, my body reacts fast, even when I know you're not trying to scare them or me.

Partner B:

Thanks for telling me that, and reminding me why yelling in the house is hard for you.

Step 5: Own your role and offer a clean apology

As the speaker, you may believe your partner is solely responsible for the argument or conflict. Sometimes, that can be true. Oftentimes, you play a role in creating or maintaining the argument, however small.

This step is also a good place to add your state of mind at the time. But *clearly* apologize.

Partner A:

I was feeling irritable after a conversation I just had with my manager, and was also rushing home because it was getting late. As I thought about it now, I can own that I came in hot. I'm sorry I didn't handle my part calmly. I still need us to find a different way to handle anger around the kids.

You can own up to your role, however small, without minimizing your original hurt (your partner yelling at the kids).

Partner B accepts the apology. If they aren't ready to fully accept your apology, that's okay.

Step 6: Make one small plan for next time

You don't need to redesign your entire relationship here. Pick one small repeatable change each.

Partner A:

One thing I can do differently next time is realize you're not trying to scare the kids. I can pause before I jump in. And if I need to step in, I'll do it with a signal we agree on instead of coming in hot.

Partner B:

You've told me this before. And I have to realize that yelling scares you and the kids. When I notice I'm getting angry, I'm going to walk away before I say anything.

What's next? Now switch roles. Partner B takes a turn sharing their experience and repair using the same steps.

Example of Step 5 when Partner B takes their turn: *I was still irritable from having to cancel my plans last night, and I raised my voice at the kids. I'm sorry. That wasn't okay, and I don't want to handle stress that way.*

“Stuck Moments” Troubleshooting

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If one of you gets defensive...

Try:

- “I’m not trying to blame you. I’m trying to explain the impact.”
- “Can you just summarize what you heard me say before you respond?”

If one of you shuts down...

Try:

- “Do you need a few minutes? If you need a break, we can come back to this later.”
- “I’m not here to attack you. I just really need you to hear what it was like for me.”

If the apology turns into “I’m sorry, but...”

Try:

- “Can you pause and try again without the ‘but’? I really need it to feel like you see the impact.”
- “We can talk about your side next. I just need you to hear me out first.”

If the fight was intense and one of you feels emotionally unsafe...

Try:

- “I want to repair, but I need the tone to be calm and respectful.”
- “If yelling or name-calling starts, I’m taking a break, and we’ll come back later.”

If you keep looping on details...

Try:

- “Let’s stop chasing the details and talk about what we felt.”

If repair conversations feel hard to start (or hard to finish), [couples counseling](#) can help you practice these skills in a calmer, more supported way.