



The Gottman-Inspired Conflict Resolution Framework

Introduction: The Science of Healthy Conflict

Conflict isn't the problem—how you handle it is. Research by Dr. John Gottman shows that successful couples don't avoid conflict; they navigate it with respect, curiosity, and repair.

This framework draws on Gottman's decades of research to give you a practical, step-by-step process for resolving conflicts in ways that strengthen your relationship instead of damaging it.

Key Principle: The goal isn't to win the argument—it's to understand each other and find a solution that honors both partners.



The 5-Step Conflict Resolution Process

Step 1: Soften Your Startup

The Problem: How you begin a difficult conversation predicts how it will end. Harsh startups (criticism, blame, contempt) lead to defensiveness and shutdown. Soft startups invite collaboration.

The Gottman Research: 69% of relationship conflicts are perpetual (they never fully go away). What matters is how you talk about them.

How to Soften Your Startup:

Use “I” Statements Instead of “You” Accusations

✗ Harsh Startup: “You never help around the house. You’re so lazy and selfish.”

✓ Soft Startup: “I’m feeling overwhelmed with housework. I need more support. Can we talk about how to divide things more evenly?”

The Soft Startup Formula:

“I feel [emotion] about [situation]. I need [specific request]. Can we talk about [solution]?”

Examples:

- “I feel hurt when plans change last minute. I need more notice when possible. Can we talk about how to communicate schedule changes?”
 - “I feel anxious when we don’t talk about money. I need us to have a budget conversation. Can we set aside time this week?”
 - “I feel disconnected when we don’t spend quality time together. I need more one-on-one time with you. Can we plan a date night this weekend?”
-

Soft Startup Checklist:

Before you bring up a concern, ask yourself:



- ☐ Am I calm enough to have this conversation? (If not, wait.)
- ☐ Have I identified my feeling and my need?
- ☐ Am I starting with “I” instead of “You”?
- ☐ Am I making a specific request, not a vague complaint?
- ☐ Am I expressing what I want, not just what I don’t want?

If you can check all five boxes, you’re ready for a soft startup.

Step 2: Take Turns Speaking and Listening

The Problem: Most conflicts escalate because both partners are talking at the same time, neither feeling heard. When you don’t feel heard, you get louder, more defensive, and more reactive.

The Solution: Structured turn-taking ensures both partners feel heard before problem-solving begins.

The Speaker-Listener Technique

Round 1: Partner A Speaks, Partner B Listens

Partner A (Speaker): - Share your perspective for 2-3 minutes (use “I” statements) - Focus on your feelings and needs, not blame - Be specific about the situation

Partner B (Listener): - Listen without interrupting, defending, or problem-solving - Your only job is to understand - Take notes if helpful

Round 2: Partner B Reflects Back

Partner B (Listener): “What I heard you say is... [summarize in your own words]. Did I get that right?”

Partner A (Speaker): “Yes, that’s right” OR “Not quite—what I meant was...”

Keep going until Partner A feels fully heard.



Round 3: Switch Roles

Now Partner B becomes the speaker, and Partner A becomes the listener. Repeat the same process.

Why This Works: - Slows down the conversation so emotions don't spiral - Ensures both partners feel heard before solutions are discussed - Reduces defensiveness because you're not being interrupted or attacked - Builds empathy by requiring you to understand your partner's perspective

Example in Action:

Partner A (Speaker): "I feel hurt and unimportant when you're on your phone during dinner. I need us to have phone-free meals so I can feel connected to you. It makes me feel like I'm not a priority."

Partner B (Listener): "What I heard you say is that when I'm on my phone at dinner, you feel hurt and like you're not important to me. You need phone-free dinners to feel connected. Did I get that right?"

Partner A: "Yes, exactly. Thank you."

Now switch.

Partner B (Speaker): "I hear you, and I don't want you to feel that way. I've been stressed about work, and I check my phone out of habit, not because you're not important. I need some grace as I work on breaking that habit."

Partner A (Listener): "What I heard is that you're not trying to hurt me—you're stressed and checking your phone is a habit. You need patience as you work on changing it. Did I get that right?"

Partner B: "Yes, thank you."

Step 3: Validate Each Other's Feelings

The Problem: Even when you understand your partner's perspective, they won't feel heard unless you validate their feelings. Validation doesn't mean agreement—it means acknowledging that their feelings make sense given their experience.



The Gottman Research: Validation is one of the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction. When people feel validated, they calm down and become open to solutions.

How to Validate:

The Validation Formula: “It makes sense that you feel [emotion] because [reason]. I understand why this matters to you.”

Examples:

- “It makes sense that you feel hurt when I’m on my phone at dinner because you want to feel connected to me. I understand why this matters to you.”
 - “It makes sense that you feel anxious about money because we haven’t talked about our budget in months. I understand why this matters to you.”
 - “It makes sense that you feel overwhelmed with housework because you’ve been doing most of it. I understand why this matters to you.”
-

What Validation Is NOT:

- ✗ “You’re overreacting.”
- ✗ “That’s not a big deal.”
- ✗ “You shouldn’t feel that way.”
- ✗ “I didn’t mean it that way, so you shouldn’t be upset.”

These responses invalidate your partner’s feelings and escalate conflict.

What Validation IS:

- ✓ “Your feelings make sense.”
- ✓ “I can see why you’d feel that way.”



- ✓ “That sounds really hard.”
- ✓ “I understand why this is important to you.”

Validation calms the nervous system and opens the door to problem-solving.

Practice Validation:

After each partner shares their perspective (Step 2), take a moment to validate:

Partner A: “It makes sense that you feel [emotion] because [reason].”

Partner B: “It makes sense that you feel [emotion] because [reason].”

Even if you don’t agree with their perspective, you can validate their feelings.

Step 4: Find Common Ground

The Problem: When you’re in conflict, it’s easy to focus on your differences. But every conflict has areas of agreement—you just have to look for them.

The Solution: Before jumping to solutions, identify what you both agree on. This shifts the conversation from “me vs. you” to “us vs. the problem.”

How to Find Common Ground:

Ask these questions together:

1. **“What do we both want?”**
 - Example: “We both want to feel connected during meals.”
 - Example: “We both want a clean house without resentment.”
 - Example: “We both want to feel financially secure.”
2. **“What do we both value?”**
 - Example: “We both value quality time together.”
 - Example: “We both value fairness in our relationship.”
 - Example: “We both value open communication.”
3. **“What are we both willing to do?”**



- Example: “We’re both willing to compromise.”
 - Example: “We’re both willing to change some habits.”
 - Example: “We’re both willing to try something new.”
-

Example in Action:

Conflict: Partner A feels hurt when Partner B is on their phone at dinner. Partner B feels stressed and uses their phone out of habit.

Finding Common Ground:

“What do we both want?” - “We both want to feel connected during meals.” - “We both want to reduce stress in our relationship.”

“What do we both value?” - “We both value quality time together.” - “We both value being present with each other.”

“What are we both willing to do?” - “We’re both willing to make phone-free dinners a priority.” - “We’re both willing to be patient as we build new habits.”

Now you’re on the same team, working toward a shared goal.

Step 5: Brainstorm Solutions Together

The Problem: Most couples jump straight to solutions before they’ve listened, validated, or found common ground. This leads to solutions that don’t work because one or both partners don’t feel heard.

The Solution: Only after Steps 1-4 are complete, brainstorm solutions together. The best solutions honor both partners’ needs.

How to Brainstorm Solutions:

Step A: Generate Options (No Judgment)

Throw out as many ideas as possible, even imperfect ones. Don’t evaluate yet—just brainstorm.

Example (Phone at Dinner Conflict):

Possible solutions: - Phone-free dinners every night - Phones in another room during meals - One person can check their phone if they’re expecting an urgent message, but they tell the other person first - Phone-free dinners on weeknights; phones allowed on



weekends - Set a timer—first 20 minutes of dinner are phone-free, then phones are okay - Designate one “phone check” break during longer meals

Step B: Evaluate Options Together

Go through each option and ask: - Does this honor both of our needs? - Is this realistic and sustainable? - Are we both willing to try this?

Example:

-  “Phone-free dinners every night” → Partner B feels this is too rigid given work stress
 -  “Phones in another room during meals” → Both agree this removes temptation
 -  “One person can check their phone if expecting an urgent message, but they tell the other person first” → Both agree this balances connection and flexibility
-

Step C: Choose a Solution and Try It

Pick one solution to try for a set period (e.g., one week, two weeks). Then check in and adjust if needed.

Example: “Let’s try putting our phones in another room during dinner for the next two weeks. If one of us is expecting an urgent message, we’ll let the other person know before dinner. After two weeks, we’ll check in and see how it’s going.”

Step D: Check In and Adjust

At the end of the trial period, ask: - How did this solution work? - What felt good about it? - What didn’t work? - Do we want to keep it, adjust it, or try something else?

Example Check-In:

Partner A: “I loved having phone-free dinners. I felt so much more connected to you.”

Partner B: “I liked it too, but there were a couple of nights I was stressed about work and wanted to check my phone. Can we add a rule where if I’m expecting something urgent, I can tell you before dinner and we’ll make an exception?”

Partner A: “Yes, that works for me. Let’s try that.”

Adjust and keep going.



De-Escalation Techniques: When Things Get Heated

Even with the best intentions, conflicts can escalate. Here's how to de-escalate before things spiral.

Recognize the Four Horsemen (Gottman's Predictors of Relationship Failure)

The Four Horsemen:

1. **Criticism:** Attacking your partner's character ("You're so selfish")
2. **Contempt:** Disrespect, mockery, sarcasm, eye-rolling (the #1 predictor of divorce)
3. **Defensiveness:** Playing the victim, making excuses ("It's not my fault")
4. **Stonewalling:** Shutting down, withdrawing, giving the silent treatment

If you notice any of these showing up, **STOP** and de-escalate.

De-Escalation Technique 1: Call a Time-Out

When to Use It:

- You're feeling flooded (heart racing, can't think clearly, overwhelmed)
- You notice the Four Horsemen creeping in
- The conversation is going in circles
- You're saying things you'll regret

How to Do It:

Step 1: Name It "I'm feeling flooded right now. I need to take a break."

Step 2: Set a Time to Reconnect "Can we come back to this in 30 minutes?" (Gottman recommends at least 20 minutes to calm your nervous system)

Step 3: Self-Soothe



- Take a walk
- Do deep breathing (inhale for 4, hold for 4, exhale for 6)
- Listen to calming music - Journal your feelings
- Do NOT ruminate on the argument or rehearse what you'll say next

Step 4: Reconnect Come back at the agreed-upon time and try again.

Time-Out Ground Rules:

-  Time-outs are for calming down, not avoiding the conversation
-  Both partners must agree to come back at the set time
-  Use the time to self-soothe, not to build your case
-  Don't use time-outs to punish your partner or avoid hard conversations

De-Escalation Technique 2: Use the Gottman Repair Checklist

Repair attempts are words or actions that prevent negativity from spiraling out of control. Gottman found that successful couples make frequent repair attempts, even mid-conflict.

Repair Phrases:

"I Feel" Statements:

- "I'm feeling overwhelmed."
- "I'm feeling criticized."
- "I'm feeling scared."

"I Need" Statements:

- "I need to calm down."
- "I need you to listen."
- "I need a hug."

Taking Responsibility:



- "I'm partly to blame here."
- "I can see my part in this."
- "Let me try again."

Getting to Yes:

- "What do you need right now?"
- "Let's find a compromise."
- "I want to meet you halfway."

Humor (Use Carefully):

- "We're both being a little ridiculous right now, aren't we?"
- "Can we start over?"

Affection:

- "I love you."
- "I'm on your team."
- "We'll figure this out."

How to Use Repair Attempts:

When you notice the conversation escalating, throw out a repair attempt:

Example:

- "Wait, I don't want to fight. Can we start over?"
- "I'm sorry, I'm not saying this well. Let me try again."
- "I love you, and I want to understand you. Can you help me?"

Your partner's job: Accept the repair attempt and soften.

If your partner makes a repair attempt, acknowledge it: - "Thank you for saying that." - "Yes, let's start over." - "I appreciate you trying."



De-Escalation Technique 3: Slow Down the Conversation

When to Use It:

- The conversation is moving too fast
- You're interrupting each other
- You're not fully listening

How to Do It:

Option 1: Use a Talking Object

- Only the person holding the object (a pillow, a pen, a small item) can speak
- When they're done, they pass it to their partner
- No interrupting

Option 2: Set a Timer

- Each person gets 3 minutes to speak uninterrupted
- The other person listens without responding
- Then switch

Option 3: Write It Out

- If talking feels too heated, write your thoughts down
- Exchange letters and read them silently
- Then discuss



Compromise Strategies: When You Both Want Different Things

Not every conflict has a perfect solution. Sometimes you need to compromise. Here's how to do it without resentment.

Strategy 1: Take Turns Getting Your Way

When to Use It:

- The issue isn't a core value or dealbreaker
- Both preferences are valid
- You can alternate who "wins"

How It Works:

Example: Choosing Weekend Activities

- This weekend, we do what Partner A wants (hiking)
- Next weekend, we do what Partner B wants (staying home and relaxing)
- Keep track so it stays fair

Example: Choosing Restaurants

- Partner A picks this time
- Partner B picks next time

Why It Works: Both partners get their needs met over time, and no one feels like they always have to sacrifice.



Strategy 2: Find a Third Option

When to Use It:

- You're stuck between two options
- Neither person wants to give in
- You need a creative solution

How It Works:

Instead of choosing between Option A (Partner A's preference) and Option B (Partner B's preference), brainstorm Option C (something new that honors both needs).

Example:

Conflict: Partner A wants to spend the holidays with their family. Partner B wants to spend the holidays at home.

Option A: Go to Partner A's family (Partner B's need for rest isn't met)

Option B: Stay home (Partner A's need for family connection isn't met)

Option C: Spend half the day with family, half the day at home. Or alternate years. Or host family at your home so you don't have to travel.

Brainstorm together until you find an option that honors both needs.

Strategy 3: Compromise on the Details, Not the Core Need

When to Use It:

- The conflict is about HOW to meet a need, not the need itself
- You agree on the goal but disagree on the method

How It Works:

Identify the core need underneath the conflict. Then compromise on the details while honoring the need.



Example:

Conflict: Partner A wants to go out with friends every Friday night. Partner B feels neglected and wants more time together.

Core Needs:

- Partner A needs social connection and autonomy
- Partner B needs quality time and connection

Compromise on the Details:

- Partner A goes out with friends 2 Fridays a month
- The other 2 Fridays are date nights
- Partner A also commits to one weeknight dinner at home each week

Both core needs are honored; the details are negotiated.

Strategy 4: Accept Perpetual Problems

When to Use It:

- You've tried everything and the conflict keeps coming back
- The issue is rooted in personality or core values
- You're not going to change each other

The Gottman Research: 69% of relationship conflicts are perpetual—they never fully go away. Successful couples learn to manage them with humor, acceptance, and dialogue.

Examples of Perpetual Problems:

- One partner is a planner; the other is spontaneous
- One partner is introverted; the other is extroverted
- One partner is frugal; the other is a spender
- One partner is tidy; the other is messy

How to Manage Perpetual Problems:

1. **Accept that this won't be "solved"**
 - Stop trying to change your partner
 - Stop expecting them to become like you



2. Create a dialogue, not a fight

- Check in regularly about the issue
- Share how you're feeling without blame
- Find small ways to honor both preferences

3. Use humor and affection

- Laugh about your differences
- Appreciate what you love about your partner, even if this issue is frustrating

4. Set boundaries where needed

- Example: "I need the kitchen clean before bed. You can leave your office messy, but the shared spaces need to be tidy."

Example:

Perpetual Problem: Partner A is always late; Partner B is always on time.

Dialogue (Not a Fight):

- **Partner B:** "I know you're not trying to be disrespectful when you're late, but it makes me feel unimportant. What can we do?"
- **Partner A:** "I know it bothers you. I'm working on it, but I struggle with time management. Can you build in a 10-minute buffer when we have plans?"
- **Partner B:** "Yes, I can do that. And can you set alarms to help you stay on track
- **Partner A:** "Yes, I'll try that."

They won't "fix" the problem, but they manage it with understanding and compromise.



Putting It All Together: A Conflict Resolution Roadmap

Before the Conversation:

- [] Am I calm enough to talk? (If not, wait.)
- [] Have I identified my feeling and my need?
- [] Am I ready to listen, not just be heard?

During the Conversation:

Step 1: Soften Your Startup

- Use "I" statements -Be specific
- Make a request, not a complaint

Step 2: Take Turns Speaking and Listening

- Speaker shares (2-3 minutes)
- Listener reflects back
- Switch roles

Step 3: Validate Each Other's Feelings

- "It makes sense that you feel [emotion] because [reason]."

Step 4: Find Common Ground

- What do we both want?
- What do we both value?
- What are we both willing to do?

Step 5: Brainstorm Solutions Together

- Generate options (no judgment)
- Evaluate together
- Choose one to try
- Check in and adjust



If Things Get Heated:

- Call a time-out (20+ minutes)
- Use repair attempts
- Slow down the conversation

If You Need to Compromise:

- Take turns getting your way
- Find a third option
- Compromise on details, not core needs
- Accept perpetual problems

Final Thoughts: Conflict as Connection

Conflict doesn't mean your relationship is broken. It means you care enough to work through hard things together.

The goal isn't to avoid conflict—it's to navigate it with respect, curiosity, and love.

When you use this framework, conflict becomes an opportunity to: - Understand each other more deeply - Strengthen your bond - Build trust through repair - Grow together

You've got this. One conversation at a time.

Quick Reference Guide

Soft Startup Formula:

"I feel [emotion] about [situation]. I need [specific request]. Can we talk about [solution]?"

Validation Formula:

"It makes sense that you feel [emotion] because [reason]. I understand why this matters to you."



Repair Attempts:

- “Let me try again.” - “I’m partly to blame here.”
- “What do you need right now?”
- “I love you. We’ll figure this out.”

Time-Out Steps:

1. “I’m feeling flooded. I need a break.”
2. “Can we come back to this in [time]?”
3. Self-soothe (don’t ruminate)
4. Reconnect at the agreed time

The Four Horsemen (Avoid These):

1. Criticism
2. Contempt
3. Defensiveness
4. Stonewalling

Use this framework with patience, practice, and commitment. Healthy conflict is a skill—and you’re building it together.