

# Repair Sequence

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## Purpose

The Repair Sequence is about changing difficult conversations, which sits at the heart of changing a relationship. The Repair Sequence provides a highly structured process for couples to have repair conversations—that is, to discuss friction points and interactional moments that would otherwise either be avoided or escalate into conflict.

In this sense, the Repair Sequence directly targets high-intensity conversations, which is a central goal of couple therapy. When couples learn to move through this process of repair, it ensures that the partner raising the issue is heard and, over time, reduces the baseline intensity in the relationship. This creates greater safety and confidence in the relationship's ability to engage with, navigate, and emerge stronger from difficult conversations.

At its core, the Repair Sequence restructures how you, as a couple, talk about everyday moments and interactions that would typically lead to hurt feelings, escalation, or accumulated resentment.

## Speaker & Listener Roles

During the Repair Sequence, one person is the Speaker and the other is the Listener for the entire sequence. These roles do not swap partway through. This is essential. The structure only works if one person is fully supported to express their experience while the other remains in a listening role. Later, if both partners are regulated, the sequence can be repeated with roles reversed—but only after the first sequence is fully completed.

The Speaker is the person who raises a specific issue. This is not a general complaint and not a character judgement. It must focus on one concrete behaviour or moment from the last few weeks—something your partner said or did in a particular situation. The Speaker's task is to name that moment clearly and briefly, and then explain how it affected them emotionally. This is not a long story and not an analysis of the relationship. It is one event, described factually, followed by its emotional impact.

The Listener's role is fundamentally different. The Listener suspends their own experience for the duration of the sequence. This does not mean their experience does not matter; it simply means it is not the focus right now. Their task is to support the Speaker in clarifying what happened and how it felt. This



includes reflecting back what they heard, asking brief clarifying questions when needed, and helping the Speaker stay focused on the specific issue. The Listener does not defend, explain, justify, or introduce their own perspective. Their role is to help the Speaker feel understood.

This structure is intentionally unnatural. In ordinary conversations, both people try to speak at once. Each explains their side, defends intentions, corrects details, and reacts emotionally. Very quickly, the original issue disappears and the conversation becomes a competition between experiences.

The Repair Sequence interrupts this completely.

Instead of two people talking over each other, the process is organised around one person at a time. The Speaker speaks. The Listener listens. Only later, if the sequence is repeated, does the Listener become the Speaker. In this way, what normally happens simultaneously is separated into two distinct processes. Expression happens first. Reception happens alongside it. Then, later, roles can reverse.

This separation is what makes the sequence work. By splitting what normally happens all at once, the structure prevents escalation, defensiveness, and derailment. It creates space for one person to be heard without interruption and for the other to practise staying present without reacting. Over time, this teaches both partners how to express themselves without attacking and how to listen without collapsing or counterattacking. The goal is not perfect conversations. The goal is replacing automatic reactivity with a repeatable structure that allows both people to be heard.

## **How to Use the Repair Sequence**

The Repair Sequence is deliberately artificial. It slows conversation down, rehearses regulation and ownership, and provides temporary structure for safer interaction. It is not meant to replace everyday conversation. It is scaffolding — something you use when normal conversation would derail.

Once the sequence has been practised in session and introduced as between-session work, either partner can signal that they would like to use it. The request is made without going into content. Both partners then agree on a time and place.

This matters. The Repair Sequence must be done in person and with full attention. It is not done in bed, while grocery shopping, with children present, or while either person is distracted by screens or other tasks. It does not need to be formal, but it does need presence. Both partners should be seated comfortably,



facing each other, and available. It is also not something to initiate late at night, as some emotional activation may follow. The intention is to set it up in advance so neither person feels ambushed.

Requesting a Repair Sequence creates a shared obligation to follow through. At the same time, this does not mean immediate engagement. Someone arriving home from work, for example, may need time to transition. The emphasis is on clear signalling, mutual agreement, and creating the conditions for a regulated conversation rather than forcing it in the moment.

The Repair Sequence is only introduced once certain foundations are in place. If corrosive actions are still active, this process should not be used. Early practice focuses on specific, recent, manageable events. High-charge or legacy issues are avoided initially. The aim at first is learning the structure, not resolving complex problems.

During the process, both partners take responsibility for monitoring their own emotional activation and for noticing when the exchange starts to spiral. If either person feels overwhelmed or pulled into familiar reactive patterns, the sequence is paused and returned to later.

Difficulty is expected. You will forget steps, lose structure, or feel awkward. Progress is measured by participation, not fluency. The sequence is approached as something you are learning together, not as a test of who is doing it right.

## **The Sequence**

### **STAGE 1: FACTUAL ORIENTATION**

Most conversations start badly. Too much is said at once, corrosive actions appear through generalisation, mind-reading, referencing the past, and implied intention, and facts and emotions collapse into a single high-intensity message. Stage 1 interrupts this pattern completely. It drastically slows the interaction and establishes clear role expectations. The Speaker raises one issue, and the entire sequence is organised around ensuring they end this stage feeling heard and acknowledged. The Listener can later take on the Speaker role if the sequence is repeated, but for now the focus remains on one person's experience.

This stage creates a shared reference point before emotion enters the conversation. Without this, couples immediately drift into interpretation, blame, or emotional argument. The aim here is simple: alignment on one specific event.



## Step 1 – Speaker

The Speaker initiates the Repair Sequence because there is something they want to raise and be heard about. They communicate the facts clearly and in less than one minute. The time limit matters, as it prevents overload and stops multiple issues from being introduced. The purpose is purely to orient your partner to what is being discussed. Nothing else.

This must be factual and observable. You do not describe emotions. You do not interpret meaning. You do not describe intention. You do not generalise. You simply state what happened.

For example:

“I want to talk to you about yesterday evening in the kitchen, when you interrupted me while I was speaking.”

“I want to talk to you about last Wednesday, when you walked out while I was speaking to you about our child.”

“I want to talk about this morning when you looked at your phone while I was explaining something important to you.”

“I want to talk about Saturday afternoon when you raised your voice and told me to ‘just drop it.’”

This should take less than one minute.

Common difficulties at this stage include Speakers drifting into storytelling, broad complaints, or assumptions about intent, which immediately destabilises the structure. Some Speakers stack multiple events once they start talking, overwhelming the Listener and collapsing containment. Others blend fact and emotion, introducing feeling before a shared reference exists. At times the Speaker also struggles to clearly articulate the specific behaviour they are raising. If any of this happens, return to one behaviour and one moment.

## Step 2 – Listener

The Listener paraphrases what they heard to confirm accuracy and may ask brief factual questions if needed. This is not agreement or disagreement. It is alignment on what occurred. No “why” questions are permitted, such as asking why it is a problem or what the Speaker meant by it.



Your task is to reflect back the specific event and ensure both of you are referencing the same moment.

For example:

“Okay, we’re talking about last night when I interrupted you while you were explaining X.”

“Let me check I’ve got this right — the specific thing you want to talk about is when I rolled my eyes and said ‘stop overreacting.’”

“So this is about Wednesday afternoon when I walked out of the room while you were speaking.”

“You’re referring to this morning when I picked up my phone while you were talking to me.”

Common difficulties at this stage include Listeners correcting, defending, or challenging the Speaker’s version, which immediately breaks containment. Some minimise or reinterpret the event, while others become emotionally reactive before alignment is achieved.

Your only task here is clarity. Both partners must recognise the same event before moving on. If voices rise or emotion escalates, the sequence pauses.

## **STAGE 2: CLARIFYING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Once both partners are aligned on the specific event, emotion is introduced. This stage is about clarifying the Speaker’s emotional experience of that moment. It is not about interpreting the partner’s behaviour, assigning intent, or explaining why something happened. The focus is strictly on what the Speaker felt in response to the specific event identified in Stage 1.

This distinction matters. The moment the Speaker moves into statements such as “you made me feel,” “you did this to me,” or “you wanted to hurt me,” the conversation shifts away from experience and into accusation or interpretation. That immediately pulls the Listener into defence and collapses the structure. This stage exists precisely to prevent that.

The task here is emotional ownership. The Speaker communicates their internal experience. Nothing more.



### Step 3 – Speaker

The Speaker briefly names the core emotion that was triggered by the event. This must be expressed as your experience, not as something your partner caused, intended, or meant.

Avoid surface reactions such as irritation, frustration, or annoyance. These are usually secondary emotions. The aim is to identify more vulnerable experiences such as hurt, sadness, fear, shame, disappointment, or loneliness.

Keep it concise. You are not telling a story. You are not analysing the relationship. You are not explaining your partner's behaviour. You are simply naming what you felt in response to this one moment.

Examples:

“When that happened, I felt hurt.”

“I noticed I felt small and ashamed.”

“It brought up sadness for me.”

“I felt scared and disconnected.”

Do not say:

“You made me feel...”

“You always do this to me...”

“You did that because you wanted to hurt me...”

“This is just like all the other times...”

Do not generalise.

Do not reference the past.

Do not introduce intent.

Do not expand into explanation.

This is a precise emotional statement, owned as your experience.



Once you have named the emotion, you stop and allow the Listener to respond.

Common difficulties at this stage

Speakers often drift back into interpretation, for example by explaining why their partner behaved the way they did.

Others move into blame or generalisation.

Some stay in surface emotion and avoid vulnerability.

Some struggle to identify feeling and move into thinking instead.

If this happens, slow down and return to one emotion connected to this one event.

## **Step 4 – Listener**

The Listener's role is to help clarify and reflect the Speaker's emotional experience. This may include paraphrasing what you heard and asking brief clarifying questions to support accuracy.

Your task is not to correct, defend, explain, or introduce your own experience.

You may have had a very different experience of the same moment. That matters. It will be addressed later if the sequence is repeated with roles reversed. For now, the focus remains solely on the Speaker.

This structure acknowledges that two experiences exist. It simply prevents them from competing.

Examples:

“So you felt hurt and disconnected when that happened.”

“Was it more sadness or more fear?”

“It sounds like shame came up for you — is that right?”

Common difficulties at this stage

Listeners often feel the urge to explain themselves or justify what they did.



Some minimise the emotion.

Others become reactive because their own experience feels unseen.

If this happens, return to listening. Your only responsibility here is to support the Speaker in clarifying their emotional experience.

This stage is complete when the Speaker feels emotionally recognised. Only then does the sequence move forward.

### **STAGE 3: VALIDATING SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE**

This stage is often the most difficult and the most important part of the Repair Sequence. Colloquially, this is the moment where you tell your partner: you are not crazy. What you experienced makes sense.

Up to this point, the Speaker has taken the initiative by naming the event and clarifying their emotional experience. From here onward, the initiative shifts to the Listener. This is a structural change in the sequence. The Listener now leads the process by acknowledging the Speaker's subjective reality.

The purpose of this stage is not agreement about facts, intent, or meaning. It is recognition of experience. The Listener acknowledges that the Speaker's emotional response is understandable in the context of what happened. This is what is typically missing in everyday conflict. Instead of feeling met, people feel dismissed, corrected, or argued with. This stage exists to interrupt that pattern.

Validating subjective experience does not mean accepting blame, admitting harmful intent, or abandoning your own perspective. It simply means recognising that your partner's internal experience is real and deserves acknowledgement. Both partners' experiences matter. They are not competing. This stage focuses on the Speaker first, with the understanding that the Listener's experience can be explored later if the sequence is repeated with roles reversed.

#### **Step 5 – Listener**

The Listener acknowledges the Speaker's emotional experience and its impact. This includes recognising what the Speaker felt and linking it to the specific behaviour that was raised earlier. Where appropriate, the Listener may also express regret for the impact, without clarifying or defending intent.



The acknowledgement should communicate three things: that you understand what your partner experienced, that it makes sense in the context of the event, and that you recognise the impact it had on them.

Importantly, acknowledging experience does not require agreeing with interpretations or accepting malicious intent. You may clarify that your intention was different, but only after you have clearly acknowledged the Speaker's experience.

Examples:

"I can see that when I rolled my eyes, you felt dismissed. That makes sense to me."

"I understand that when I walked out, you felt abandoned and hurt. I can hear that."

"It makes sense that you felt small and embarrassed when I interrupted you."

"I can see how that landed for you, even though that wasn't my intention."

"I didn't mean to dismiss you, but I understand that that's how it felt for you."

"I can hear that you felt hurt and disconnected in that moment. I get that."

Some people find it helpful to explicitly separate experience from intention:

"When I did that, you felt dismissed. I can see that. It wasn't my intention to dismiss you, but I understand that that's what you experienced."

Common difficulties at this stage

Listeners often move too quickly into explaining themselves.

Some minimise the emotion or try to reframe it.

Others jump straight to their own experience.

Some struggle with the idea that acknowledging their partner's experience does not invalidate their own.

If this happens, slow down and return to acknowledgement. This stage is not about balance. It is about recognition.



## Step 6 – Speaker

The Speaker receives the acknowledgement and confirms whether it has landed. This is not a moment to ask for more, correct wording, or expand the issue. The Speaker simply indicates whether they feel understood.

