



FREE GUIDE • FOR COUPLES

The same fight, again. *How couples break the loop.*

Practical tools for softer conversations and faster repair, drawn from the approach our couples therapists use every week. For couples years in, and couples just starting out.

PREPARED BY

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01

START HERE

It's not you. It's *the loop*.

Most couples don't have a hundred fights. They have one fight, wearing a hundred costumes. The topic changes. The pattern underneath doesn't.

The most common pattern is pursue and withdraw. One of you moves toward the problem, the other moves away from it. She brings it up again at dinner because the silence feels like drifting apart. He goes quiet because every conversation has started to feel like a test he's already failing. In plenty of couples the roles run the other way around.

Each response makes perfect sense from the inside. And each one feeds the other. The pursuing makes the withdrawing feel necessary. The withdrawing makes the pursuing feel urgent. Round and round.

WHAT EACH SIDE FEELS

The pursuer feels alone, unimportant, shut out.

The withdrawer feels criticized, inadequate, overwhelmed.

Neither of you is the problem. The loop is the problem. That one idea, from Emotionally Focused Therapy, changes how couples fight more than any technique in this guide.

Whether you've been married for years or you're preparing for the wedding, the loop looks remarkably similar. The five tools that follow are about stepping out of it, together.

02

THE FIRST SIXTY SECONDS

Begin *softly*.

How a conversation begins is usually how it ends. The first sixty seconds decide more than the next sixty minutes.

A harsh start-up opens with criticism, blame, or a character verdict. "You always." "You never." The listener stops hearing the issue and starts defending themselves, and the loop takes over from there.

A soft start-up does three small things. It starts with "I" instead of "you." It describes a feeling and a situation, not a flaw in the other person. And it asks for something, instead of prosecuting something.

TRY SAYING

Instead of:

"You never help around here. I do everything myself."

Try:

"I've been feeling stretched thin lately. Could we sit down and figure out how to share things differently?"

The second version isn't weaker. It's clearer. It tells your husband or wife exactly what's wrong and exactly what you're asking for, with nothing to defend against.

03

BELOW THE SURFACE

Find the feeling *underneath*.

Anger is rarely the whole story. Most of the time it's a bodyguard, standing in front of something softer.

In Emotionally Focused Therapy, anger is called a secondary emotion. It's the protective layer over more vulnerable feelings: hurt, fear, loneliness. The trouble is that anger is what your spouse or fiancé actually sees, and anger pushes people away, while the feeling underneath tends to draw them closer.

So before the next hard conversation, take a quiet minute and ask yourself:

- i. **Am I actually hurt?** Did something land like a small wound, even if it sounds petty to say out loud?
- ii. **Am I scared?** Worried about where the two of you are heading, or about not mattering?
- iii. **Am I feeling rejected or unimportant?** Like you've slipped down the list of priorities?
- iv. **Am I feeling alone?** Disconnected, even when you're in the same room?

"I'm furious you were on your phone all evening" usually means "I missed you tonight." The second sentence is harder to say. It's also the one that gets heard.

04

WHEN IT GETS TOO HOT

Pause well. *Return on purpose.*

When emotions flood, the reasoning part of the brain goes quietly offline. No tool in this guide works while that's happening.

Taking a break mid-argument isn't avoidance. It's wisdom, but only if the break has a structure both of you agreed to in advance. Otherwise a time-out just feels like one more withdrawal, and the loop spins faster.

- i. **Agree on a signal beforehand.** A word or gesture that means "I need a break," chosen on a calm day, not invented mid-fight.
- ii. **Take at least twenty minutes.** A flooded nervous system needs real time to settle. Five minutes of silent fuming doesn't count.
- iii. **Soothe, don't rehearse.** Walk, breathe, put your hands in dishwater. Replaying the argument and sharpening your comeback keeps the flood going.
- iv. **Come back.** Name a time and keep it. "Let's try again after dinner." The return is what separates a pause from a shutdown.

THE PROMISE THAT MAKES IT WORK

A time-out only feels safe to the pursuing partner if the return is guaranteed. If you're the one who asks for the break, you're the one responsible for restarting the conversation.

05

THE OTHER HALF OF TALKING

Listen so it *lands*.

