
The Language of ‘Fighting Right’

By Dr. John Gottman and Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman

A healthy relationship doesn’t mean that there’s never any fighting. Couples can have disagreements and still be on each other’s side. We’ve been happily married for 35 years, and we’ve found that in conflict, your mission is to allow yourself to be vulnerable — to turn the normal response of *attack and defend* into *self-disclosure and openness*.

When conflict arises, the happiest and most successful couples use a language of repair and collaboration. This is something that anyone can learn to do.

We’ve organized our suggestions into six categories of phrases and what kind of repair they help with. These are tried-and-true phrases for calming down an escalated conflict, pulled from years of observation of over 30,000 couples:

1. “I feel”

Use this when you need help expressing your emotions in the moment.

Examples:

- “I’m getting scared.”
- “Please say that more gently.”
- “That hurt my feelings.”
- “That felt like an insult.”
- “I feel blamed. Can you rephrase that?”
- “I feel like you don’t understand me right now.”

2. “I need to calm down”

Use this when you start feeling flooded and/or need a moment of repair.

Examples:

- “I need your support right now.”
- “Just listen to me right now and try to understand.”
- “Can I have a hug?”
- “This is important to me. Please listen.”
- “Can you make things safer for me?”
- “Can I take that back?”

3. “I’m sorry”

Use this when you need help phrasing an apology.

Examples:

- “My reactions were too extreme. I’m sorry.”
- “I really blew that one.”
- “Let me try again.”
- “I want to be gentler to you right now and I don’t know how.”
- “I can see my part in all this.”
- “How can I make things better?”

4. “Stop action”

Use this when you are flooded and need a break.

Examples:

- “I might be wrong here.”

- “Please let’s stop for a while.”
- “Give me a moment. I’ll be back.”
- “Let’s start all over again.”
- “Let’s agree to disagree here.”
- “I’m feeling flooded. Can we take a break and talk about something else for a bit?”

5. “Getting to yes”

Use this when you want to validate your partner or meet them halfway.

Examples:

- “You’re starting to convince me.”
- “I agree with part of what you’re saying.”
- “Let’s compromise here.”
- “I never thought of things that way.”
- “I think your point of view makes sense.”
- “What are your concerns?”

6. “I appreciate”

Use this when you want to make a repair and add positivity.

Examples:

- “I love you.”
- “I understand.”
- “One thing I admire about you is…”
- “This is not your problem, it’s our problem.”
- “Thank you for…”
- “I see your point.”

Small Repair Phrases Prevent Major Damage

- Think of a repair as anything that shifts the conversation toward the positive. Make that your goal and work as a team to open up to each other.
- The most basic repair is a straightforward apology: “I’m sorry” or “I’m sorry I said that — let me try again.”
- It can also take the form of empathy or validation: “I understand how you feel” or “That makes sense, when you put it that way.”
- It can be voiced admiration: “You know what I really appreciate about you? How much you care about our kids. We’re disagreeing over which school to pick, but I love how much it matters to you that they have a good education.”
- Remember, what determines the success or failure of a relationship is how you each respond to the repair.

Dr. John Gottman and Dr. Julie Schwartz Gottman are the co-founders of The Gottman Institute and Love Lab. Married for over 35 years, the two psychologists are world-renowned for their work on relationship stability and divorce prediction. They are also the co-authors of “Fight Right: How Successful Couples Turn Conflict into Connection” and “The Love Prescription: Seven Days to More Intimacy, Connection, and Joy.”