



# How to Turn Down the Heat: Moving from Contention to Connection

## Handout

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## Three “Heart” Keys that Turn Contention into Connection:

### Slow Down, Make It Safe, Soften Your Heart

#### SLOW DOWN

- Mindfulness: The ability to be fully present and aware in the moment, without judgment.
- Choose to slow down, breathe deeply and ask thoughtful, curious questions.
- Be intentional: “What do I want to happen as a result of this discourse?”
- Keep your eye on the target: “What is the long-term cost of giving in to the short-term satisfaction of self-defense or lashing out?”
- Unpack the dance: Triggers → Feelings → Meaning → Reaction.
- Use a time-out to slow down and create space, but be sure to time-in.

#### MAKE IT SAFE

- No blaming, shaming, naming or flaming.
- Avoid the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Dr. John Gottman, *Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*): Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, Stonewalling.
- **Definition of criticism:** finding fault with your partner’s personality, judgmental fault-finding
  - The problem with blame (or criticism): 1) nothing gets solved, 2) it invites defensiveness, 3) it inhibits self-awareness because the blamer does not have to reveal him- or herself, or try to learn something about him- or herself.
  - Antidote to criticism: self-disclose something real and vulnerable about yourself.
- **Definition of defensiveness:** any attempt to ward off a perceived attack.
  - Antidote to defensiveness: ask a curious question or own your part.
- **Definition of contempt:** criticism combined with an attitude of superiority and enmity.
  - Antidote to contempt: remember you’re not at *war* with your partner. It is possible to express your feelings and needs (be assertive) without putting your partner down.
  - Also: cultivating a conscious, intentional focus on what is good, of value, worthy and admirable in your partner.



- **Definition of stonewalling:** unresponsive, checking-out, tuning out, disengaging, acting busy.
  - Most often we stonewall in an effort not to make things worse. Instead, it *does* make things worse. It *elevates* the heart rate of your partner, and makes them feel more invisible, more anxious.
  - Antidote to stonewalling: manage your flooding through self-soothing (breathing/relaxing) then learn to *re-engage* dialogue when you are more regulated.
- Do you value the other person and your relationship with them? Do you give them the benefit of the doubt that they value you?
- Do you value the relationship more than being right? More than winning?

## SOFTEN YOUR HEART

- Caring responsiveness: providing care and compassion to another person in distress.
- Tune into the “emotional message”. Start with emotions. They are our clue to emotional needs.
- If you’re stuck on the details or the facts, you’ve missed the emotional message. Remember: people rarely feel connected to you or change their hearts by being reminded of the facts.
- Examples of common emotional messages: Are you there for me? Can I count on you? Will you help me? Do I matter to you?
- Speaking from the Heart: use “I” statements to: 1) describe your feelings, 2) state how you made meaning, 3) define what you want, and 4) own your actions (see below for examples of “I” statements).
- Be authentic, real and vulnerable.
- Acknowledge the understandable part of the other person’s feelings.
- This often means acknowledging how your actions impacted the other person’s feelings, *even if you did not intend that impact*.
- In many circumstances, we need not apologize for our primary feelings, but we may need to apologize for our *reactions* to our feelings.
- Things to avoid: hard-selling (persuasion), and focusing on the other person’s faults.
- One of our underlying emotional needs → the need to feel “heard”.

## The EARN Formula (*A formula for validating, helping your partner feel heard*)

E = Emotions = Acknowledge the other person’s emotion.

A = Actions (Yours) = Acknowledge how your actions impacted the other person’s feelings.

R = Responsibility (Yours) = Acknowledge how you will adjust your actions in future.

N = Need = Ask your partner what they need to feel comforted and safe.



# A Five Step Process for Repairing and Restoring Connection After a Conflict

**1** Each of you describes your part of the “trigger → feelings → meaning → reaction” chain.

When I saw/heard you say: (i.e. “When I heard you say that you weren’t going to help me...”)

I felt: (i.e. “I felt alone and hurt”)

I thought it meant: (i.e. “I thought it meant that you didn’t care”)

Then I: (i.e. “Then I reacted to my feelings by giving you the cold shoulder. I went into protection mode. I know that doesn’t mean you were trying to hurt me.”)

**2** Each of you validates the understandable part of the other person’s feelings (their subjective reality).

John: “I can see why you would think that I didn’t care. I really shut down and withdrew and that must have hurt.”

Jane: “Yes, it did. It makes me feel better when you validate that. I can also see how you felt rejected when I gave you the cold shoulder.”

**3** Each of you acknowledge some way that you contributed to the incident or fight.

John: “I was just thinking of myself in that moment and wouldn’t help you. I can see how that made things worse.”

Jane: “Thank you. I feel better. I kept giving you the cold shoulder expecting that would make it better. Instead, it made you feel rejected. I can see that the more I did that the more rejected you felt.”

**4** Each of you express what you want or need.

“I think when I’m feeling overwhelmed like that, it would help me if you could...”

**5** Together make constructive plans to handle this issue better the next time it comes up.

