

ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK SESSIONS:

How to Deliver an Effective Feedback Session to Your Couples

The information below is presented to help you assess and provide feedback to your couples. The Gottman Relationship Checkup website was designed from Drs. John and Julie Gottman's Sound Relationship House Theory and is based on over four decades of research with more than 3,000 couples. Below is a brief summary of the Gottman Method Couples Therapy assessment process and the levels of the Sound Relationship House (SRH) that are covered in the Feedback Session.

Assessment Session 1: Initial Couples Session

The first assessment session consists of three areas: the couple's narrative, an Oral History Interview, and observing the couple briefly discuss an area of conflict. Begin by outlining the assessment process. Then elicit from the couple their narrative explanation of why they're coming to therapy ("What brings you here today?"), how they view their problems, and what their goals are. Following this discussion, conduct an Oral History Interview ("How did you meet? First Impressions, Major Life Transitions," etc.). Then ask the couple to discuss a problem with each other for 10 minutes while you observe them "like a fly on the wall." The purpose of this is to get an idea of how the couple processes conflict. At the end of the session, give the Gottman Relationship Checkup overview document (available in the Resources tab) and review it with them. Explain that you will be inviting them to take the online Gottman Relationship Checkup, a confidential clinical tool that will help you evaluate their relational strengths and challenges.

For a complete explanation of this first assessment session, please refer to the Gottman Method Couples Therapy Level 1 or Level 2 clinical training manuals.

Assessment Session 2: Individual Sessions

The therapist next meets with each partner individually. The session time can be divided into two parts, half for each partner, or the half-sessions can be scheduled at different times. The individual sessions are used to build trust with each individual and learn more about each partner's perspective, family-of-origin, history, possible co-morbidities, hopes, expectations, and commitment to the relationship.

Session 3: The Feedback Session

In this session, review your assessment findings verbally with your couple. Formulate your feedback by integrating the information you learned from their Narrative, Oral History Interview, Conflict Discussion, Individual Sessions, and the Relationship Checkup questionnaires. Give the couple a copy of the Sound Relationship House (available in the Resources tab). Tell them you're going to provide feedback about their relationship strengths and areas needing improvement.

We recommend following each of these steps for an effective Feedback Session:

- 1. Establish a trusting alliance** with each person.
- 2. Engage both partners** in the process (be dynamic & interactive vs. lecturing).
- 3. Give the couple a copy of the Sound Relationship House** **handout.**
- 4. Define each level of the Sound Relationship House**, one at a time (see SRH Summary

of levels below).

5. **Tell the couple how their relationship is doing on that level.** Is this level a strength or a challenge? Don't criticize or single one individual out. You can say, "the relationship is struggling with 'this'" vs. identifying one partner as having the problem.
6. **Do not give them a copy of the Relationship Checkup analysis or their numerical scores.** The Checkup analysis is designed for therapists to use in the context of all the other information learned about a couple during the assessment process. In addition, providing a copy would reveal each person's responses, violating the privacy implied by having each person create their own password protected account when answering the questions and it would be counter to the statement on the information sheet that states, "your therapist will be the only person to see your responses."
7. **Give them hope and understanding and be empathetic.** On levels of the Sound Relationship House where the couple is weak, tell them you have exercises and tools designed to strengthen those areas.
8. **Talk about what your goals are for the therapy** and the order in which you'd like to proceed should they decide to continue with treatment.
9. **Ask more questions to get their reactions to what you're saying.** Does the feedback fit and make sense to them? Ask if they have any additional goals they'd like to focus on so that you can incorporate those into the treatment plan. Ask if you missed anything important.

Below is a summary of each level of the Sound Relationship House to help you describe it during the Feedback Session

Build Love Maps

The first three levels of the Sound Relationship House (SRH) constitute friendship, the foundation of a strong relationship. The first level of the house is Love Maps. This entails how well you know one another—how well you know your partner's inner psychological world, his or her worries, stresses, joys, and dreams. It involves asking open-ended questions and maintaining awareness of your partner's world.

Share Fondness and Admiration

The second level of the house is Fondness and Admiration, which is the antidote for contempt. It involves changing a habit of mind from scanning the environment for your partner's mistakes and then correcting them, to scanning the environment for what your partner is doing right and building a culture of appreciation, fondness, affection and respect.

