

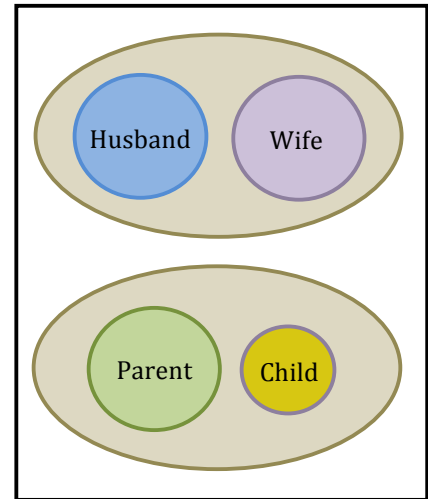
Breach and Repair

C.A. Childress, Psy.D. (2013)

Breach-and-Repair Sequences are Normal and Healthy

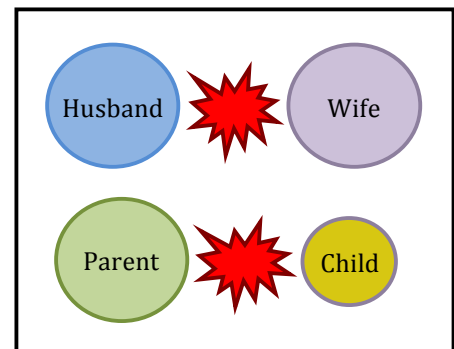
We all seek to be understood by others and to be accepted. When this occurs it creates a warm feeling of belonging. Within the scientific research literature, this shared psychological state of understanding the other, and of being understood, is called an **“intersubjective field.”** You have your inner subjective experience, I have my inner subjective experience, and when we’re together in a state of shared mutual understanding, we have a shared “inter-subjective” experience of both understanding and of being understood.

The “intersubjective field” of mutual shared experience can be in any relationship, between spouses, within the parent-child relationship, or between friends. When we are in an “intersubjective field” of shared experience with someone, the feeling is one of belonging, that the other person understands me and I understand them, someone “gets it” about me.



As wonderful and positive as this “intersubjective” experience of understanding and being understood is, it cannot last. We are not one person, but two separate people. At some point our separateness will create a breach in our shared psychological experience. The breach is caused by an “empathic failure” in which one person’s separateness fails to fully understand the other person’s separate experience. When this occurs, when either person in the relationship fails to be perfectly empathic, then a breach in the “intersubjective field” occurs.

This is not a bad thing. In fact, breaches in the shared experience of understanding and of being understood actually promotes the formation of authenticity and “self-structure” in which we are separate and autonomous individuals. Research on both child development and psychotherapy has found that these breach sequences are essential for healthy psychological development... **as long as these breaches are effectively repaired.** Problems in development and psychological relationships occur, not because of the breach, but because of **inadequate or incomplete repair.**



Because the shared psychological experience of understanding and being understood feels so wonderfully warm and accepting, when the breach occurs we will experience a pang of psychological pain at the **empathic failure** of the other person. This burst of hurt at the

breach in the shared “intersubjective field” of understanding and of being understood produces a slight burst of anger (i.e., anger is “you hurt me, so I hurt you”). An “empathic failure” that produces a breach in the “intersubjective field” is always signaled by a burst of anger in the dyad (parent-child, husband-wife, friendship).

This is normal and is not a problem. The issue is not the breach. Breaches are a normal and healthy part of being separate, autonomous people. The issue is to repair the breach.

Repair of the Breach

Phase 1: Escalating Conflict

When a breach occurs in the “intersubjective field” of understanding and being understood, the “aggrieved partner” who was not perfectly understood (i.e., because of the “empathic failure” by the other person that created the breach) will approach the “offending partner” with a display of anger and a description of the “offense,” i.e., of the empathic failure of “offending partner.” This is a key phase in the repair of the intersubjective breach of mutual understanding.

When confronted with an angry description of his or her empathic failure, it is normal and natural for the “offending partner” to respond defensively to the anger and perceived criticism. The “offending partner” wants to repair the “intersubjective field” of shared psychological understanding with the “aggrieved partner,” and so tries to convince the “aggrieved partner” that the empathic failure, “the offense,” was unintended (i.e., “it’s not my fault”).

However, a defensive response from the “offending partner” only deepens the intersubjective breach, making the situation worse. The “aggrieved partner” interprets the defensive response of the “offending partner” as not understanding his or her role in creating the “empathic failure” (i.e., “you don’t get it, you don’t understand”). The perceived lack of understanding by the “offending partner” represents an additional “empathic failure” that further frustrates the “aggrieved partner,” amplifying the anger felt by the “aggrieved partner” and prompting a more forceful description of the “offending partner’s” relationship error, i.e., the empathic failure.