Most of us don't listen. We reload. We wait for a gap in our partner's sentences so we can fire back the point we've been holding.

Real listening is different work: trying to understand what it's like to be the person across from you, before you say anything about your own view. A simple structure for it is LUVA.

- i. **Listen** without interrupting. All the way to the end, even the parts that sting.
- ii. **Understand** by asking questions. "What was the worst part of that for you?"
- iii. **Validate** the feeling, even where you disagree with the facts. "I can see why you'd feel that way."
- iv. **Acknowledge** their perspective out loud before offering yours. Say back what you heard, in your own words.

WORTH UNDERLINING

Validation is not agreement. You can fully understand why he's frustrated, or why she's hurt, while still seeing the situation differently. Most of us wait for agreement before offering understanding, and that order is backwards. Understanding comes first. Agreement gets easier after.

06

HINTS DON'T COUNT

Ask plainly, *not in code*.

Your partner cannot read your mind. Not after thirty years, and certainly not three months before the wedding.

Most criticism is a need wearing armour. "You never want to spend time with me" is really "I miss you." But the armoured version invites a defence, not a date. A clear, slightly vulnerable request almost always works better than a complaint, a hint, or a test they don't know they're taking.

TRY SAYING

Instead of:

"You never want to spend time with me anymore."

Try:

"I miss you. Could we plan a real date night this week, just the two of us?"

Two small rules make requests easier to grant. Say what you want, not what you don't want. And make it specific enough to act on: "this week," "tonight," "when you get home," rather than "more" or "sometimes."

07

MAKE REPAIR A HABIT

Twenty minutes, *once a week.*

Tools you only reach for mid-fight don't hold. The couples who change their pattern practise it on the calm days.

Set aside twenty minutes each week, same day if you can, phones elsewhere. Then walk through five steps:

- i. **Appreciate.** Each share one thing you appreciated about the other this week. Be specific.
- ii. **Raise one thing.** Share one thing that's been on your mind or bothering you. One, not the whole list.
- iii. **Listen with LUVA.** The listener's only job is to understand. No defending, no fixing.
- iv. **Switch roles.** The listener becomes the speaker, and gets the same hearing.
- v. **Look forward.** End with something you're both looking forward to, together.

IF THE LOOP WON'T LOOSEN

These tools help many couples. But if the same argument keeps returning without resolution, if you feel more like roommates than a couple, if trust has been broken, or a big transition is straining things, that's not failure. It's a sign the pattern runs deeper than tools on a page, and working with a couples therapist can help you change it together.

08

AN HONEST NOTE

Why this works better *with a guide.*

Everything in this guide is real, and couples use these tools on their own every day. It's also true that the same tools work differently with a therapist in the room. Here's why, plainly.

- i. **You can't see your own loop from inside it.** By the time a conversation heats up, both of you are in it. A couples therapist watches the cycle happen live and can stop the film at the exact moment it turns, which is something no worksheet can do.
- ii. **Someone holds the conversation steady.** The hardest topics are the ones that escalate fastest. With a third person keeping things safe, couples can finally finish conversations they've been abandoning halfway for years.
- iii. **The skills get aimed at your specific pattern.** This guide teaches the general shape. A therapist notices which tool your particular loop needs, when you're ready for it, and what's underneath the pattern in the first place.
- iv. **Practice with feedback beats practice alone.** Like any skill, repair gets better faster when someone who has seen hundreds of couples can say "try it this way" in the moment.

NO PRESSURE ATTACHED

Use this guide on its own for as long as it serves you. If you reach the edge of what the tools can do alone, that's not failure. That's the normal place where couples therapy begins.

YOUR NEXT STEP

The first conversation *costs nothing.*

These tools come from the same approach our therapists use in couples therapy and premarital counselling, and a guide can only take a pattern so far. The next step is a free 15-minute consultation. Answer a few questions, get matched with the therapist who fits your situation, and pick a time that works. No obligation, no pressure, and nothing to pay.

Get matched & book your free consultation

gracewaywellness.com/book/free-consultation · about 90 seconds

Meet our therapists first

gracewaywellness.com/our-team

Prefer to reach out directly?

hello@gracewaywellness.com · (289) 204-4439

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