

Processing Regrettable Incidents

By Jessica Fern

(Adapted from John Gottman and Jule Gottman's *Five Steps to Reclaiming Good Will With Your Partner*)

This exercise offers you an opportunity to process regrettable incidents, past fights or past emotional injuries in a new way. The intention is to talk about the incident, without getting back into the fight, in order to better understand each other and be able to move forward from what happened. This requires that both people are calm and resourced to be able to share and listen, without going into the Four Horsemen.

Assumptions: We assume that each of our realities and experiences are valid (even if it was based on a misunderstanding or partial information). This means that you don't focus on the facts of what happened or who said what. This typically gets you nowhere except more and more fighting and disconnection.

Posture: Take on the attitudes and postures of curiosity, care, humility and willingness to be open and receptive to each other.

12 Steps to a Better Conversation: First, pick and agree on an incident or past right that you are going to use for this process. Then...

Speaker	Listener
1. Realities: Describe your own perceptions and "reality" of what happened. Use I statements and avoid commenting on your partner's feelings or interpreting the reasons and intentions behind your partner's actions. Present your position without blame or criticism.	(Listen to your partner with an open mind and heart)
2. After you share your point of view of what happened, now share the feelings you had and the needs that arose for you.	3. Summarize what your partner shared for # 1 and #2. You don't need to recite their words verbatim. You want to capture the essence of what their experience was, and the feelings and needs they had based on their reality of what happened. When you're done summarizing, ask your partner if you got it right and if they want to edit anything or reiterate something that you may have missed. Listener postpones bringing up their position until you switch roles after step 10.
After your partner reflects back what they heard you say from #1 and #2, pause for a moment and check in with yourself to see if you feel understood	If your partner does not feel fully understood, ask "what do I need to know

<p>by them. If Yes, go to Step 4.</p> <p>If not, edit or highlight anything that you think is important that your partner may have missed or that you really want them to understand. It's important that you only move on until you feel understood, so it's OK if you need to go back and forth a few times. Be patient and manage any defensiveness or inner frustration that you may feel if they didn't fully get it the first time.</p> <p>Once you feel like they "got it" go to step 4 →</p>	<p>to understand your experience or perspective better?" Listen to what they said and then summarize what you heard, checking in as to whether you got it or if there is anything else you missed or anything else they need to say.</p> <p>Go back and forth as much as your partner needs to until they feel like you really got it. Stay open and manage any defensiveness or inner frustration that may arise if you didn't get it the first time.</p> <p>Once your partner feels understood, move to step 4.</p>
<p>(Receive the validation from your partner)</p>	<p>4. Once your partner feels like you understand their experience, now it is time to validate your partner's reality by saying something like, "<i>It makes sense to me how you saw this way</i>", "<i>I see why you would have felt they way you did</i>", or "<i>I understand why this was so hard for you</i>", etc." Validating your partner's experience does not mean that you have to agree with it 100%. It also doesn't mean that your own experience is invalid if you validate theirs. It means that you are connecting with what they went through as if you were listening to a friend who just went through a painful situation and you're empathizing with them.</p> <p>Avoid explaining how this makes you feel or launching into an apology. You can explain how if you were in their shoes, you probably would have had a similar experience.</p>
<p>5. Thank your partner for validating you and share any positive impact or feelings that you're experiencing from them taking the time to understand you.</p>	
<p>6. Triggers and Stories: Triggers: Share what got triggered for you in this situation--it will help your partner to better understand you. What past experiences or memories came up</p>	<p>7. Validate any part of your partner's triggers or stories that make sense to you.</p>

<p>for you that then made this situation feel even worse?</p> <p>Stories: Sometimes it's not just past triggers that add more painful layers to certain situations, but it's also the stories that we are telling about what is happening (or both). Share what stories you started to tell about yourself or your partner that made this situation even more painful, (i.e., <i>I started to tell the story that you don't care about me, I started to tell the story that I'm not enough in this relationship, etc.</i>)</p>	
	<p>8. Taking Responsibility: Share with your partner what you see as your contribution to this regrettable incident. Without making excuses for your behaviors, share what you specifically regret, what you wish to apologize for and/or what you see that you could have done differently.</p>
<p>9. Accept your partner's apology or let them know what you still need in order to accept them taking responsibility.</p>	
<p>10. Taking Responsibility: Now Share with your partner what you see as your contribution to this regrettable incident. Without making excuses for your behaviors, share what you specifically regret, what you wish to apologize for and/or what you see that you could have done differently.</p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">Switch and Repeat Steps 1-10 with other partner (You may want to take a break before you start this process again)</p>	
<p>11. Take turns sharing what you each think are the important takeaways and lessons learned from this situation.</p>	
<p>12. Constructive Plans. Finally you want to talk about anything that is needed in order to repair what happened and/or how to do it better next time. Share if there is anything that either of you needs from the other in order to be able to put this behind you and move on. Take turns sharing 1-3 things that you agree to do differently next time something like this happens again. Then share 1-3 things that your partner could do to make it better next time. If you need to, write steps 11 and 12 down, so that you both can refer to them and keep them fresh on your minds.</p>	