

those seemingly endless cycles of recriminations. How do you do this? By using repair attempts.

When Michael gets defensive and says, “I definitely clean off the counters in the kitchen and the table whenever we do stuff,” Justine doesn’t immediately discount his point. “Hm-hmm, you do,” she says. This is a repair attempt. It de-escalates the tension so that Michael is more receptive to finding a compromise. What separates stable, emotionally intelligent marriages from others is not that their repair attempts are necessarily more skillful or better thought out but that repair attempts get through to the spouse. This is because the air between them hasn’t been clouded by a lot of negativity.

REPAIR ATTEMPTS QUESTIONNAIRE

To assess the effectiveness of repair attempts in your own relationship, answer the following.

Read each statement and circle T for “true” or F for “false.”

DURING OUR ATTEMPTS TO RESOLVE CONFLICT:

1. We are good at taking breaks when we need them. **TF**
2. My partner usually accepts my apologies. **TF**
3. I can say that I am wrong. **TF**
4. I am pretty good at calming myself down. **TF**
5. We can maintain a sense of humor. **TF**
6. When my partner says we should talk to each other in a different way, it usually makes a lot of sense. **TF**
7. My attempts to repair our discussions when they get negative are usually effective. **TF**
8. We are pretty good listeners even when we have different positions on things. **TF**
9. If things get heated, we can usually pull out of it and change things. **TF**
10. My spouse is good at soothing me when I get upset. **TF**
11. I feel confident that we can resolve most issues between us. **TF**

12. When I comment on how we could communicate better, my spouse listens to me. **TF**
13. Even if things get hard at times, I know we can get past our differences. **TF**
14. We can be affectionate even when we are disagreeing. **TF**
15. Teasing and humor usually work to get my spouse over negativity. **TF**
16. We can start all over again and improve our discussion when we need to. **TF**
17. When emotions run hot, expressing how upset I feel makes a real difference. **TF**
18. We can discuss even big differences between us. **TF**
19. My partner expresses appreciation for nice things I do. **TF**
20. If I keep trying to communicate, it will eventually work. **TF**

Scoring: Give yourself 1 point for each “true” answer.

13 or higher: This is an area of strength in your marriage. When marital discussions are at risk of getting out of hand, you are able to put on the brakes and effectively calm each other down.

Below 13: Your marriage could stand some improvement in this area. By learning how to repair your interactions, you can dramatically improve the effectiveness of your problem solving and develop a more positive perspective on each other and your marriage.

Getting the Message Through

Remember that the key factor in whether a repair attempt is effective is the state of the relationship. In happy marriages, couples send and receive repair attempts with ease. In unhappy ones, even the most eloquent repair attempt can fall on deaf ears. But now that you know this, you can “buck the system.” You don’t have to wait for your marriage to improve before you start hearing each other’s repair attempts. Start now by focusing intently on these brakes and training each other to recognize when one is sent your way. Do this, and you can pull yourselves out of a negative cycle.