

♥ A Step-by-Step Guide ♥

# How to Save Your Relationship

Things aren't working, but you're here because you care. This guide will show you exactly what to do, one step at a time.

## Getting Started

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### 1 Is this guide right for you?

This guide is for couples who:

- Want to repair their relationship
- Are struggling but not in danger
- Are willing to try something different

**Important:** If there's physical abuse or you feel unsafe, this guide isn't the right first step. Your safety comes first. Please reach out to a professional or helpline.

## 2

## Understanding your situation

Every struggling relationship is unique, but most challenges fall into recognizable patterns. Understanding which pattern you're experiencing is the first step to finding the right solution.

Take a moment to reflect:

- What specific moments or situations cause the most pain or frustration?
- When did you first notice things weren't working?
- What does a typical difficult day look like in your relationship?
- If you could wave a magic wand, what would change first?

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## How this guide works

Each situation guide includes:

**A. Why this is happening**

A quick explanation so you understand the pattern (2 min read)

**B. Do this today**

One specific action you can take right now

**C. This week's practice**

A technique to work on together over the coming days

**D. Tools that help**

Books, games, and resources if you want to go deeper

# "We can't talk without fighting"

Your step-by-step plan to fix communication

## A Why this is happening

When your heart rate goes above 100 bpm during an argument, your brain enters "fight or flight" mode. You literally **can't hear** your partner properly anymore - your brain treats them like a threat.

This is called "flooding." It's biology, not a character flaw. The solution is to prevent flooding and learn how to talk so both people feel heard.

## B Do this today

### Agree on a "timeout" signal

**Step 1:** Tell your partner: "I want us to try something. When things get heated, either of us can say 'I need a break' - and we both agree to stop for 20 minutes."

**Step 2:** During the 20 minutes, do something calming (walk, read, breathe). Don't rehearse arguments in your head.

**Step 3:** After 20 minutes, come back and try again, starting with "What I was trying to say is..."

**Why 20 minutes?** That's the minimum time for your nervous system to calm down from flooding.

## C This week's practice: The Speaker-Listener Technique

Use this structure for difficult conversations:

### 1. Speaker talks in "I feel" statements

"I feel hurt when I come home and you're on your phone, because I miss connecting with you."

### 2. Listener repeats back what they heard

"What I'm hearing is that you feel hurt when I'm on my phone when you get home, because you want to connect. Did I get that right?"

### 3. Speaker confirms or clarifies

"Yes, exactly." or "Almost - it's more about..."

### 4. Switch roles

The listener now becomes the speaker.

**Rule:** No rebuttals allowed until you've correctly repeated what your partner said.

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## Tools that help

### Gottman Card Decks (App)

Free app with conversation starters. Use the "Open-Ended Questions" deck to practice talking about non-conflict topics.

### Codenames Duet (Board Game)

A cooperative word game that trains you to think from your partner's perspective. Low-stakes practice for understanding each other.

### "Hold Me Tight" by Sue Johnson

Book that explains why couples get stuck in communication loops and how to break free.

# "We feel like roommates"

Your step-by-step plan to reconnect

## A Why this is happening

When you first fell in love, your brain was flooding with dopamine every time you saw your partner. They meant **excitement**.

Over time, that chemical rush naturally fades. Your partner becomes associated with routine, bills, and responsibilities. Your brain stops giving you that reward feeling around them.

The fix: You need to **rewire** your brain to associate your partner with excitement again. This happens through novelty and intentional connection.

## B Do this today

### The 6-Second Kiss

**Step 1:** Find your partner right now (or when they get home).

**Step 2:** Tell them: "I want to try something. Can we kiss for 6 seconds?"

**Step 3:** Kiss them. Not a peck - a real kiss, lasting at least 6 seconds.

**Step 4:** Do this every single day.

**Why it works:** 6 seconds is the threshold for releasing oxytocin (bonding hormone) and reducing cortisol (stress hormone). It physically changes your brain chemistry.

## C This week's practice: The Stress-Reducing Conversation

Every day, spend 20-30 minutes talking. Here are the rules:

### **Talk about external stress only**

Work problems, annoying traffic, that weird thing your coworker said. NOT relationship issues.

### **Take turns being the listener**

When your partner talks, your only job is to understand and support them against the external world.

### **Don't try to fix anything**

Just listen, nod, and say things like "That sounds frustrating" or "What a jerk!"

**Goal:** Rebuild the "us vs. the world" feeling. You're teammates again.

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## **Tools that help**

### **The Adventure Challenge (Book)**

Scratch-off date ideas. You don't know what the activity is until you commit. Forces novelty - which rewires your brain's association with your partner.

### **Gottman Love Maps (App)**

Questions to learn about your partner's inner world. "What's their biggest dream?"  
"What are they worried about right now?"

### **Weekly Novel Activity**

Do something NEW together every week. Not just pleasant - new. Take a class, visit somewhere you've never been, try a new restaurant.

# "I do everything around here"

Your step-by-step plan to fix the imbalance

## A Why this is happening

There's visible work (cooking, cleaning) and **invisible work** (remembering the dentist appointment, knowing when groceries run out, planning birthday parties).

This "mental load" often falls on one person. The other person might genuinely not see it. When you say "You never help," they think "I do plenty!" because they don't count the invisible work.

The fix: Make the invisible **visible**. Then redistribute fairly.

## B Do this today

### Make a full task list together

**Step 1:** Sit down with your partner. Get paper or open a notes app.

**Step 2:** List EVERY task that keeps your household running. Include invisible ones like "Notice when we're out of toilet paper" and "Remember kids' friends' names."

**Step 3:** Next to each task, write who currently does it.

**Step 4:** Look at the list together. Don't argue yet - just look.

**The goal:** Create undeniable visual proof of the imbalance. This bypasses "I do plenty around here" because it's all written down.

## C This week's practice: Own the whole task

When you take a task, you own ALL of it:

### **Conception**

Noticing it needs to be done. (The garbage is full.)

### **Planning**

Figuring out how and when. (It's trash day tomorrow, I need to take it out tonight.)

### **Execution**

Actually doing it. (Taking out the garbage.)

**Key rule:** If someone "owns" a task, the other person doesn't remind, nag, or check on it. The owner handles it completely.

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## **Tools that help**

### **Fair Play Card Deck**

100 cards representing household tasks. Deal them based on who does what now. The visual pile difference is powerful. Then redistribute.

### **"Fair Play" by Eve Rodsky (Book)**

The full system for dividing domestic labor fairly. Explains the Conception-Planning-Execution model in detail.

### **Weekly Check-in**

Schedule 30 minutes weekly to review how task division is working. Adjust as needed. Keep it businesslike.

**Warning:** If your partner refuses to look at the list or dismisses your experience, that's a bigger issue than chores. It may indicate a lack of respect. Consider whether the relationship has fundamental respect problems.



# "We're constantly fighting"

Your step-by-step plan to break the negative cycle

## A Why this is happening

You're stuck in a predictable cycle. Researcher John Gottman calls the destructive patterns "The Four Horsemen":

- **Criticism:** Attacking character, not behavior ("You always..." "You never...")
- **Contempt:** Disgust, eye-rolling, mockery (the #1 predictor of divorce)
- **Defensiveness:** Making excuses, counter-attacking
- **Stonewalling:** Shutting down, silent treatment

The good news: Each one has an antidote you can learn.

## B Do this today

### Identify YOUR pattern

**Step 1:** Think about your last few fights. Which of the Four Horsemen do YOU do most?

**Step 2:** Be honest. We all do at least one. (Criticism is most common.)

**Step 3:** For the rest of today, catch yourself before you do it. Just notice when you're about to.

**Why this works:** You can only change your own behavior. When you change, the cycle breaks because your partner has nothing to react to.

## C This week's practice: The antidotes

Replace each Horseman with its antidote:

**Criticism → Gentle startup**

Instead of "You never listen," say "I feel unheard when I'm talking and you're on your phone. Can we put phones away during dinner?"

**Contempt → Describe without judgment**

Instead of eye-rolling, describe how YOU feel about the SITUATION (not your partner's character).

**Defensiveness → Take responsibility**

Instead of excuses, find SOME part you can own. "You're right, I did forget to call. I should have set a reminder."

**Stonewalling → Take a break properly**

Instead of silent treatment, say "I'm flooded and need 20 minutes. I'll come back and we'll continue."

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## Tools that help

### Couples Journal (Shared)

When conversations get too heated, write to each other instead. Writing slows down your brain and prevents flooding.

### Cooperative Board Games

Games like Pandemic or Codenames Duet where you work together against the game. Practice being on the same team in a low-stakes way.

### "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work"

John Gottman's book explaining the research behind the Four Horsemen and how to defeat them.

# "Trust has been broken"

The path to rebuild - if both of you want to

## This is hard.

Recovering from betrayal (infidelity, major lies, broken promises) is some of the hardest relationship work there is. It often requires professional help. This guide gives you a starting framework, but consider working with a therapist trained in infidelity recovery.

## A What's happening in your brain

The hurt partner is experiencing something similar to PTSD. Intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, flashbacks, difficulty sleeping - these are **normal trauma responses**.

Recovery requires the person who broke trust to tolerate the hurt partner's pain without becoming defensive - for an extended period. This is extremely difficult but necessary.

## B The three phases of recovery

### Phase 1: Atonement

The person who broke trust takes full responsibility. No minimizing ("It didn't mean anything"), no blame-shifting ("If you hadn't been so distant..."). They answer questions honestly. The hurt partner needs to understand what happened to process it.

### Phase 2: Attunement

Learning to turn toward each other's pain instead of away. The hurt partner expresses their feelings; the other listens without defending. This phase can last

months or even years. Progress isn't linear.

### **Phase 3: Attachment**

Rebuilding the bond. Creating a new relationship that's stronger because it's finally built on honesty. Some couples say their relationship is better after recovery than before - because they're truly being honest for the first time.

## **C Do this today**

### **If you broke the trust:**

Say this: "I know I hurt you deeply. I take full responsibility. I'm committed to doing whatever it takes to rebuild your trust, for as long as it takes."

### **If your trust was broken:**

It's okay to not be okay. Your reactions are normal. Decide if you want to try to rebuild - not if you "should," but if you actually want to.

## **D Essential resources**

### **"How to Help Your Spouse Heal from Your Affair"**

By Linda J. MacDonald. Essential reading for the person who broke trust. Clear, direct guidance on what the hurt partner needs.

### **Gottman-trained or EFT therapist**

Seriously consider professional help. Infidelity recovery is one of the hardest things to do without guidance.

### **"After the Affair" by Janis Spring**

For both partners. Helps understand what happened and whether/how to move forward.

# "We're on the verge of ending it"

Before you decide, read this

If you're here, things feel hopeless. Maybe they are. Or maybe there's something left to try.

This guide won't tell you what to do. It will help you think clearly and make sure you've tried the right things before deciding.

## A Honest questions to answer

### **Do you BOTH want to save this?**

Not "should you" - do you actually want to? If only one person wants it, that's important information.

### **Is there contempt?**

Contempt (disgust, mockery, eye-rolling) is the strongest predictor of divorce. If it's present, it must be addressed first - and it's very hard to fix.

### **Have you tried with professional help?**

Reading articles isn't the same as working with a skilled therapist. Many couples who seemed hopeless have turned around with the right help.

### **Is there abuse?**

Physical, emotional, or financial abuse is a different situation. Your safety comes first. Couples therapy is often not recommended when abuse is present.

## B Option 1: Structured Separation

This is NOT "taking a break" - it's a therapeutic tool. A structured separation gives both people space to calm their nervous systems and think clearly.

### The rules:

- Written agreement: timeline (usually 3-6 months), finances, communication schedule
- Clear expectations about dating others (usually: don't)
- Individual therapy for both during this time
- Scheduled check-ins to reassess

This isn't for everyone. But for some couples, time apart with clear structure leads to clarity - either to reconnect or to separate with respect.

## C Option 2: Intensive therapy

Weekly therapy sessions may not be enough at this stage. Consider intensive formats:

- **Gottman Couples Retreat:** Weekend intensive workshop
- **Private intensive sessions:** Multiple hours over several days with one therapist
- **Discernment counseling:** Specifically for couples where one or both are unsure about staying

## D Resources

### "Too Good to Leave, Too Bad to Stay"

By Mira Kirshenbaum. A guide for people stuck in ambivalence about whether to stay or go.

### Discernment Counseling

A specific type of therapy for "mixed-agenda" couples (one wants to work on it, one isn't sure). Search for certified discernment counselors.

### "Should I Stay or Go?" by Lundy Bancroft

Especially helpful if you're unsure whether what you're experiencing is normal conflict or something more serious.

## A final thought

Not all relationships should be saved. Some endings are healthier than continuing in misery. But if there's genuine love underneath the pain, and both people are willing to do the hard work, many couples who seemed hopeless have found their way back.

Whatever you decide, try to treat each other with respect through the process.



This guide provides general relationship advice.  
For serious situations including abuse, please seek professional help immediately.

[savingourrelationship.com](https://savingourrelationship.com)