

Emotional Repair

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After seeing upwards of 1000 couples over the years, there is one area that stands out as particularly helpful in resolving couples conflict: repair.

While driving to the store, Grayson and Emily got into a fight. Grayson called her a bitch. Emily responded by socking him really hard on the shoulder, causing the car to swerve. Luckily, there wasn't an accident, but they were both really angry at the other. When we discussed this in the session she said that he had been complaining about her relentlessly and when he called her a bitch it was just too much. She really needed him to stop. The impulse to sock him was so strong and it happened without her even thinking about it. He, on the other hand, felt entitled to call her names after she had impugned sexual performance.

It was the beginning of a long and upsetting day. Both were confused about how to make things better.

Although I am a great believer in unwinding the deep emotional injuries that drive couples into these kinds of conflicts, exploring the attachment injuries, the core beliefs that tend to shape their emotional lives, I also find that people can obtain tremendous relief by engaging some simple steps of repair. They are of course easier to talk about the practice.

There are nine distinct steps for couples.¹ For friends and family members steps eight and nine are usually omitted:

¹ Many of these steps I learned from Cedar Barstow, the author of Right Use of Power.

Couple's Steps to Repair

Step One: Self forgiveness and forgiveness of the other.

Step Two: Compassion.

Step Three: Accountability. Take responsibility for your part in the conflict.

Step Four: Impact. Communicate your understanding of the impact on the other person.

Step Five: Regret and Apology

Step Six: Discuss what you have learned.

Step Seven: Make amends.

Step Eight: Mutual Self Reflection ("MSR") – Each discloses their vulnerabilities.

Step Nine: Physical contact.

Step One: Forgiveness. Often it is hard to engage in repair when you feel that you have not lived up to your own standards. Instead of taking responsibility, you want to attack the other person so that you can feel right rather than guilty. To counteract this it is helpful to first forgive yourself your transgressions. This does not mean to make excuses or condone hurtful actions, but to acknowledge your humanness and your natural tendency to make mistakes.

Also, since conflicts are rarely one sided, you may need to be understanding and forgiving towards the other person as well.

Grayson had violated his own standard by calling Emily a bitch. He did not want to act that way towards women, yet when his reptilian brain became engaged, he found himself saying something he regretted. He did not want to feel like the bad guy here, so his first response was, "She deserved it." He needed to first take a moment to forgive himself in order to go on to any further steps.

Step Two: Compassion. In order to forgive oneself and others, compassion can be very helpful. Grayson needed to be compassionate towards himself. He had made a mistake. He remembered Einstein saying, "If I had life to live over, I would make more mistakes." He was really hurting and worried from Emily's comment about sex

and decided to be a bit gentle on himself without excusing his actions. He also could understand that she was probably also hurting from his comment as well as the disconnection between them.

Emily needed to forgive herself for socking him. At first she felt self-righteous and justified in doing this - standing up not just for herself, but for all women. After all, he was being such a jerk. Then she felt regretful and ashamed for violating her own principles. As soon as she thought that, she hated him even more. It was easier to hate him than to forgive him. She decided to practice compassion for herself, forgiving herself for being so activated and hurt that she lashed out in a dangerous way. Only when she was able to be gentle on herself was she able to calm down enough to start thinking about repair.²

Step Three: Take responsibility. For connection to be reestablished, each of them needed to independently take responsibility for what they did. They were each acting in response to an intolerable feeling in part generated by something that the other person did. However, if they use that for justification for their own hurtful behavior they will be doomed to a difficult relationship for all of eternity!

Grayson was finally able to say, "I know I called you a name. I'm not proud of it." Emily was struggling with the same steps. After all, she was a domestic violence counselor! She felt humiliated. For each of them to just admit their part, independently of the other person's action was hard. They needed to suspend the impulse to extract an apology or admission from the other. And, at least temporarily, to have themselves accurately understood. This latter point is quite important. People really want to be understood - particularly by their intimate partner. In order to be understood, one must often defer this happening in favor of understanding the other first. If you try to get the other person to understand you before you have communicated understanding them, they often don't have the internal emotional capacity to actually receive you, and the communication ends in frustration and anger on both sides.

No one likes to be accountable for his or her mistakes. Grayson did not want to admit that he did something hurtful. He just wanted to have people think highly of him, not admit something that would hurt somebody that he cared about. He had to override a part of him that did not want to admit make a mistake or being less than perfect. Acknowledging what he did and staying away from blame or reprisal are key.

