

HARD *empathy*

THE REPAIR MAP

A Practical Guide to Fighting Less,
Repairing Faster, and Building Agreements
That Actually Hold

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You Keep Having the Same Fight

You know the one. It starts with something small — a tone, a forgotten task, a look. Within minutes, you're both defending, attacking, or shutting down. The details change, but the pattern doesn't. Afterward, someone apologizes (sort of), someone moves on (sort of), and you both silently agree to pretend it's fine — until it happens again.

This is the **disappointment-expectation loop**. You expected your partner to act a certain way. They didn't. You're disappointed. But instead of naming what actually happened and what you actually need, you fight about the surface issue. The real conversation never occurs.

Hard Empathy breaks this loop. Not by being softer. Not by being harsher. By being **clearer**.

Empathy without accountability is enabling. Accountability without empathy is cruelty. Hard Empathy is the uncomfortable middle.

This guide gives you three things: a way to stop the spiral in real time, a repair process that actually works, and a framework for building agreements that hold. No therapy-speak. No lectures. Just tools.

Part 1: Stop the Spiral

Before you can repair anything, you have to stop making it worse. Most couples try to resolve conflict *while their nervous systems are still activated*. This never works. Your brain is in threat mode. You're not problem-solving — you're surviving.

The Timeout Protocol

This is not “storming off.” This is a structured pause with a return commitment. Here's the script:

TIMEOUT SCRIPT

“I need to pause. I'm getting activated and I don't want to say something I'll regret. I'm not leaving this conversation — I'm coming back in [30 minutes / 1 hour]. I want to finish this. I just can't do it well right now.”

Why this works:

- **It names what's happening internally** (“I'm getting activated”) instead of blaming the other person
- **It commits to returning** so it doesn't feel like abandonment
- **It gives a specific time** so both people know the plan
- **It protects the relationship** from words spoken in survival mode

During the Timeout: The Nervous System Reset

Do not rehearse your argument. Do not scroll your phone looking for validation. Instead:

1. **Move your body.** Walk, stretch, do push-ups — anything that discharges the adrenaline.
2. **Name your emotions.** Not “I'm fine” — the real ones. Am I hurt? Scared? Dismissed? Disrespected? Use the word bank on the next page.
3. **Ask: What do I actually need right now?** Not what I want to say. What do I need?
4. **Paint the portrait.** Remind yourself: this person did not grow up in your house, with your parents, with your wiring. They are not you. What would make them act this way?

Emotion Word Bank

When your partner asks “What’s wrong?” and you say “Nothing” or “I’m just frustrated” — you’re not being honest. You’re being vague. Precision matters. Circle or highlight the words that are actually true:

HURT	FEAR	ANGER	SHAME
Dismissed Rejected Invisible Betrayed Taken for granted Unimportant	Abandoned Unsafe Controlled Trapped Uncertain Powerless	Disrespected Provoked Overwhelmed Resentful Disgusted Bitter	Inadequate Embarrassed Exposed Unworthy Stupid Broken
SADNESS	LONELINESS	EXHAUSTION	GRIEF
Hopeless Defeated Empty Disappointed Numb Lost	Isolated Disconnected Unseen Misunderstood Forgotten Alone	Drained Burned out Depleted Running on empty Done Over it	Missing who we were Mourning the plan Letting go Accepting loss Holding on Moving through

The goal isn't to feel better. It's to feel accurately. When you can name what's actually happening, you can communicate it. And when you can communicate it, your partner has something real to respond to.

Part 2: The Repair Process

Most apologies fail because they're designed to end the conversation, not start a real one. "I'm sorry you feel that way" is not repair. "I said I'm sorry, what else do you want?" is not repair. Repair is a process, not a sentence.

The Hard Empathy Loop for Couples

This is the operating system. Five steps, in order. Don't skip ahead.

1. NAME	Name what happened. Not the accusation — the experience. <i>"When you didn't respond to my text for six hours, I felt invisible."</i> <i>"When you made that joke in front of your family, I felt humiliated."</i>
2. OWN	Own your part. Even if it's only 10%. Especially if it's only 10%. <i>"I should have told you I was upset instead of going quiet."</i> <i>"I know I came in hot. That wasn't fair to you."</i>
3. NEED	State the need clearly. Not a complaint disguised as a question. <i>"I need to know you're not checking out when things get hard."</i> <i>"I need you to ask me before making plans that affect both of us."</i>
4. BOUNDARY	Set the line. What you will and won't accept going forward. <i>"I won't continue this conversation if we're yelling. I will come back when we can talk."</i> <i>"I won't pretend I'm okay when I'm not. I will tell you what I need."</i>
5. NEXT ACTION	Agree on one concrete action. Not "be better." Something measurable. <i>"We'll check in for 10 minutes every Sunday night about the week ahead."</i> <i>"If one of us needs a timeout, we'll use the script and come back within an hour."</i>

Part 3: The Apology Quality Rubric

Not all apologies are created equal. Most are designed to end discomfort, not repair damage. Use this rubric to evaluate whether an apology — yours or theirs — is actually doing the work.

EMPTY APOLOGY	PARTIAL APOLOGY	FULL REPAIR
<p>“I’m sorry you feel that way.” “I’m sorry if I hurt you.” Deflects blame No ownership No behavior change</p>	<p>“I’m sorry I did that.” Acknowledges the action Missing: what it cost you Missing: what changes next Getting closer</p>	<p>“I see that when I [action], it made you feel [emotion]. That wasn’t okay. Here’s what I’ll do differently.” Names the action Names the impact Takes ownership Commits to change</p>

A full repair apology has four parts: (1) I see what I did. (2) I see how it affected you. (3) I own it without excuses. (4) Here’s what changes. If any part is missing, it’s incomplete.

Post-Fight Repair Checklist

Use this after every significant conflict. Not immediately — after both of you have calmed down and are ready to talk. This is the bridge between the fight and the agreement.

1. **Both partners confirm they're ready.** “Are you in a place to talk about what happened?” If either person says no, set a time.
2. **Each person names what happened from their perspective.** No interrupting. No correcting. Listen to understand, not to respond.
3. **Each person names the emotion underneath.** Use the word bank. “The real feeling was ____.”
4. **Each person owns their part.** Even 10%. “My contribution to this was ____.”
5. **Each person states one need.** “What I need going forward is ____.”
6. **Build one agreement together.** Specific, measurable, and time-bound. Write it down.
7. **Set a check-in date.** “We’ll revisit this in one week to see how it’s going.”

Boundary Language Scripts

Boundaries aren't threats. They're invitations to a better version of the relationship. The formula: **"I won't [thing you won't accept]. I will [thing you're committing to]."**

When your partner shuts down during conflict:

"I know this is hard. I'm not going to force you to talk right now. But I need you to know that when you go silent, it feels like the issue doesn't matter to you. Can we agree to come back to this by tonight?"

When the same fight keeps repeating:

"We've had this fight before. I don't want to have it again the same way. Can we try something different this time? I'll tell you what I need, you tell me what you need, and we'll build an agreement."

When you need to set a boundary with someone you love:

"I love you, and this isn't working for me. I'm not trying to punish you. I'm trying to protect what we have. Here's what I need to be different."

For co-parenting handoffs:

"Here's what you need to know about the kids this week: [facts only]. If anything comes up, text me and I'll respond within an hour. Let's keep this about them."

What Hard Empathy Is Not

Before you use these tools, you need to know when they don't apply. Hard Empathy is powerful, but it's not a substitute for professional help in certain situations.

Do not use this guide as a replacement for professional support if:

- There is physical, emotional, or sexual abuse in the relationship
- There is an active, undisclosed affair
- There is untreated addiction
- There is a severe power imbalance where one partner cannot safely speak
- You or your partner are in crisis and need immediate help

In these cases, the right move is a therapist, a counselor, a mediator, or in cases of danger, a crisis line. Hard Empathy is for relationships where both people are safe and willing to do the work.

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Love someone and hold a line.

Ready to go deeper?

Join a Hard Empathy workshop, cohort, or coaching program.

hardempathy.com/couples

Book a Discovery Call: hardempathy.com/call

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