Examples:

“Yes, that’s it.”

“That feels accurate.”

“Yes, that’s what I was trying to say.”

“I feel heard.”

This confirmation consolidates the exchange and signals that the acknowledgement has been received.

If it does not land, the Speaker can briefly clarify what was missing, and the Listener tries again. The goal is not a perfect script. The goal is that the Speaker genuinely experiences being emotionally recognised.

This stage is pivotal to the entire Repair Sequence. It is where the relationship shifts from argument to recognition. Over time, repeated experiences of being acknowledged in this way reduce defensiveness and soften entrenched patterns. Partners learn that difficult moments can be met with understanding rather than escalation. This creates the emotional safety that makes further repair possible.

## STAGE 4: OFFERING COMMITMENTS

This stage translates understanding into action. Up to this point, the Listener has acknowledged the Speaker’s experience. Now the Listener takes the initiative again by offering a concrete commitment. This is not about making grand promises or trying to repair everything at once. It is about taking responsibility in small, realistic, behavioural ways.

The commitment is offered by the Listener, not dictated by the Speaker. This is crucial. In ordinary conflict, the person who is hurt often tells the other what they must change. Here, the direction is reversed. The Listener reflects on what they have heard and voluntarily offers something they are willing to do differently. It is precisely the fact that this is freely offered that allows it to land.



These commitments should be modest and specific. They are not blanket statements like “I’ll be better” or “I promise I’ll never do that again.” They are concrete actions that relate directly to what was discussed.

## **Step 7 – Listener**

The Listener offers one clear, realistic commitment based on what they have understood about the Speaker’s experience. This is responsibility, not apology. The focus is on what you will do differently going forward.

Examples:

“Given what you’ve said, I won’t use that phrase again. I can see now how it lands for you.”

“I hear how it affects you when I walk away. I’ll make an effort to stay present instead of leaving.”

“I understand that being on my phone made you feel ignored. I’ll put it down when we’re talking.”

“I can see that interrupting you shuts you down. I’ll slow myself and let you finish.”

“I didn’t realise how strongly that affected you. I’ll pay more attention to that in future.”

The commitment should be something you genuinely intend to try. Overpromising creates future rupture. One small, doable shift is enough.

Common difficulties at this stage

Listeners sometimes offer sweeping promises they cannot sustain.

Some become defensive and avoid making any commitment.

Others turn the commitment into an explanation of themselves.

If this happens, return to simplicity. One specific action. One realistic change.



## Step 8 – Speaker

After the Listener has offered their commitment, the Speaker also takes responsibility by making their own commitment. This is essential for balance. Without this step, the process can start to feel one-sided, as if only the Listener is changing.

The Speaker briefly names something they took from the exchange, affirms willingness to use the Repair Sequence again, and offers one small commitment of their own. This often relates to how they will raise issues, regulate themselves, or avoid assumptions in future.

Examples:

“I’m willing to do this again when things come up. I’ll try to raise it earlier next time instead of letting it build.”

“I’ll work on not assuming your intention when something hurts me.”

“I’ll try to be clearer and calmer when I bring things to you.”

“I’ll let you know sooner when something starts bothering me.”

This step matters. It reinforces that repair is a shared responsibility, not something one partner does for the other. Both people leave the sequence having made a contribution to change.

The aim of this stage is not perfection. It is forward movement. Two small commitments, offered freely, create a sense of mutual participation. Over time, these repeated moments of responsibility replace blame with collaboration and help couples build a new pattern of responding to everyday ruptures.

## STAGE 5: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This final stage closes the Repair Sequence. By this point, several important things have already happened: a specific issue has been named, the Speaker’s emotional experience has been acknowledged, commitments have been offered by both partners, and the conversation has stayed contained without spiralling. This stage marks that completion and helps both partners register that something different just occurred.

Acknowledgements are not about reopening content. They are about recognising the process itself — the effort, presence, and risk taken by both



people. This helps consolidate the experience and makes it more likely that the sequence will be used again in future.

As in the previous stage, the Listener initiates.

## **Step 9 – Listener**

The Listener acknowledges the Speaker for raising the issue and for staying with the process. This includes recognising the Speaker's vulnerability and the effort it took to speak clearly and directly.

The focus is on appreciating that the Speaker stepped into the conversation and shared their experience.

Examples:

“Thank you for bringing this up and for explaining it so clearly.”