² Domestic violence can be life threatening and needs additional interventions beside a repair approach such as the one suggested here. Safety plans, exit plans, procedures for de-escalation, explorations of triggers, gender issues around power PTSD, etc. are all helpful to explore so that violence is not repeated. However, repair can be an essential part of this therapeutic equation.

After struggling with himself inside he continued, " I know I shouldn't have called you that name." "Really, sorry." He turned away from her as he said this. He had actually combined the first and second steps together, which frequently happens.

Emily's first reaction to his apology was, that now, since he was listening, she could really let them have it. He would listen to her and take it in and she would finally feel vindicated and understood. She could even give him a little taste of what he had done to her. She could say something demeaning to him! Yet another part of her knew that if she did that it would just further erode the connection between them. What she really wanted was to be close, not just to be right. Advocating in favor of her deeper longing, she decided to opt in favor of connection instead of retaliation. She also wanted to hear a heartfelt apology that really let her know that he cared about her feelings. His turning away did not help. His defensiveness had interfered with his showing his care. It is hard to apologize when you feel under attack. He did the best he could do and she was wise enough to see his effort, as imperfect as it was.

Step Four: Impact. Letting the other person know that you are aware of the impact on them of your action can be quite soothing. It tells them that you are aware of them, attuned to them, and care about the impact of your actions. Grayson continued, "I know how much that bothers you when I call you names. It's not just demeaning to you, I guess its demeaning to all women and their value. I know it sounds incredibly dismissive and makes you really mad and untrusting of me."

Emily liked hearing this. Maybe he wasn't really such a bad guy at all. At least he was aware of it!

She felt inspired to say, "I can't believe I hit you. It's against everything I believe. I don't know how to forgive myself or even how to be compassionate towards myself." This went a long way with Grayson. At least they were on the same team about this, just the fact that she was acknowledging what she had done and not continuing to blame him made him start to feel more relaxed. "I'm pretty sure didn't hurt you though right?"

Oh, oh! It hadn't hurt him so much physically, but the idea that she would touch him in that way violated something deep in his sense of their connection. She appeared to be dismissing it out of her own guilt. She could see a grey cloud cover his face. "Maybe I'm not quite getting it," she said. Can you tell me more about what it was like for you?

"Actually it hurt me a little bit physically, but more than that makes me not trust you and I think maybe this will start to escalate if you keep doing this."

Oh, she thought I didn't expect that! He such a jerk! Why is he such a baby? Maybe she should just leave him. She felt really guilty. It was a bit much for her to take, but she realized if she went in that direction there would be no coming back together.

She really had stepped over the line. She had decided to follow her deepest self, the part of her I lived underneath all the triggers at the shame, so that she could really advocate for what she wanted rather than liver light from the triggers.

“I didn’t know,” she said, looking down. This was a bigger deal for you than I had thought. I know all this theoretically from work, but being in it is very humbling.”

Step Five: Regret. Your partner wants to know that you care about what happened, that you care about the impact and about their feelings, that you are sorry. Trying to extract an apology from a partner is usually a thankless task, however. They can feel coerced and can respond with resistance or a sense of obligation that make the apology feel empty.

In this case, Emily really did feel regretful, but this was mixed with a sense of outrage at what he had said to her. She realized that she would need to communicate more of her experience later and to focus on regret now. She already felt a bit better from having gone through the preceding steps, so she was willing to give it a shot.

“I’m sorry I did that. The last thing I want is to break the trust between us. I love your body and don’t ever want you to feel like you have to protect yourself from me. I’m really sorry.”

“Good” he thought. Let her grovel a little bit. It felt good. But, what about his part? He felt self-righteous and did not feel like apologizing. Now what? “At some point I’d like to apologize to you too, but I am too riled up right now, and a bit self righteous too! Is it OK that I wait for a little bit?”

She like his self-reflection and understood he needed a little time. She did not need to rush this, and a false apology wouldn't do her any good at all.

Step Six: Learning from It. They each had the potential to learn from this experience. In order for your partner to come to peace with what happened they want to know that this will not repeat itself, that you have learned something and this will not become a pattern that will go on and on. Otherwise, it won’t really settle inside. Apology is not enough.

She had learned something about putting him down sexually and about her tendency to escalate into physical violence. He had learned about how frustrated he could become to the point he would say things that were just hurtful. Maybe he shouldn’t have started the fight by calling her “the ice queen” when she didn’t want to have sex.

