



Talking About the Hard Stuff, Gently

Four small things for couples to try: a soft beginning, real listening, finding your way back, and a kind pause

Every couple bumps into hard topics. Money, chores, family, time, closeness. Wanting to talk about these things is not a problem. It is part of loving someone. What helps is having a few gentle ways in. This sheet offers four small things to try. Think of them as experiments, not rules. You do not need to do them perfectly, and you do not need to do them all. Pick one that feels possible and see how it goes. Awkward is fine. Awkward and kind is a lovely place to start.

First, a note about safety

These ideas are meant for everyday disagreements between two people who feel safe with each other. If you feel afraid of your partner, or if there is control, intimidation, or abuse in your relationship, this sheet is not the right tool, and trying harder to communicate is not the answer. Your safety comes first. Please tell your therapist privately, on your own or by phone, not in a session together. You can also reach the National Domestic Violence Hotline any time at 1-800-799-7233 or thehotline.org.

Begin softly

The first minute of a hard conversation matters more than almost anything that comes after. A sharp opening puts the other person on guard. A soft one invites them closer. Soft does not mean hiding what you need. It means leading with what you miss, or what you are carrying, instead of what they did wrong. You are allowed to bring up anything. This is just a warmer door in.

1. Before you start, ask yourself what you actually want. More help? More time together? Less worry? That is the thing to say.
 2. Lead with yourself, not with them. "I've been feeling stretched thin" opens a door. "You never help" closes one.
 3. Ask for something small and doable, as an invitation. A question, like "could we...?", usually lands more softly than a demand.
 4. Pick a calm moment when you both have a little room. The middle of a rushed morning is nobody's best time.
1. "I've been missing you lately. Tonight, could we have half an hour, just us, phones away?"
 2. "I'm running on empty by bedtime. Could we take turns with the kids this week?"
 3. "The credit card bill has been weighing on me. Could we sit down this weekend and look at it together?"

Say back what you heard

In most arguments, we listen just enough to build our reply. Here is a slower way to try. When your partner shares something, say back what you heard, in your own words, before you answer. You are not agreeing, and you are not giving up your side. You are just showing them you got it. Feeling truly heard settles most of us faster than being right ever does. This one feels clunky at first for almost everyone. Try it anyway, once, on something small.

1. Let one of you talk first, one piece at a time, not the whole case at once.
 2. The other says back what they heard, gently, in their own words, and checks whether it landed right.
 3. Let the first speaker adjust. Something like "close, but the bigger piece for me is..." is exactly how this is supposed to go.
 4. When your partner feels understood, trade places. Your turn is coming. It does not get lost by waiting.
1. "So it's less about the dishes and more about feeling like it all lands on you. Did I get that right?"
 2. "It sounds like you've been carrying that all week. I didn't know."
 3. "Hang on, let me make sure I've got this before I jump in."

Small ways back to each other

Couples who do well are not the ones who never argue. They are the ones who reach for each other in the middle of it. A small word, a touch, a bit of warmth that says we are still us, even now. Offering one takes courage when you are upset. Accepting one takes just as much. If your partner reaches toward you mid-argument, even clumsily, see if you can let it count.

1. "Wait, can we start over? That's not how I wanted this to go."
2. "You're right about that part."
3. "I'm sorry. That was unkind, and you didn't deserve it."
4. "Hey. I love you. We'll figure this out."
5. "Can we slow down? I don't want to fight with you."
6. A hand on their arm, a deep breath together, even a small shared laugh can say the same thing without words.

A kind pause

Sometimes your body leaves the conversation before you do. Heart pounding, thoughts racing, voice rising. Nothing useful gets said from that place, for anyone. It is not a character flaw. It is just how bodies work. When you notice it, you are allowed to ask for a pause. A pause is not walking out, and it is not the silent treatment. It is a break with a promise attached: I am coming back.

1. Either of you can ask for a pause, any time. It is a kindness, not a defeat.
2. Say when you will come back. "I want to talk about this well, and right now I can't. Can we come back to it after dinner?"
3. Give it at least twenty to thirty minutes. Bodies genuinely need about that long to settle.
4. Spend the break on something calming. A walk, a shower, some music. Rehearsing your comeback keeps you stirred up, so let it wait.
5. Then come back when you said you would, even if it is just to say "I need until morning." Keeping that promise is what makes the pause feel safe.

Try these in calm weather first, on the small stuff, not the biggest thing between you. And go easy on yourselves. You will forget the words, start sharp, miss a cue. Everyone does. What tends to stay with a partner is not the perfect phrase. It is the feeling that you tried a gentler way.

This sheet is a companion to your work in therapy, not a replacement for it, so bring what you try, and how it goes, into your sessions. And worth repeating: these tools are for everyday conflict between partners who are safe with each other. If there is fear, control, or abuse in your relationship, safety comes first, and this sheet is not the right tool. If you're in crisis, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline), any time, day or night.