The increased anger and escalating conflict increases the expanse of the intersubjective breach. The “offending partner” feels unjustly attacked and criticized and tries to repair the breach by communicating to the “aggrieved partner” that the error, the empathic failure, was unintentional, so that the “aggrieved partner” should not be upset. However, communicating that the “aggrieved partner” is wrong in identifying an empathic failure is, in itself, an additional empathic failure that only succeeds in escalating the argument, and amplifying the breach in the intersubjective field of shared understanding. The “aggrieved partner” believes that the “offending partner” doesn’t understand his or her empathic failure and is trying to minimize and justify the relationship error and insensitivity.

The breach therefore expands and becomes more intense as each partner unsuccessfully attempts to repair the breach from each partner's perspective. Each partner rightly understands that the solution lay in increased understanding, but each partner believes it is the other person who needs to show more understanding. The repair of the breach, however, begins with the "offending partner," who must be sufficiently mature to offer understanding first.

Once the intersubjective bond is reestablished, or is close to being reestablished, then the "offending partner" can become the "aggrieved partner" regarding any perceived empathic failure by the other person, so that a dance of relationship repair can move back and forth in dialogues of understanding until the relationship bond is repaired in a way that accepts and integrates both person's authenticity of experience.

Phase 2: Initiating Repair:

The repair process begins when the "offending partner" responds non-defensively to the description offered by the "aggrieved partner" of the "offending partner's" empathic failure. Responding non-defensively will be difficult for the "offending partner," who feels that the description of his or her empathic failure represents an unjustified criticism because no offense was intended, and there were likely explanatory reasons for what the "offending partner" did or said.

However, continued defensive explanations from the "offending partner" only represent continued empathic failures. It is only when the "offending partner" responds non-defensively and with an Intent to Understand regarding the experience of the "aggrieved partner" **from the perspective of the other partner**, that he or she offers an empathic response to the "aggrieved partner" that will begin to repair the empathic failure and restore the "intersubjective field" of shared mutual understanding and emotional bonding.

Organizing Intentions:

The human brain contains a set of brain cells, called "mirror neurons," that allow us to feel what the other person is feeling as if we were having the experience ourselves. This system for "psychological connection" allows us to kiss each other without bumping our faces together, and it also allows us to experience what the actors in movies are feeling as if we were having the experience ourselves.

Because we have identified the brain cells responsible for this "**psychological connection**" system, we've been able to examine the operation of this mirror neuron network in brain scans to determine exactly what this system is designed to register; and what we've discovered is that it's designed to read the **INTENTIONS** of other people; what's motivating their actions.

At a very fundamental level, we are designed to live partly in the brains of other people in order to determine what is motivating the actions of the other person, what is the other person's underlying intention. Because we are designed to read the intentions of other

people, understanding the basics of how interpersonal intentions function can greatly facilitate productive communication.

The Four Key Intentions:

There are four primary intentions, two are relationship building and two are maturation building. The two relationship building intentions (and the ones we want to make frequent use of for repairing an intersubjective breach) are:

1. **The Intent to Understand:** Which is a simple curiosity to understand the other person's world from the other person's perspective. What is it like to be them?
2. **The Intent to Be-With:** This is a wonderful intention, and it is so incredibly simple, yet also incredibly powerful in building relationship. The Intent to Be-With communicates that "I just want to be-with you; not necessarily to do something (i.e., an Intent to Task), but simply because I enjoy being with you."

Both relationship-building intentions communicate, "I care more about **who you are** than what you do" – In responding to the inner experience of the other person, both relationship-building intentions treat the other person's inner experience as something valuable, so that both of these relationship-building intentions feel very good to the other person.

The two maturation-building intentions are:

3. **The Intent to Task:** Accomplishing the task is more important than the person's wants or feelings. The person is secondary to the task. Schoolwork is a classic example of an Intent to Task; it is not relevant that the child doesn't want to do the schoolwork; the child must still do the assigned coursework whether he or she wants to or not. This intention of ours toward accomplishing the task as being more important than what the child wants and feels, and the child's submission to accomplishing the task, leads to increased **maturation of the child's brain** regarding the focused accomplishment of goal-directed activity.
4. **The Intent to Change:** I don't like what you're doing, stop it and do something different. This intention is essentially a power assertion intent to change what the other person is doing because we find what the other person is doing either annoying or painful. The other person's feelings and desires are again secondary to this intent of ours to change what the other person is doing ("It's not relevant what you want or feel, you need to be different"). This intention leads to **increased maturation of the brain** regarding impulse inhibition within a social context.

Both maturation-building intentions communicate, "I care more about **what you do** than who you are" – In responding to the external behavior of the other person the maturation building intentions treat the other person as an object, so that both

maturation-building intentions are experienced by the other person as somewhat painful (it's painful to be dehumanized and treated as an object).

Recognizing Our Organizing Intention:

Our brains are designed to read the organizing intentions of other people, not just their verbal communication and overt actions. So our ability to engage in productive communication benefits from our being able to use our intentions that are organizing our responses in support of what we actually say verbally and what we want to accomplish interpersonally. Increased self-awareness regarding our underlying intention becomes easier with practice, as we become increasingly familiar with what the responses from each of the four primary intentions experientially feels like.

