

The Sound Relationship House

The Sound Relationship House is a research-based framework developed by Drs. John and Julie Gottman that outlines the key components of a healthy, lasting relationship. In couples therapy, it's used as a roadmap to help partners strengthen their emotional connection, manage conflict effectively, and build shared meaning together.



“The Four Horsemen” in Relationships: How to Stop Them with Their Antidotes

The Four Horsemen are four negative communication patterns identified by Drs. John and Julie Gottman that predict relationship distress and, if left unaddressed, divorce.

They are: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling.

In couples therapy, partners become aware of how their communication may be eroding connection by learning to recognize and interrupt these patterns with the “antidotes”: Gentle Start Up, Building a Culture of Appreciation, Taking Responsibility & Self-soothing

Criticism
Verbally attacking personality or character.

Gentle Start Up

Talk about your feelings using “I” statements and express a positive need.

Contempt
Attacking sense of self with an intent to insult or abuse.

Build Culture of Appreciation
Remind yourself of your partner’s positive qualities express gratitude

Defensiveness
Victimizing yourself to ward off a perceived attack and reverse the blame.

Take Responsibility
Accept your partner’s perspective and offer an apology for any wrongdoing.

Stonewalling
Withdrawing to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance, and separation.

Physiological Self-Soothing
Take a break and spend that time doing something soothing and distracting.

Gentle Startup

A Gentle Start-Up is one of the most effective tools for reducing conflict and creating emotional safety in relationships. It's the practice of beginning difficult conversations with softness, clarity, and respect, rather than criticism, blame, or harshness. It sets the tone for a productive conversation rather than triggering defensiveness or shutdown.

Gentle Start-Up Formula:

“I feel [emotion] about [situation]. I need [positive need or request].”

Why It Works:

The first 3 minutes of a conversation often predict how the whole thing will go. Starting gently = more likely to be heard, less likely to escalate. It's a core predictor of long-term relationship success.

Key Elements of a Gentle Start-Up:

1. Use “I” statements instead of “You” accusations
2. Name your feelings
3. State a specific need or request
4. Avoid blame, criticism, or global statements (“always,” “never”)

Examples:

Harsh Start-Up:

“You never listen to me. I’m sick of repeating myself.”

Gentle Start-Up:

“I’m feeling frustrated and unheard when I have to repeat things. Can we figure out a way to stay more on the same page?”

Harsh Start-Up:

“You’re so selfish. You always put your friends before me.”

Gentle Start-Up:

“I feel sad and left out when we don’t have much one-on-one time. I’d love to plan something just for us soon.”

Harsh Start-Up:

“You never help with anything. I’m done doing everything around here.”

Gentle Start-Up:

“I’m feeling overwhelmed with all the responsibilities. It would mean a lot if we could talk about dividing things up a bit more.”

Gottman Repair Checklist

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I Feel

I'm getting scared.
Please say that more gently.
Did I do something wrong?
That hurt my feelings.
That felt like an insult.
I'm feeling sad.
I feel blamed. Can you rephrase that?
I'm feeling unappreciated.
I feel defensive. Can you rephrase that?
Please don't lecture me.
I don't feel like you understand me right now.
Sounds like it's all my fault.
I feel criticized. Can you rephrase that?
I'm getting worried.
Please don't withdraw.

Sorry

My reactions were too extreme. Sorry.
I really blew that one.
Let me try again.
I want to be gentler to you right now and I don't know how.
Tell what you hear me saying.
I can see my part in all this.
How can I make things better?
Let's try that one over again.
What you are saying is...
Let me start again in a softer way.
I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

Appreciation

I know this isn't your fault.
My part of this problem is...
I see your point.
Thank you for...
That's a good point.
We are both saying...
I understand.
I love you.
I am thankful for...
One thing I admire about you is...
I see what you're talking about.
This is not your problem, it's OUR problem.

I Need to Calm Down

Can you make things safer for me?
I need things to be calmer right now.
I need your support right now.
Just listen to me right now and try to understand.
Tell me you love me.
Can I have a kiss?
Can I take that back?
Please be gentler with me.
Please help me calm down.
Please be quiet and listen to me.
This is important to me. Please listen.
I need to finish what I was saying.
I am starting to feel flooded.
Can we take a break?
Can we talk about something else for a while?

Stop Action!

