



Ingredients to Relationship Repair

By Becky Makous

Rupture is part of any intimate relationship. When there are close connections with others, there will be hurt feelings, disagreements, tension, old wounds being activated, or misunderstandings. Studies have shown that having disagreements doesn't mean that a relationship is unhealthy, but how you move through the conflict that correlates with the happiness of the relationship. Being able to move through conflict in a productive way, that brings two people in a relationship closer, is a huge asset to any relationship. This is true for romantic partners, close friends, family members, and even work colleagues.

An important first step is figuring out how to open a repair conversation. A good way to start might be something like "There has been something weighing on my mind that I have been wanting to share. Do you feel like you have the capacity to talk about it with me right now?" If they say yes, you can proceed, if they say no you can say something like "I totally respect that and thank you for honoring your boundaries. Could we set aside a time to discuss this together?"

Here are some helpful skills needed to repair conflict:

Taking space if needed: If you and your partner are feeling too escalated, don't try to jump into relationship repair. Take some space to calm down and ground yourself, release your emotions in some way, and gain some perspective. Between half an hour and 24 hours later when you're both feeling more grounded, revisit the conversation and move towards repair.

Vulnerable sharing: Focus on the emotions you are experiencing as opposed to the narrative. Only when the emotions are addressed can you start addressing the problem at hand. Try to share from your own experience of feelings as opposed to labeling your partners actions. It's a lot easier for your partner to hear "I feel scared when [x] happens" as opposed to "I perceive your actions as aggressive when you do [x]." It's a subtle but important difference. A valuable tool for use when sharing vulnerably is naming your emotions. There is an emotion wheel at the end of this document, which is a tool for this skill development.

Empathetic listening: For the listening partner, take yourself out of a defensive mode and be fully present with your partner without reacting. It's difficult to do this in any circumstance, but especially difficult if the voiced frustrations are about you. Try to put yourself in a position of listening to a friend, and save any reactions for later. Try to give your full capacity of attention and empathy towards whatever vulnerable emotions your partner is experiencing. You'll get a chance to voice your feelings and clarify your experience of the narrative when the time is right.

Getting on the same team: Sharing vulnerably and empathetic listening will help you get back on the same team. Emotions are always okay and once you and your partner get on the same team holding space for the emotions, you'll be able to get on the same side of the problem. One way of thinking about it is: it's not *you* vs. *me*, it's *you* and *me* vs. *the problem*. Once everyone's emotions are fully seen and heard, you can move on to problem solving.

Taking responsibility: It's important for the listening partner to step up and take responsibility for some portion of whatever is bothering the sharing partner. A simple acknowledgement, without excuse, can go miles and really help repair.

Turn-taking: One partner, usually the more escalated person, will get a chance to speak and express first. Once the first partner feels complete in their sharing, be sure to switch and the sharing partner will listen and the listening partner can take a turn to share. It is so important for both partners to feel heard during relationship repair.

Time for reconnection: After both partners have vulnerably shared, empathetically listened, and taken some amount of responsibility, be sure to take some time to reconnect. Once both partners feel heard and validated, this will probably happen naturally. This could be as simple as taking a moment to hug or cuddle before moving on to the rest of your day.