“I know that wasn't easy to raise. I appreciate you telling me how it affected you.”

“Thank you for staying with this and helping me understand what it was like for you.”

“I appreciate you taking the risk to talk about this.”

This is not analysis or reassurance. It is simple recognition of the Speaker's courage and participation.

## **Step 10 – Speaker**

The Speaker then acknowledges the Listener for how they showed up in the process. This includes recognising the Listener's effort to stay present, listen, and hold space, even if they had a different internal experience.

The Speaker also names that they felt heard.

Examples:

“Thank you for listening and staying focused on me.”

“I know you may have experienced it differently, but I really appreciate how you held space for me.”



“Thank you for helping me feel heard.”

“I appreciate you staying with this instead of defending or shutting down.”

This step acknowledges the experience of the process itself. It marks that something worked: the Speaker felt listened to, and the Listener stayed present. That recognition matters. It helps both partners register that this structured way of engaging can actually hold difficult moments.

This closes the sequence.

Nothing new is introduced here. No additional content, no further concerns, no revisiting earlier points. The Repair Sequence ends with mutual acknowledgement of effort and presence.

This final exchange does something subtle but powerful. It reinforces that the couple just completed a difficult conversation without collapse. Over time, these moments accumulate and reshape how both partners approach conflict — not through avoidance or escalation, but through structured engagement and shared responsibility.

## **Integration into Everyday Life**

Once the Repair Sequence has been practised in session and both partners can complete it without spiralling, it becomes part of everyday life. This is where real change happens.

The sequence is always used retrospectively, never in the heat of an argument. One partner signals the intention to talk, without going into content, for example:

“Something happened earlier and I’d like us to talk about it. Let me know when you’re available.”

Both partners then agree on a time and place.

For the first few weeks, it is essential to practise regularly. Each partner should initiate the Repair Sequence at least once per week, meaning each person takes a turn being the Speaker. Early on, it is completely acceptable—and often helpful—to use low-intensity or even relatively neutral situations. This keeps the process collaborative and can make learning the structure feel lighter and more playful. The initial goal is not depth; it is fluency.



Over time, the sequence naturally becomes the way specific pain points are raised. What starts as practice evolves into a reliable method for addressing moments of irritation, misunderstanding, or emotional impact before they accumulate.

The Repair Sequence is never used during active conflict. If either partner feels overwhelmed or pulled into familiar reactive patterns, the process is paused and returned to later. This is not failure. It is part of learning when containment is needed.

Both roles should be completed whenever possible, but regulation always comes first. Quality matters more than finishing. A paused sequence can always be resumed later.

With repetition, the structure begins to internalise. The formal steps soften, but the core capacities remain: signalling instead of erupting, listening instead of defending, acknowledging impact, and making small repairs. Over time, these qualities start to appear naturally in everyday conversations, reducing the need for the full structure while preserving its effect.

## **Function of the Repair Sequence**

The Repair Sequence exists to change how difficult moments are handled in your relationship. Its purpose is not to analyse the past or solve everything at once, but to create a different experience in the present: one person speaks, the other listens, emotions are acknowledged, and both partners take responsibility for small shifts forward.

At its core, the sequence helps you complete conversations that would normally derail. Instead of escalation, shutdown, or avoidance, it provides a way to stay present through discomfort and to express something vulnerable without being met by defence or counterattack.

By separating Speaker and Listener roles, the Repair Sequence interrupts the usual pattern where both people try to explain, justify, or protect themselves at the same time. This slows everything down, redistributes space more evenly, and allows each person to be heard in turn. Quieter partners find voice. More reactive partners practise containment.

The structure shifts the focus away from blame and story and toward participation. It replaces arguing about who is right with a shared process of listening, acknowledging, and making small, realistic commitments. Reactivity is treated as a human response under pressure, not as personal failure.



Over time, the sequence also protects the present from being constantly pulled into unresolved history. Each Repair Sequence deals with one specific moment, allowing tension to be processed instead of stored. This prevents the gradual build-up of resentment and emotional distance.

Old patterns persist because they are well rehearsed. The Repair Sequence introduces a new rehearsal. Each successful exchange becomes a small corrective experience. With repetition, these moments begin to install a different default: conversations that hold rather than collapse.

Hope does not come from promises or intentions. It comes from lived experience. From feeling heard. From staying connected through something difficult. From seeing that repair is possible. The Repair Sequence is a way of practising that, again and again, until it becomes part of how you relate.