Turn Towards Instead of Away

The third level is Turn Towards vs. Turning away in everyday moments. The small moments of everyday life are actually the building blocks of a relationship. A partner has the opportunity to either turn towards, turn away, or turn against a bid from his or her partner. A bid is a gesture—verbal or nonverbal—for some sort of positive connection: conversation, humor, affection, or support. The very small everyday moments in a relationship are opportunities—opportunities for Turning Towards one another. Accept bids for emotional connection and make deposits into the Emotional Bank Account.

Maintain a Positive Perspective

The first three levels determine whether this level is positive or negative. A positive perspective occurs when friendship is strong. This level represents what it feels like in the relationship. Whether this level is positive or negative determines a lot of things, including the presence of positive affect in problem-solving discussions and the success of repair attempts during conflict resolution. If the first three levels of the Sound Relationship House are not working, then couples tend to be in a negative perspective and are hypervigilant for negativity. People are in negative perspective for a good reason: they see their partner as an adversary, not a friend. To change that state, you need to build the friendship in your relationship, using the first three levels of the Sound Relationship House.

Manage Conflict

We use the term “managing” conflict rather than “resolving” conflict because relationship conflict is natural and it has functional, positive aspects. For example, it helps us learn how to better love and understand our partners, deal with change, and renew courtship over time. We try to manage but not eliminate conflict.

A. Manage Conflict: Perpetual Problems

Relationships work to the extent you and your partner can learn to live with your perpetual problems. When a problem is a perpetual problem, as the majority of couples' problems are, instead of solving it, learn how to dialogue about your different subjective realities. The masters of relationships seem to be able to come to some acceptance of their problems. They are able to simultaneously communicate acceptance of their partner and the desire to improve the problem, often with amusement, respect, and affection. However, if they cannot establish such a dialogue, their conflict may become gridlocked which eventually leads to emotional disengagement.

B. Manage Conflict: Solvable Problems

Use these six skills to help manage conflict: practice self-soothing, use softened startups, make repairs and de-escalate, listen to your partner's underlying feelings and dreams, accept influence, and compromise.

Make Life Dreams Come True

Find ways to support each other's life goals and dreams. A crucial aspect of any relationship is creating an atmosphere that encourages each person to talk honestly about his or her dreams, values, convictions, and aspirations.

Create Shared Meaning

Here, we come to the attic of the Sound Relationship House. This is what you tell yourself about your relationship, your internal thoughts, metaphors, myths, and stories. Everyone is a philosopher trying to make some sense out of this brief journey through life. This level of the Sound Relationship House is about creating shared meaning in the relationship. People create shared meaning intentionally by talking about:

- Rituals of Connection (formal and informal)
- Shared goals

- Supporting each other's life roles
- Agreeing about basic symbols such as what a home means

We believe that every committed relationship is a cross-cultural experience in which we blend together each partner's legacy, culture, values, and beliefs to create an entirely new culture.

Trust

Trust is the state that occurs when you believe your partner has your best interest in mind and acts in ways that benefit you. It's knowing your partner values your interest and needs as much as their own. In other words, this means, "my partner has my back and is there for me."

Commitment

Commitment means believing (and acting on the belief) that this relationship is a lifelong journey, for better or for worse (meaning that if it gets worse you will both work to improve it). Act to maximize your partner's well-being. Avoid negative comparisons. Generate frequent thoughts and acts that cherish your partner's positive qualities and minimize your focus on their negative faults.

The Importance of the Therapeutic Alliance with Both Spouses

Do not assume that the couple necessarily wishes to work with you. We recommend that you pay very careful attention to the quality of the therapeutic alliance you have been able to form with each person. We are convinced that therapy cannot be effective unless there is an atmosphere of caring and respect that the therapist develops for their clients. Only in a caring atmosphere can the couple have enough safety to dive into the work necessary to heal their relationship.

Note: This information is found within the Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3 manuals of Gottman Method Couples Therapy. For a complete explanation of the Gottman assessment process, Feedback Session and intervention strategies, please refer to [Gottman training materials](#).