

Aftermath of a Failed Bid To Connect

This exercise is a guide for processing what happened after a failed bid to connect emotionally. This is the major source of couples' conflicts. This exercise is designed to try to increase understanding between the two of you.

Before you begin The basic assumption we work with is that there is no absolute "reality" when two people mis-communicate, or miss each other in turning toward one another, or in turning away. There are two "subjective realities." Everyone is right. Perception is everything, not facts. Facts are useless. Don't focus on your partner's "facts", focus instead on perceptions.

"Processing" means you can talk about the incident without getting back into it again, and finding at least one way to make this type of interaction better in the future. Try to make it your job to understand your partner's reality, not to argue for your own reality. Use the steps in this exercise to process fully how you might have miscommunicated.

STEP I FEELINGS

Share how you felt. Do not say why you felt that way.
Avoid commenting on your partner's feelings. Be patient.
Ask: "What else were you feeling? Tell me everything you felt."

I felt

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. defensive | 24. unappreciated |
| 2. not listened to | 25. disliked |
| 3. hurt | 26. unattractive |
| 4. totally flooded | 27. stupid |
| 5. angry | 28. morally outraged |
| 6. sad | 29. taken for granted |
| 7. unloved | 30. like leaving |
| 8. misunderstood | 31. like staying and talking this through |
| 9. criticized | 32. overwhelmed with emotion |
| 10. I took a complaint personally | 33. not calm |
| 11. like you didn't even like me | 34. stubborn |
| 12. not cared about | 35. powerless |
| 13. worried | 36. I had no influence |
| 14. afraid | 37. I wanted to win this one |
| 15. unsafe | 38. my opinions didn't even matter |
| 16. tense | 39. there was a lot of give and take |
| 17. right and you were wrong | 40. I had no feelings at all |
| 18. that both of us were partly right | 41. I had no idea what I was feeling |
| 19. out of control | 42. lonely |
| 20. frustrated | 43. alienated |
| 21. righteously indignant | 44. rejected |
| 22. morally justified | 45. abandoned |
| 23. unfairly picked on | |

STEP 2 SUBJECTIVE REALITIES

Describe your "reality." Take turns. Summarize and validate at least part of your partner's reality.

There are always two realities—two perceptions—in each failed bid for connection. There is no immaculate perception. Do not argue for your own perceptions. Instead, try to understand your partner's perceptions.

In this step, you will have an opportunity to discuss and validate each person's subjective reality; you will have a chance to explain your perceptions and emotions.

Speaker: Focus on your own feelings; do not use "you statements." Do not describe your partner, your partner's intentions, or motivations. Report your own perceptions like a newspaper reporter. For example, instead of saying "you said," say "I heard you say."

Describe the situation neutrally. Talk about what you needed in that situation. What is your recipe for success with you? Perhaps these needs were unexpressed at the time.

Below are some examples of "needs." You don't have to choose from this list. They are just examples.

Listener: Try to listen to your partner compassionately. When your partner is done, try to communicate that you understand some of his or her perspective. Validate.

I needed

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. you to just listen to me | 17. you to put down the paper or mute the TV when I wanted to talk |
| 2. you to hold me | 18. a foot rub |
| 3. for you to offer to help me | 19. a back rub or a massage |
| 4. to feel understood | 20. you to offer to do a household chore so I could get some relief |
| 5. to be validated by you | 21. you to tell me I looked nice |
| 6. you to initiate sex | 22. you to answer me when I called your name |
| 7. to cuddle more | 23. a romantic drive or get away |
| 8. to know when you found me irresistible | 24. to go out to dinner and a movie |
| 9. to talk more about our kids | 25. to take a long bath together |
| 10. you to ask me about my hopes and aspirations | 26. you to cook a meal or order food in for one night a week |
| 11. to have a conversation with you | 27. to see my friends |
| 12. to talk to you about my day | 28. for us to have an adventure together |
| 13. our reunions to be warm and affectionate | 29. some time alone for myself |
| 14. you to be more affectionate with me, to touch me more | 30. I needed...(you supply the need) |
| 15. you to look happy when you first saw me at the end of the day | |
| 16. you to ask me about my work | |

STEP 3 TRIGGERS

Share what experiences or memories you've had that might have escalated the interaction, and the stories of why these are triggers for each of you.

