

How To Repair a Damaged Relationship

By Travis Bradberry, Ph.D.

Ten weeks ago, I wrote a piece entitled *Four Signs a Relationship Is Failing*, and was floored by the response. It's our most popular article thus far and has nearly twice the reads of our second most popular piece. In retrospect, I really shouldn't have been surprised. Relationships are tough. We're all looking for sound strategies to help keep our relationships healthy, happy, and productive.

If you want to learn how to repair a damaged relationship, you first need to understand that frequency of conflict has no bearing on the quality of a relationship. Conflict is a normal part of two people with different needs, interests, and motivations coming together. It's *how* conflict is handled that determines the quality and ultimate success of a relationship. Researchers at the University of Washington (the same researchers who can predict the future success of a relationship with 93% accuracy) have discovered that successful relationships address conflict using a single technique—one that's so effective at addressing conflict that it's called a repair.

A repair is a gesture that shows respect and concern for the other despite disagreement. Repairs take on many forms, but all aim at resolving a conflict together—as opposed to *winning* a conflict on your own. A repair can be anything from suggesting a compromise (“Let’s split the funds between sales and marketing”), to owning your half of the situation (“I realize that letting marketing have these funds is a risk that we may all regret taking”), to voicing respect for another party (“I think your project is a great idea”), to using humor to break tension (“Maybe we can all transfer to the service department so we won’t have any funds to fight over”).



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In the heat of an argument, a repair sends an instant signal that you think the other person is important, that you respect him or her, and that you're willing to put the good of the relationship ahead of your self-interest. Repairs don't just improve the outcomes of the conflicts that you weave them into. They inject health into relationships that have been damaged by discord.

Making Repairs

It's safe to assume that we've all had conversations that could use a repair. A simple discussion breaks into a disagreement or gets stuck going around in circles. In these broken conversations, past mistakes get brought to the surface, regretful comments are made, and blame is prevalent. No matter who said what, or who “started it,” it's time to refocus and fix things. It's time for you to step back, quickly assess the situation, and begin repairing the conversation. Repairs happen in a four-step process. If you're new to repairs, you'll likely be conscious of each and every step. Once you get some practice under your belt, the steps will blend together and the entire process will feel smooth and seamless.



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Step One - Take Your Emotions Out of the Driver's Seat

A repair involves moving beyond the expression of anger, resentment, and hostility toward the other party. Your first hope for a successful repair lies in your self-awareness. You can't improve on an argument if you're being thrown over a barrel by your emotions. Disagreements bring your emotions rushing to the surface, and you can't perform a repair unless you understand them. Don't waste time feeling guilty about your feelings. Just focus your energy on understanding them for what they are. If you find your emotions are so strong that it's hard to think clearly, it is probably best to save the discussion for later. If you're so emotional that you're getting tunnel vision, feeling sick, or are just in a haze, the most successful repair is explaining to the other party that you feel overwhelmed and need some time to cool off and get your thoughts together before continuing. Your argument is not going anywhere, so don't pressure yourself into a discussion when you can't think clearly.

Step Two-Take a Look at the Field from the Other Side

If you are composed enough to have some perspective on the situation, you can initiate the next step in a repair. Use your social awareness skills to focus your thoughts on what things must be like in the other person's shoes. Don't spend time thinking about what they're like. Just imagine what they're thinking and feeling. What's important to them and how is that driving their behavior? You can't launch a successful repair until you fully understand why the other person is doing whatever it is that they are doing. You have to show the other person that you care about how things look from their point of view, even if you don't agree with it. This can't happen until you actually

see things the way they do. To do so, you need to let go of blame and focus on the repair. Do you want to be right, or do you want a resolution? Move beyond thinking of ways that you can convince the other party of your opinions, and ask yourself what you can do to honor their feelings. Respecting another's opinions, right or wrong, is the key to compromise.

Step Three - Make a Repair and Evaluate its Effectiveness

At this stage of the game, all you need to do is craft your repair and give it a whirl. Keep in mind that an effective repair will:

- show respect for the other party
- show concern for the other party's perspective
- find common ground
- be neutral in tone

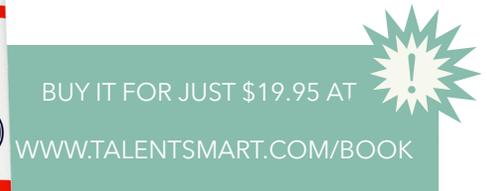
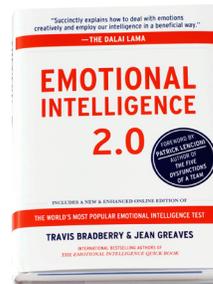
The look of a successful repair can be as varied as the problems it solves. A repair that works in one situation with one person may just make things worse in another. Saying "What exactly do you mean by that?" can sound like you are minimizing the issues in the middle of one argument, but be received as a sign of wanting to make things better in another. To perform a successful repair, arm yourself with the knowledge that many of your attempts will crash and burn. Even an empathetic comment like, "I understand what you are saying," can be perceived as belittling if the other party is defensive or not accustomed to you saying this. Be ready to try multiple repairs in a single argument and expect that they will not all go off without a hitch. The more you repair, the more the other party will be receptive and do the same. People with the best skills at repairing disagreements are the same ones who try the most often.

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Step Four - Discuss Repairs Together

It will also help your relationship to discuss repairs together. If you can talk about your arguments, you are both more likely to initiate repairs the next time you have one. When repair attempts are always one-sided, a relationship usually fails. Both parties need to work to resolve challenges together. By talking about repairs, you develop the understanding that they are important. Even if the other party has trouble making repairs the next time the two of you argue, he or she will likely recognize your effort and realize that it is an attempt to make things better. A successful repair must be initiated by one partner at a time, but when the other responds in kind, the relationship builds an unshakable strength that can only come from a high level of emotional intelligence. 🌱

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Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0* and the cofounder of TalentSmart, the world's leading provider of emotional intelligence tests and training serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company, Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.