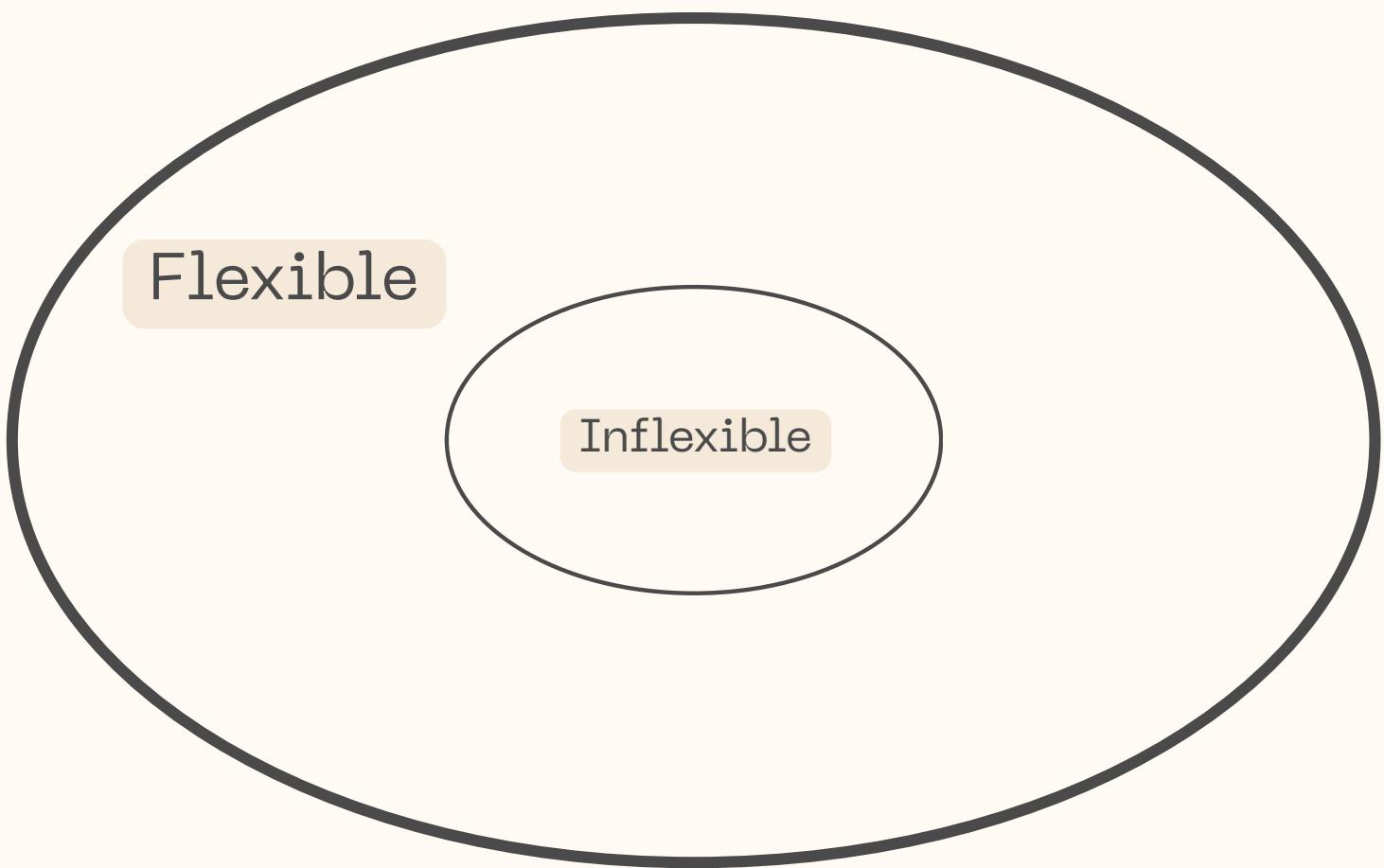
I might be wrong here.
Please let's stop for a while.
Let's take a break.
Give me a moment. I'll be back.
I'm feeling flooded.
Please stop.
Let's agree to disagree here.
Let's start all over again.
Hang in there. Don't withdraw.
I want to change the topic.
We are getting off track.

Get to Yes

You're starting to convince me.
I agree with part of what you're saying.
Let's compromise here.
Let's find our common ground.
I never thought of things that way.
This problem is not very serious in the big picture.
I think your point of view makes sense.
Let's agree to include both our views in a solution.
What are your concerns?

Compromise: Accepting Influence

The goal of compromise is to dialogue about a problem. The problem may never be solved but it will hurt less. Accepting influence is the willingness to be shaped by your partner's ideas, feelings, and needs—even when they differ from your own. It's about valuing your partner's perspective and showing openness to compromise. You can only be influential if you are willing to accept influence.



My inflexible area or core need on this is...

My more flexible areas on this are...

Compromise: Accepting Influence

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Getting to “Yes.”

Discuss these questions with your partner:

- Help me understand why your inflexible area is so important to you.
- What are your core feelings, beliefs, or values about this issue?

- Help me understand your flexible areas.
- What do we agree about?
- What are our common goals?
- How might these goals be accomplished?
- How can we reach a temporary compromise?
- What feelings do we have in common?
- How can I help to meet your core needs?

Our compromise that honors both our needs and dreams: