Back to Best Friends

5 Small Steps to Reconnect When Your Marriage Has Drifted



John Lang

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“You still talk about the bills, the children, and tomorrow’s plans. But when did you last talk as best friends?”

If that question touched something, I’m really glad you’re here, because this short guide gives you a place to start this week. You don’t have to wait for life to calm down or for the right moment to come along.

Let me tell you about something that made me smile.

A university researcher sat down with more than 700 older Americans, many of them married for sixty and seventy years, and asked each one the same question.

Looking back over your life, what is the most important lesson about love and marriage you would pass on to younger people?

You might expect grand answers, like a secret, a perfect weekly date night or some big romantic gesture.

But several of the wives said something nobody saw coming.

They said that their husband doing the dishes was the most powerful aphrodisiac they could think of.

The dishes. That’s what the couples with the longest, happiest marriages kept coming back to: small, ordinary kindnesses, done day after day.

Those elders even had a name for the season you might be in right now.

They called it **the middle-aged blur**, the years when children and work fill everything, the relationship turns “grim and serious” and the fun quietly leaves it.

They came out the other side, and they wanted younger couples to know that the way back is made of small things.

After many years of marriage, I've come to value the friendship at its heart.

I'm sharing these thoughts as a husband and a friend, with the hope that they help you take a small step towards each other.

> **Two are better than one, Because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up.**
>
> Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NKJV)

I wrote this for the husband or wife who still loves their spouse and misses their friend.

You can start it even if you're the only one reading.

I believe drift is one of the most normal things in the world.

When researchers followed couples from the start of their marriage, most of the struggles that came later simply weren't there at the beginning.

Time together, talking and shared plans just got harder as the years went by.

Nothing has to have gone wrong for two people who love each other to end up running a household like business partners.

I believe date nights and big talks are lovely, and the couples who lasted added something that works even faster: tiny things done every day, which are easy to start tomorrow.

And I believe the one who reaches out first is the stronger of the two.

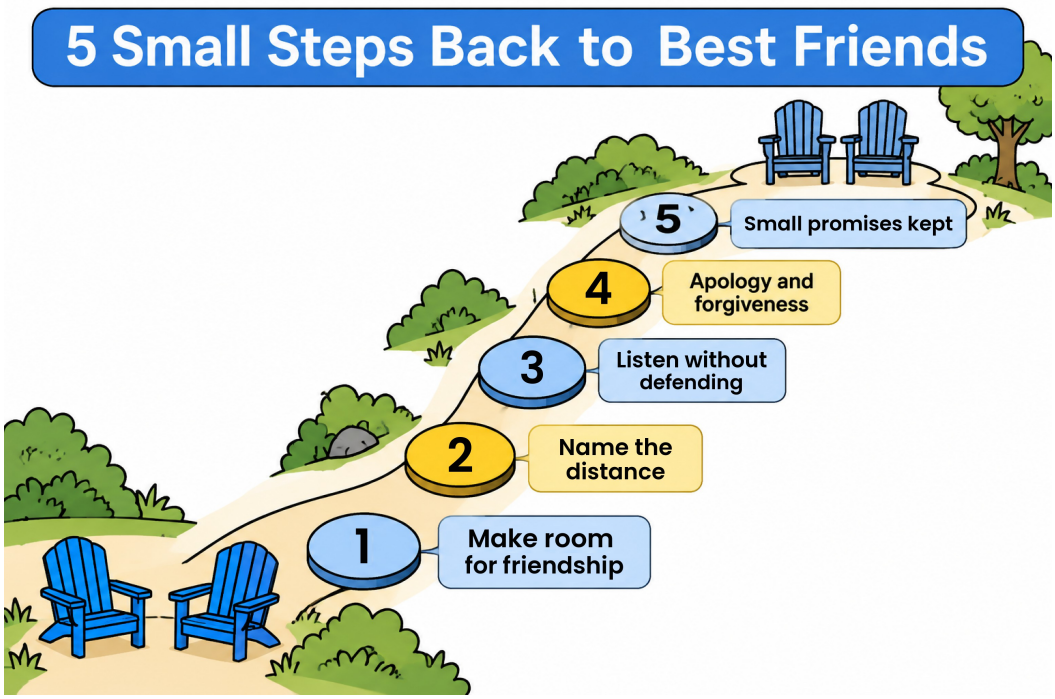
Small really does go a long way. In one study of 120 couples, some were given a short writing exercise about their disagreements.

It took about 21 minutes in total, and over the following year their marriages held steady while the other couples' slipped.

In another, couples who simply did fresh, enjoyable things together each week for ten weeks ended up happier together than couples who didn't.

In the next few pages you'll find:

- How to make a coffee together feel easy again, with one kind of question that makes your spouse light up.
- Three short sentences that say "I miss us" in a way that opens a door instead of starting an argument.
- Two sentence starters that help you both feel heard, even about the things that usually end in silence.
- How to apologise so it truly counts, and why the part most people lead with matters least.
- The kind of promise that's far easier to keep, and how to choose yours in a couple of minutes.
- Why a chore you don't even have to do can warm your home more than a night out.



Each step is small enough to try in a single week, and each one makes the next a little easier.

You don’t need a weekend away or a lot of money. You don’t have to do all five at once either. Read them through, then start with the first one, which takes about an hour and a cup of coffee.

By the end, you’ll have one small thing to try this week, the words for one honest conversation, and a page the two of you can fill in together.

Those wives with the dishes knew it, and so do I: friendship comes back in small, ordinary moments. Let’s find yours.

1. MAKE ROOM FOR FRIENDSHIP AGAIN

Start with one small, enjoyable moment together, and let it be just that.

Invite your spouse for a coffee, a walk, or something you once loved doing together, and say out loud that it’s just an hour together: “I’d simply love an hour with you, nothing more.”

That one sentence takes the pressure off both of you, because the most common mistake here is asking one coffee to carry the whole repair.

Small is the whole point.

The long-married elders described marriage as “hundreds or thousands of micro interactions” a day, and each one is a little choice to be warm, cheerful and supportive, or not.

Their rule of thumb was that it takes around ten good moments to make up for one sharp one.

That sounds like a lot until you see how small a good moment can be.

One of their favourites was to quietly do your spouse's chore before they get to it.

As they put it, if the dog is scratching at the bedroom door early on a rainy morning and it's your partner's turn to walk it, get up and do it, because "it's money in the bank."

Then, during your moment together, ask one question about something that matters to them, and **respond like it's good news**.

Instead of "How was your day?", try "How did the visit with your sister go?" or "What did the doctor say?"

Then look at them, and ask two more questions about what they tell you.

Researchers who studied how couples answer each other's news found four kinds of reply, and only one of them builds closeness: full attention, real interest, and asking to hear more.

A distracted "that's nice", turning the talk to yourself, or picking holes all wear the friendship down, and that held whether the news was big or tiny.

So even the smallest story at the end of the day is a chance to get closer.

If you have a bit more time, make the moment new as well as nice.

Couples in that ten-week experiment spent at least an hour and a half a week on fresh, enjoyable things, and that's what lifted them.

A walk on a path you've never tried will do more for you than the same table at the same restaurant.



Full attention and one or two follow-up questions turn an ordinary walk into time as friends.

Leave the phones in another room Across many studies, the more one partner looks at their phone during time together, the lower the relationship scores. An hour without them says “you matter” before you’ve said a word.

How to start

1. Today, do one of your spouse’s small jobs without being asked or mentioning it.
2. Tomorrow, invite them for a coffee or a walk, and tell them it’s just an hour together.
3. Ask one question about something that matters to them, then ask two more about their answer.

4. You'll know it's working when the talk drifts past the bills and the plans, even for a few minutes.



2. NAME THE DISTANCE, AND OWN YOUR PART

Once you've shared a moment or two of easy friendship, you can gently say what you've probably both felt.

This is naming the distance, and it's never a request for a confession.

It fits in three short sentences: “I miss how close we used to be. I know I’ve contributed by ____.

I’d like us to reconnect, because you’re my best friend.”

How you begin matters a great deal.

In a six-year study of married couples, researchers could tell how each marriage would go from the first three minutes of a hard conversation.

The couples who struggled opened with a lot of negative feeling and almost no warmth.

So your first sentence sets the tone for everything after it, and that’s why the script leads with what you miss.

Watch for one trap.

“I feel like you never listen to me” sounds gentle, but it’s still a complaint about them dressed up as a feeling.

Name the feeling itself, like lonely, far apart or missing you.

“I’ve been feeling lonely lately, and I miss us” opens a door that “you never” would close.

For the middle sentence, choose **one small, true thing**. A sweeping confession like “I’ve been a terrible husband” leaves your spouse having to comfort you.

Something specific works far better: “I know I’ve contributed by going straight to the television every evening.”

Marriage researchers count defensiveness among the most harmful habits a couple can fall into, and they say the cure is taking responsibility for even a small part.

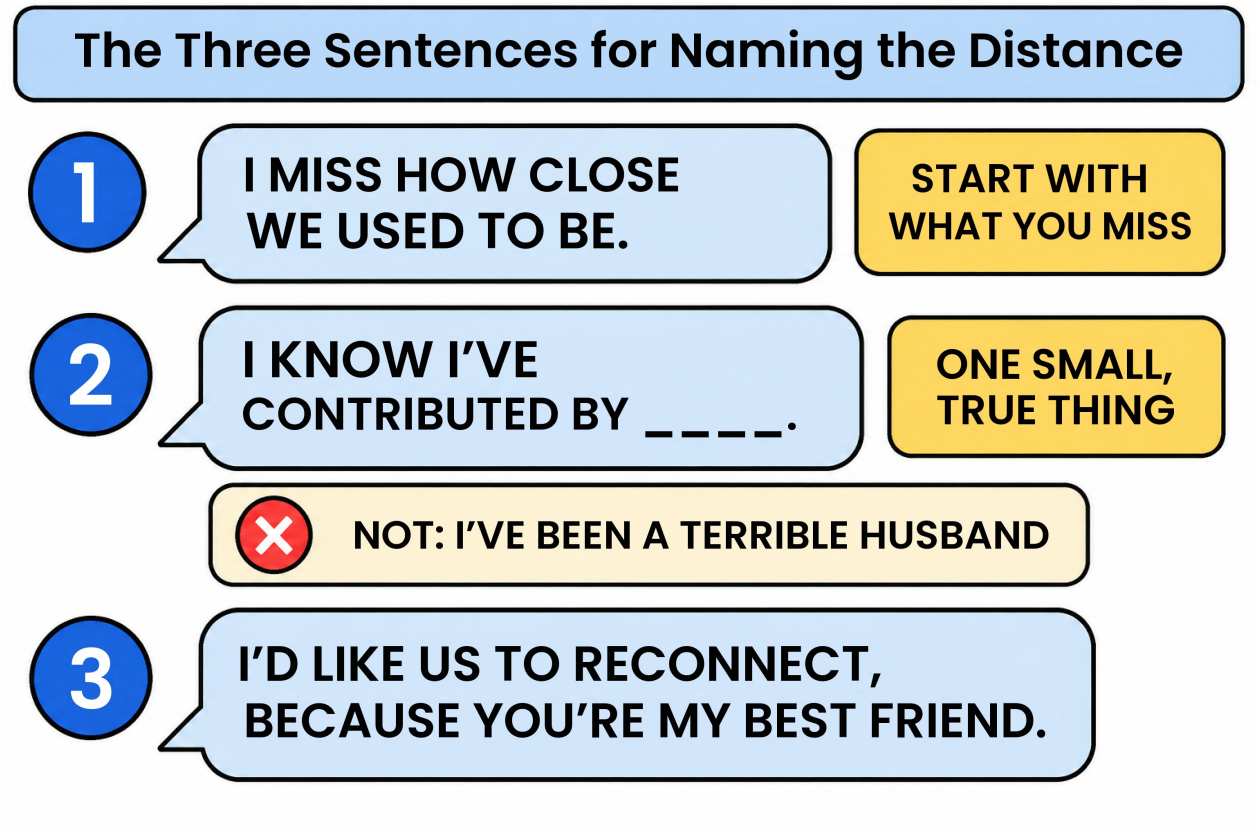
When one of you owns a little piece, the other no longer has to stand guard, so they find it easier to soften too.

> **If your spouse hears it as an attack,** a leading marriage therapist suggests saying something like this: “I’m not trying to criticize you or put you down. I really care about you, and I really want to be closer to you.”

And if you feel like the one doing all the work again, I understand.

It takes two of you to keep a friendship going, but someone always goes first, and when one person changes how they open a conversation, the old pattern starts to shift and it gets easier for the other to step in.





3. SPEAK HONESTLY, AND LISTEN WITHOUT DEFENDING

This step uses two sentences. One of you finishes "Something I've been missing is..." and the other answers "What I hear you saying is..." Then you swap.

It's simple, but a few rules make it work, and they're the ones most couples skip:

- The speaker talks about one thing only, briefly, and about themselves. "Something I've been missing is our walks after dinner" works well, while a list of the other person's faults doesn't.
- The listener repeats it back in their own words and then asks, **"Did I get that right?"** If it isn't quite right, the speaker says it again

until it is.

- While you're listening, you don't correct, explain or defend. Your turn to speak is coming, so hold on to it.
- Then you swap, and the other person gets exactly the same care.

Here's why it helps.

The most common harmful pattern researchers have found between couples is one partner pushing to talk while the other pulls away, so the more one pushes, the more the other withdraws.

A review of more than seventy studies linked that pattern clearly with unhappy marriages.

The listener's repeat-back breaks it, because the speaker finally gets what they wanted all along, which is proof that they were heard.

If the same disagreement keeps coming back, try naming the pattern out loud together: "When this comes up, I go quiet, and then you push harder."

Now the pattern is the thing you're facing together, and neither of you has to be the bad guy.

If either of you gets too upset to listen, ask for a break of about twenty minutes, do something calming, and say when you'll come back.

Then come back at that time.

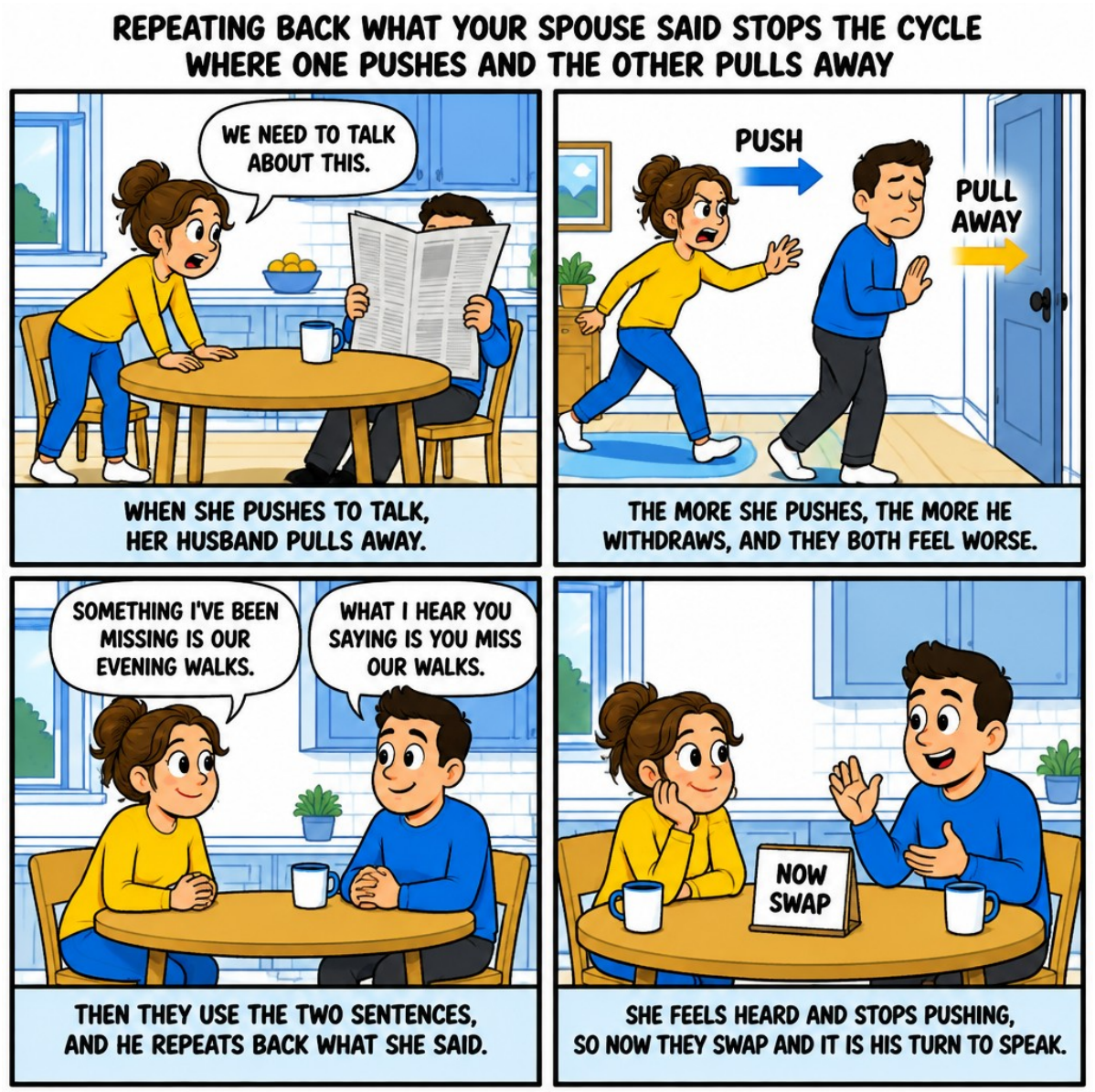
Try not to follow the other person during the break, because chasing after an agreed pause only makes things worse.

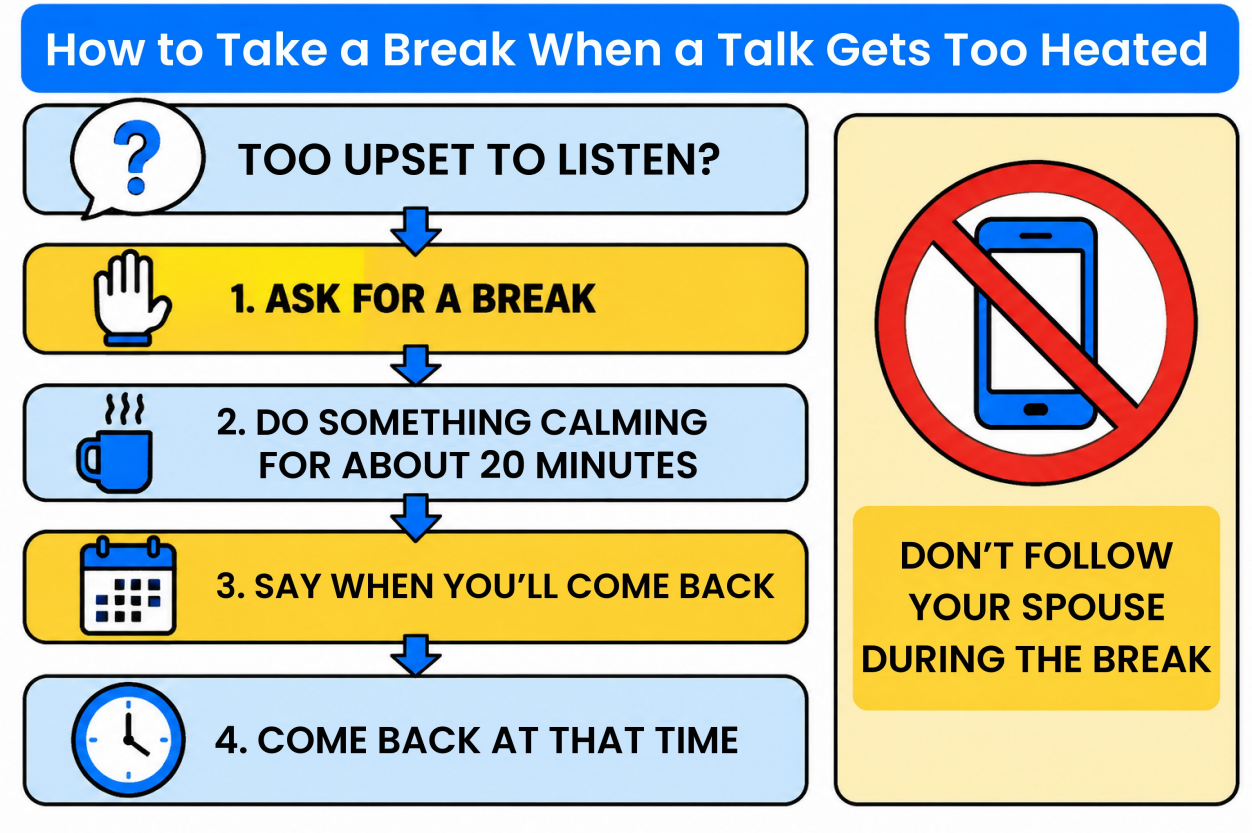
Keep it light where you can, and keep it from turning into a trial with no "and another thing" at the end.

The elders said humour and easy forgiveness were what carried them through, and they had a lovely test for any argument: “Is this argument gonna make any difference to me when I’m 80?”

They said the answer is almost always no.

If the sentence starters feel stiff the first time, that’s normal, and soon they’ll sound like the two of you.





4. MAKE ROOM FOR APOLOGY AND FORGIVENESS

Some of the distance between you may come from hurts that were never quite talked about.

An apology can start to clear the way, and the kind that does it best is what I call **The Sorry With a Toolbox**.

You say exactly what you did and show you understand it hurt: "I'm sorry I ____. I understand that it hurt you."

You keep the word "but" well away from it. Then you add one concrete thing you'll do to set it right.

In two experiments with about 750 people, researchers tested which parts of an apology matter most. Owning the mistake counted most of all.

Offering to repair it came second, because, in their words, talk is cheap.

Asking for forgiveness helped least, so you can leave that part out and give your spouse time.

For you, that means the toolbox, the thing you'll actually do, carries more weight than any lovely words.

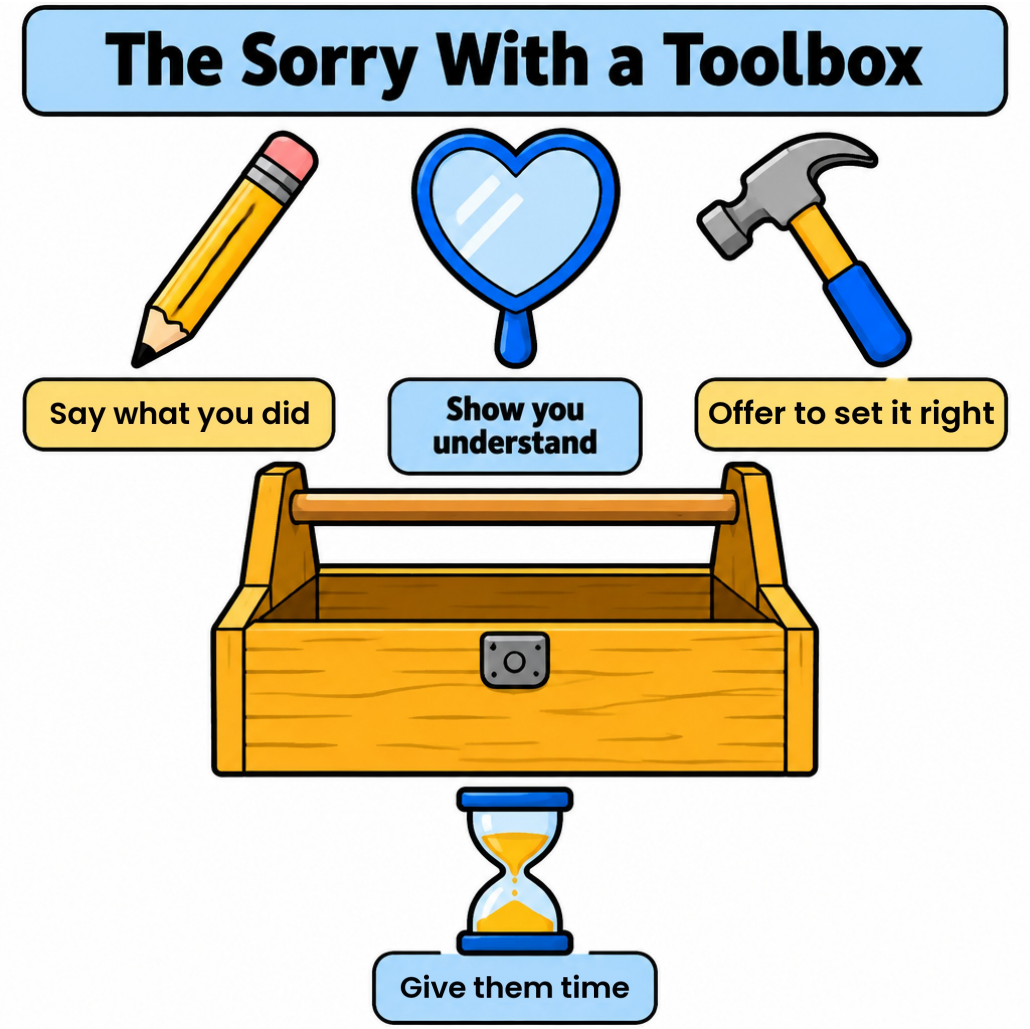
A well-known psychologist sums up the other rule neatly: get your but out of your apology.

"I'm sorry I snapped, but you'd been on at me all day" cancels itself out.

Apologise for what you did rather than for how they feel, because "I'm sorry you got upset" owns nothing at all.

Here's The Sorry With a Toolbox in full: "I'm sorry I joked about your cooking in front of the family.

I understand that it hurt you. From now on, I'll only say kind things about you when others are around."



Owning the mistake and offering a repair do the most good, so the request for forgiveness can wait.

An apology also shouldn't be a quick way out of a difficult conversation, and it means little if the same thing keeps happening.

That's why the repair part matters so much, and why the next step is all about keeping promises.

Forgiveness can take time, and that's alright. It works more like a set of steps than a switch you flip.

In one trial, adults who had been badly hurt by someone close spent about six hours working through forgiveness step by step.

Their forgiveness rose a great deal while their anger and low mood eased, and the change was still there six weeks later.

Across more than twenty-five trials with over two thousand people, this kind of step-by-step work helped people forgive.

For you, that means forgiveness can move faster than you'd expect when you work at it gently, and the work belongs to the one doing the forgiving.

Forgiving doesn't instantly bring trust back, either.

You can begin to forgive before you feel completely safe again, and trust comes later, by a different road.

So try not to ask for forgiveness before you've owned the mistake, and if you've already apologised, give it time rather than asking why they're still hurt.

> **And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.**
> Ephesians 4:32 (NKJV)

I believe forgiveness is essential in a marriage. It isn't always easy, and faith in God helps.

Friendship can mend even the hardest mistakes when both of you keep coming back to it.

5. REBUILD TRUST THROUGH SMALL PROMISES KEPT

Trust comes back the same way it slipped away, in small moments, over and over.

Warm words help, but trust is rebuilt by things you actually do, again and again.

Researchers who study how couples reach out to each other found that being ignored hurts even more than being turned down, because a “no” at least keeps you talking.

So every small promise you keep tells your spouse, “I see you, and you can count on me.”

Choose one realistic promise for the coming week, and choose it using **The Worn Grass Path**.

You’ve probably seen one in a park: people keep cutting across the lawn until there’s a bare track, and some town planners simply pave that track rather than forcing everyone onto a new route.

The Worn Grass Path does the same with your promise.

Find a moment you already share, like Saturday breakfast or the drive home from church, and tie the promise to it as an “if, then” plan: “If it’s Saturday morning, then I’ll make the coffee and sit with you for ten minutes.”

Plans worded this way get kept far more often.

In one field trial, every woman who tied a monthly health check to a set time and place did it, against about half of those who didn’t make that plan.

In another, people with these plans lost about twice as much weight.

A promise with a when and a where attached is simply easier to keep, so it’s the kind of promise that rebuilds trust.

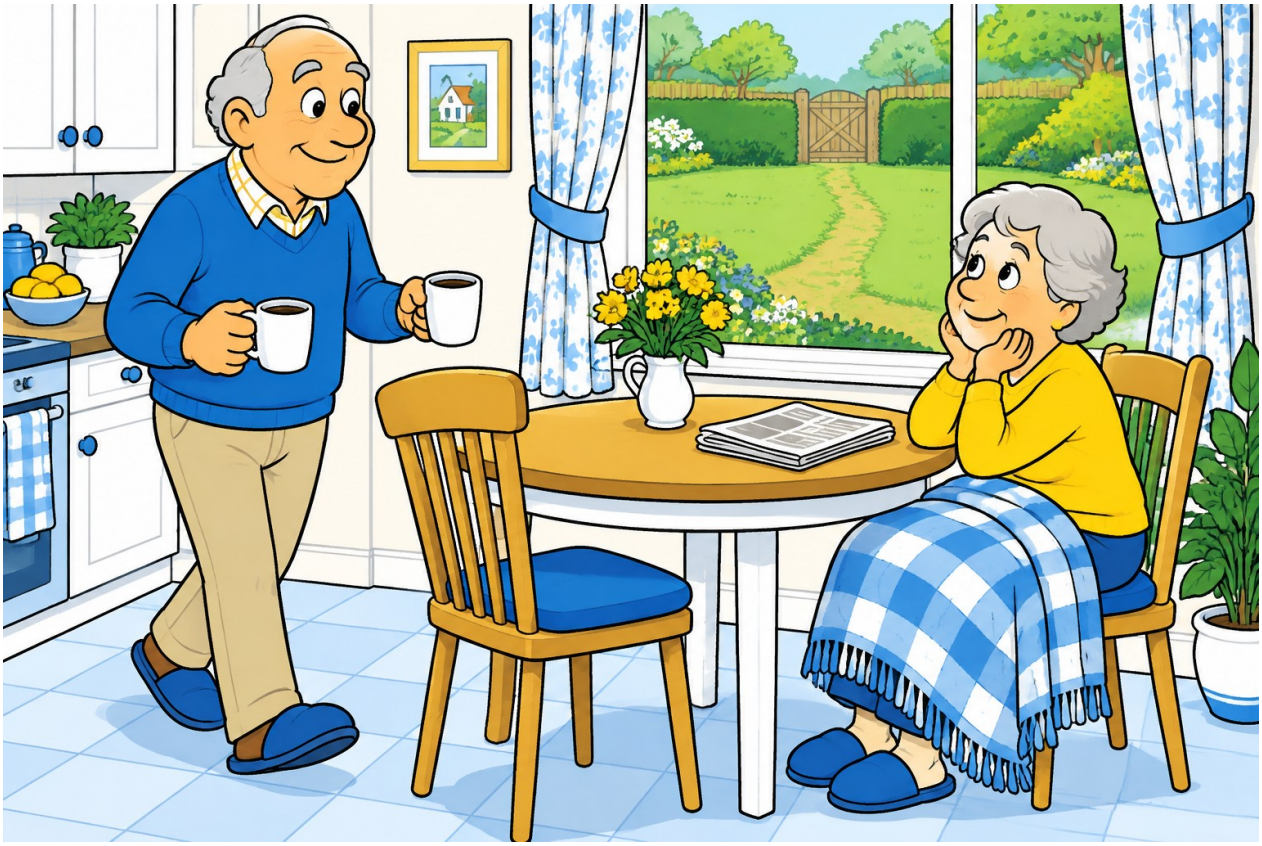
Keep it small enough to be boring.

The promise that sounds impressive in the moment is the one that quietly slips, while a small one kept every week does far more good.

If you do miss it, say so plainly rather than hoping it went unnoticed, because naming a slip is part of being trustworthy too.

Then talk about it at a ten-minute check-in on the same day each week, which is the second half of The Worn Grass Path.

Three questions are plenty: What felt good this week? What was hard? Does our plan need changing?



A promise tied to a moment you already share, like Saturday coffee, is the easiest kind to keep week after week.

If you are both willing, invite prayer into the week.

Small studies point the same way: people who prayed for their partner were more willing to forgive, and couples who prayed together reported more trust.

That makes sense, because it’s very hard to hold a grudge against someone while you’re asking God to bless them.

Invite, and never require If your spouse isn't ready to pray together, you can pray for them on your own, and that still counts. Prayer should never become a test of who is trying harder.

How to start

1. Think of one moment you already share each week, like a meal, a drive or a walk.
2. Write your promise as "If it's ____, then I'll ____", and make it small.
3. Keep it this week, and if you miss it, say so.
4. At the end of the week, sit down for ten minutes and ask the three check-in questions.

OUR FIRST WEEK BACK TOWARDS EACH OTHER

Each of you finish these four sentences on your own, then sit down together, maybe over that Saturday coffee, and read them to each other.

Start with appreciation.

- One thing I appreciate about you.

  _____

- One thing I take responsibility for.

  _____

- One thing I miss doing together.

  _____

- One small promise I will keep this week.

_____

There's a good reason to begin with appreciation.

In a study of about two hundred people, those who thanked their partner went on to feel closer to that partner themselves.

So the first sentence warms the one who writes it as well as the one who hears it.

The longest marriage ever recorded belonged to a couple from North Carolina who were together almost 87 years.

In their final months together, both of them past 100, they answered strangers' questions about marriage from their home while the world listened.

Another woman in those interviews, married 60 years, had every reason to give up early on, and she and her husband went on to share "20 or 30 really good years at the end."

The warm years are not behind you.

A 92-year-old woman, married for 71 years, gave the best advice I know for ending each day.

She said to "clean out each day as it comes along," so that when you shut your eyes at night, you've cleaned out everything.

So here is my blessing over your week ahead: be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

And tonight, do the dishes.



Keep the friendship growing long after this Saturday's coffee



By now you have one small promise, a weekly check-in and four sentences to read to each other, and that's a real start.

Mend the Marriage is a home programme by relationship coach Brad Browning that walks you through the next steps at your own pace.

- The communication templates give you gentle words for starting a hard conversation, so your spouse hears an invitation and stays open.
- A worksheet on conflict triggers helps you spot what sets off your usual arguments, so you can catch them before they start.
- The resentment audit helps you find the old hurts you're still carrying, so you can talk them through one at a time.
- There's a 230-page guide and a four-hour audio version, so you can listen on the drive home from church or while you do the dishes.

It's $49.95 once with a 60-day money-back guarantee, so you can begin it this week alongside your first small promise. If you'd like more small steps like these, follow me on Instagram: @fruitfulafter50.

Get Mend the Marriage

I may earn a commission if you buy through this link, at no extra cost to you.

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