“I think that next time I get so upset with you I need to find a way to take a break before talking to you from that place. It’s really hard for me because I just get so

frustrated. I think it would be better if I take a break when I start feeling lieka reptile so that I don't hurt our connection. That's the last thing I want. Sometimes I say judgmental things in an effort to convince you that my point is valid. I know that doesn't work at all. It just make things worse. I really need to be more careful of your feelings." Either one of them could have said this.

Step Seven: Amends. Making amends is an offer to make things better – some act of care to rebalance the relationship. It is as simple as asking your partner, “Is there anything I can do to make things better?”

His response to this was to touch him in a gentle way and to review an article about domestic violence. Hers was to hear what he appreciated about women and to take back what he had said about her being an ice queen. Also to go to her favorite restaurant.

Step Eight: Self Reflection. In this step each person can explore how they got triggered. This is really an advanced step. If you are able to do this, the result can be an enhancement of the depth of connection between the two of you and a deeper sense of secure attachment. It is not for the faint of heart as it involves willful emotional vulnerability (“WEV”). Sounds like a bad idea? Maybe. If your partner is on the attack, or not interested in you as a person, then don't throw pearls before swine. If your partner is open hearted and interested, this will create the alchemy to take an upset and transform it into intimacy.

When people act in hurtful ways, they may be unconscious or they may be triggered into earlier emotional wounds. For instance, when Grayson Emily call him a “sexual wimp,” he felt triggered. If he had stopped for a moment and become curious about his 0 – 60 in under a second response, he might have tapped in to all the times he wasn't sure he was masculine enough, did not fit in, and that everyone else was better than he. Painful places. He might have been able to say, “Wow, that really hurts. It brings me back to all the times I have questioned my own place in the world. When you also seem to be doing that, it really takes me for a spin!”

Emily could do the same – become mindful and study with warmth and curiosity what triggers her so much when he called her a demeaning name. This is not to excuse or condone the other person's behavior on either side. It does mean to explore and disclose to your partner where your sensitivities are without self righteousness, entitlement or blame. This will create understanding and secure attachment. It would be a tragedy not to take advantage of the opportunity. It is a way of including your partner in your inner world.

As human beings, we have a tendency to opt for following our triggers, rather than really advocating for our deepest needs and longings. Both Emily and Grayson had impulses to get revenge or teach the other a lesson, but decided instead to do what was needed to build closeness. This involves a deep decision to follow what you

really want as opposed to indulging a trigger. It means moving from your reptilian brain which wants to fight, freeze or flee, to your prefrontal cortex that can move towards intimacy.

Step Nine: Touch. If the repair process is conducted with an intimate partner, it can be quite helpful to reconnect physically. Many of the wounds people experience are connected to deep attachment injuries that are not accessible with words alone. The nerves, the cells and the muscles of the body need to be addressed. One can often talk oneself blue in the face trying to resolve an attachment injury with words. (Particularly psychotherapists.) Touch is needed. Do not force this, however, if either person is scared (as in domestic violence), disgusted, or unready in any way. Upsets create a rift in the fabric of attachment that is hard to mend with words alone. Touch is the language of attachment, and to reattach after an injury using touch is often the royal road.

You may be wondering what happened to Grayson and Emily. After completing step number nine, Emily suggested that they lie down together and snuggle. Grayson consented, hoping where this might lead, but they both fell asleep. When they woke up Emily initiated sexual contact, and they lived happily ever after.

Life, however, does not always follow fairy tales. Going through these steps is gritty stuff and takes a deep commitment to your own happiness, to letting the other person go first and really honoring your need for both peace, closeness and differentiation. Often it does not go according to this article and in one or more steps things fall apart. You can always take a break and come back, or at least celebrate the one step that you or your partner accomplished successfully.

Sometimes the injured person is not ready or not willing to engage in a repair conversation. In this case, it is not wise to insist on the process just because it may make you feel better. Respect their freedom of choice. You can invite them into a dialogue, offer to listen and understand and leave it up to the other party.

These are guidelines for a lifetime of practice. Treat yourself and your partner with as much compassion and forgiveness as you can in the process. Remember to acknowledge small triumphs along the way. Make room for your own and your partner's mistakes and for your own humanness.



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He is a speaker at conferences and workshops around the country such as CAMFT, USABP, The Psychotherapy Networker, The Couples Conference, and The Relationship Council where he presents as a peer, master or keynote speaker. Teaching internationally, he is a Hakomi Mindfulness Based Somatic Psychotherapy Trainer and a director of Hakomi Institute of California and the Hakomi Institute of China.