

# Applying the Brakes During Conflict



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*Content on this side is intended for the educator's reference. The information on the back can be photocopied and shared with clients.*

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**Objective:** Clients will learn conflict management strategies to help prevent arguments from escalating.

**Audience:** This tool can help all clients; however, it may be most useful for those who report having arguments that tend to escalate easily. This tool is not recommended when working with clients experiencing intimate partner violence unless used under the supervision of a trained counselor.

**Estimated Time:** 10-15 minutes

**Educator Instructions:** Review the instructions printed on the tool. Explain that conflict is not always bad, but rather how a conflict is handled is what matters. Discuss the importance of preventing hostile conflict and ways to prevent conflict from escalating. Explain what “repair attempts” are and review the examples provided. Talk about how the couple typically handles arguments. For example, is one of them more likely than the other to use a repair attempt? Is there a certain type of repair attempt that tends to work better for them? Ask clients to briefly describe a disagreement that left them feeling upset, and then talk about how a repair attempt might have helped them work through their differences better.

**Discussion Starter:** Conflict is inevitable and normal. Even couples who have really close, long-lasting relationships have arguments from time to time. The key is not how much or how little a couple argues, but rather how conflict is managed. One way to help keep conflicts from escalating is by simply taking a step back from the situation and using something called “repair attempts.” Basically, repair attempts are just things we can say or do to help us work through problems and disagreements. I have an activity we can do together to help you learn how to use repair attempts.

**Follow-up:** During your next visit, talk about recent conflicts that have come up and how they were handled. Did either partner try to use a repair attempt? If so, which strategy was used and how well did it work? If the clients did not use any repair attempts, or may have forgotten about the activity, try to validate their frustrations over the conflict and remind them about using repair attempts.



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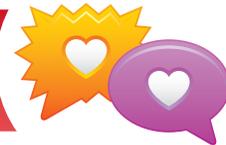
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Conflict in relationships is common. Every couple has arguments from time to time. How couples handle conflict is what makes the difference between a healthy versus unhealthy relationship. Sometimes when it feels like an argument is getting out of control, we need to use a “repair attempt” to get back on track. This involves saying or doing something to prevent angry feelings while you talk things out. Think of it as applying the brakes in a car and slowing down so you both are calm and able to focus and understand each other.

Here are some examples of simple statements you could say when you feel like a conversation is turning into an argument. Which repair attempts reflect things you and/or your partner sometimes do?

Repair Attempt Examples	Who does this during a disagreement?	
	Me	My Partner
<b>Find common ground</b> “Let’s talk about this” or “We can tackle this together.”		
<b>I feel...</b> “I am getting scared,” “What you said really hurt,” or “I don’t feel like you are understanding me right now.”		
<b>Calming down</b> “Can I take that back?” or “I just need this to be calmer right now.”		
<b>Apologize</b> “Let me try again,” “I didn’t think of that,” or “I’m sorry, will you please forgive me?”		
<b>Get to yes</b> “I see what you mean” or “Let’s compromise.”		
<b>Stop Action!</b> “We are off track” or “Let’s take a break and talk a little later.”		
<b>Appreciate each other</b> “I see your point,” “I think we are both saying...,” “I know this isn’t your fault,” “I understand,” or “I love you.”		

Look back at the repair attempts you marked. How well do these strategies usually work? Is there another repair attempt that might work better? If they feel awkward or forced, use language that you feel more comfortable with.

For repair attempts that one or both partners do not do, are there ways you could try them? What difference could they make in how you work through disagreements?

Think of a recent conflict you had with your partner that turned into an argument. How could a repair attempt have helped to keep the conflict from getting out of control?

***Managing conflicts from getting out of control can help you both feel better about your relationship!***