There are not always triggers in every incident of a failed bid. Triggers are enduring vulnerabilities that might have been activated in this incident of a failed bid for connection. They need to refer to events that happened in your past, but not in this current relationship. The goal of Step 3 is to understand why these events are triggers for you and to build your partner's awareness of why these events are triggers for you.

Identify the triggers for each of you.

Share what experience or memories you've had that might have escalated the interaction and the stories of why these are triggers for you.

As you rewind the "videotape" of your memory, stop at a point where you had a similar set of feelings from your past in which you got triggered in the same way or had some of the very same feelings as you did this time. Now tell the story of that past moment to your partner, so that your partner can understand why that is a trigger for you.

Below are some examples of triggers. You don't have to choose from this list. They are just examples.

Take turns putting into your own words what escalated this failed bid for connection for you.

Speaker: Tell the story of that incident from the past: how it happened, what you felt.

Listener: Summarize your partner's story and listen to your partner's story with empathy.

What triggered me.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. I felt excluded | 14. I couldn't just talk about my feelings without you going ballistic |
| 2. I felt powerless | 15. Once again, I was the bad guy and you were innocent |
| 3. I felt not listened to | 16. I was not getting taken care of very well |
| 4. I couldn't ask for what I needed | 17. This felt so unfair to me |
| 5. I felt scolded | 18. I had trouble with your anger or yelling |
| 6. I felt judged | 19. I had trouble with your sadness or despair |
| 7. I felt blamed | 20. I felt trapped |
| 8. I felt disrespected | 21. I felt you had no passion for me |
| 9. I felt no affection | 22. I could not ask for what I needed |
| 10. I felt unsafe | 23. I felt unloved |
| 11. I felt uncared for | 24. I felt controlled |
| 12. I felt lonely | 25. I felt manipulated |
| 13. You weren't there for me when I was vulnerable and needed you | |

STEP 4 RESPONSIBILITY

Acknowledge your own role in contributing to the disconnection.

In this exercise, you will identify and share what set you up for the miscommunication. And then, accept responsibility. What role did you play in this regrettable incident or fight? What specifically was your own contribution to this incident? What do you wish to apologize for?

**What Set Me Up:
(Read aloud the items that were true for you)**

1. I've been very stressed and irritable lately
2. I've not expressed much appreciation toward you lately
3. I've taken you for granted
4. I've been overly sensitive lately
5. I've been overly critical lately
6. I've not shared very much of my inner world
7. I've not been emotionally available
8. I've been more typically turning away from you
9. I've been getting easily upset
10. I've been depressed lately
11. I had a chip on my shoulder lately
12. I've not been very affectionate
13. I've not made time for good things between us
14. I've not been a very good listener lately
15. I've not asked for what I need
16. I've been feeling a bit like a martyr
17. I've needed to be alone
18. I've not wanted to take care of anybody
19. I have been very preoccupied
20. I have been very stressed lately
21. I haven't felt very much confidence in myself
22. I have been running on empty

Step 4 is continued on the next page

Step 4, continued from previous page

Specifically, what do you regret; specifically, what was your contribution to this regrettable incident or fight? _____

What do you wish to apologize for?

Examples are below, but use your own words.

(Read aloud) I wish to apologize for:

1. Disrespecting you
2. Turning away from you
3. Over-reacting
4. Saying something I regret
5. Insulting you
6. Rejecting you
7. Abandoning you
8. Being cold
9. Hurting you
10. Leaving you so alone
11. Violating your trust
12. Lying to you
13. Not listening
14. Being stubborn
15. Being insensitive

If you accept your partner's apology, say so. If not, say what you still need.

STEP 5 CONSTRUCTIVE PLANS

Together, plan one way each of you can make it better next time.

Share one thing ***your partner*** can do to make a discussion of this issue better next time.

(It is important to remain calm as you do this.)

Then, while it is still your turn, share one thing ***you*** can do to make it better next time.

What do you need to be able to put this behind you and move on? Be as agreeable as possible to the plans suggested by your partner.

Write your plan to make it better: