



Re-Pairing

Helping couples have deeper conversations after difficult times

Seven ideas can help you recover from upsetting conversations that range from small flare-ups to larger arguments. Over time, awareness of them will allow you to “re-pair” more quickly, sometimes even before an upsetting conversation ends; they may then help you to actually prevent such disruptions in intimacy. These ideas can lead you to the deeper conversations couples must have to develop more resilient relationships.

1. Experiencing disappointment, hurt, anger, and upsets are a basic part of experiencing intimacy. A relationship is a system created by two people, resulting in complex, mutually interactive vulnerabilities; one person’s wounds or soft spots tends to set off the other’s. Activating those hurts from time to time can actually be healing when followed by “re-pairing.”

2. We all have two experiences of another person. One is of the “Actual Person” that is present in the here-and-now, and the other is of the “Conceptual Other” - our mental image of that person in our mind that is made up from our past interactions with him or her, and from our projections, fears, hopes and distortions from our histories with emotionally important others.

3. Any feeling -- the most important part of intimate communication -- is true in the moment it is experienced. When you focus on feelings (rather than on opinions, beliefs, decisions, and actions) and acknowledge together the veracity of those feelings, you will make it easier for each of you to experience empathy and understanding, and will feel close again (“re-pair”) quicker after arguments and other upsets.

4. Anger, irritation, annoyance, and frustration often are the result of other painful emotions. Listen closely to your partner. Underneath the emotions being expressed, you may hear pain, fear, and/or sadness. When you acknowledge and ask about underlying causes of distress, you will be better able to accept and respect your partner’s feelings. “Re-pairing” helps heal recent wounds and vulnerabilities as well as older ones.

5. You can hold your partner’s feelings with the same kind of tenderness that you listen to a child’s upsets. Even when your partner is very angry, learn to not take your partner’s feelings personally. You can each listen for the truth in what you are each saying: the feeling part. Acknowledge all feelings expressed. Then try to understand what your partner needs from you.

6. Escalating arguments can be minimized by either person requesting a temporary time-out or pause, and by expressing a willingness to talk later, when both partners are calmer. Even a short break can help quiet down our “flight or flight” response.

7. Blame is irrelevant when each person’s feelings are acknowledged and when both people recognize that neither person is an “innocent bystander.” We all yearn to be understood non-judgmentally and to not be blamed for our feelings. When you accept part of the responsibility for upsets, you take a big step toward being a grown-up in an intimate relationship. Behavior change will then come more easily and naturally.

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