The personal experience of responding from an **Intent to Understand** is a psychological state of simplicity and gentle curiosity. Background goals (i.e., an Intent to Task) and desires (i.e., and Intent to Change) drop out of our awareness as we respond more fully in the present moment from a simple desire to **understand the other person's world from that person's perspective**. We can return to goals and desires (i.e., an Intent to Task and Intent to Change) later in the flow of dialogue, but for the moment these concerns drop away from our awareness, and **our sole interest** becomes to understand the other person's experience from that person's point of view (i.e., what is it like to be them?).

The **Intent to Be-With** is similarly a very simple psychological state of having a gently warm interest in simply being with the other person ("I like you"). Again, goals to achieve some task and desires for change drop away, and our psychological experience is one of warm compassion and a gentle joyfulness in being with the other person. The goals, tasks, and desires of the world can return later in the dialogue, but for now, for this set of communication exchanges, when we are in an Intent to Be-With **our sole experience** is a gentle warmth of affection for the other person.

The **Intent to Task**, on the other hand, focuses on **a goal to be achieved**. Something must be accomplished, some outcome is desired, some decision needs to be made. While we may listen to the other person in order to understand his or her position on an issue, the ultimate goal is not simply to understand the other person's point of view - because something needs to be accomplished or done. The ultimate goal of an Intent to Task is to obtain the other person's participation with a task, their movement toward a goal, their action. When we seek to understand the other person's experience only in an effort to then change it, this represents a **False Intent to Understand** that masks the true underlying intention of accomplishing some goal or task. A true Intent to Understand emerges from a simple desire to understand the other person's experience from the other person's perspective as the **sole goal, and as the only outcome sought**.

Similarly, we might be involved with the other person in an activity that seemingly appears to represent an Intent to Be-With, because we are, after all, with the other person. However the other person may actually be secondary to the accomplishing some task or goal. For example, being together at the zoo may look like being-with. However, the actual

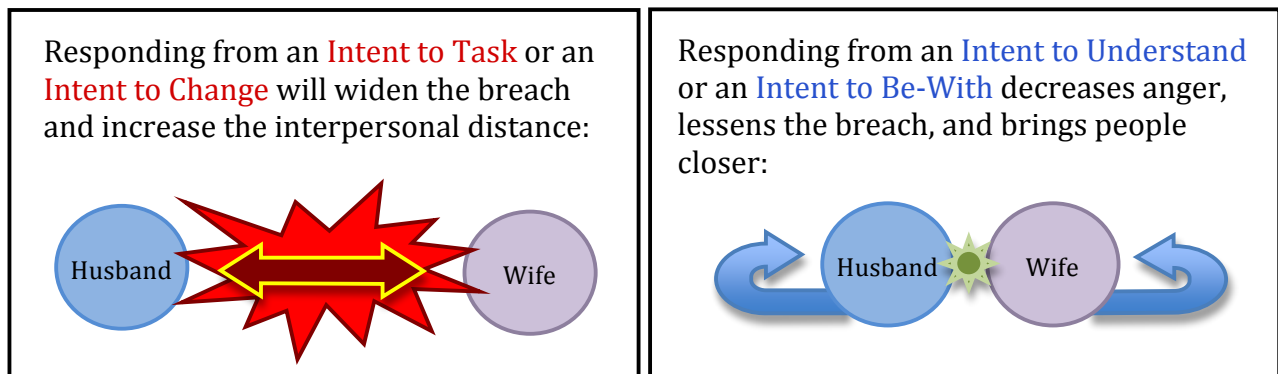
intention may be “the task” of seeing a particular set of animals or some particular shows at the zoo, so that being with the other person actually becomes secondary to the task or goal to be accomplished. The psychological experience of an Intent to Task is a motivation to accomplish some goal, outcome, or activity.

When we respond from an **Intent to Change**, we want the other person to do something that will make us more comfortable, and possibly less irritated and annoyed. The Intent to Change is similar to an Intent to Task in that both seek to accomplish some goal, and both differ from an Intent to Understand and Intent to Be-With in which there is **no goal other than simply understanding or being with** the other person.

Our responses that come from an **Intent to Task** or an **Intent to Change** will be experienced by the other person as being insensitive, as a criticism, and as not caring about the other person. On the other hand, responses that originate from an **Intent to Understand** and an **Intent to Be-With** will be perceived by others as being warmly nurturing, understanding, and sensitive to the feelings of the other person.

Initiating the Repair:

When the “intersubjective field” of shared understanding has been breached, if either person responds from an **Intent to Task** or an **Intent to Change** then the breach and interpersonal separation will widen. When either partner responds from an **Intent to Understand** or an **Intent to Be-With**, the breach in their shared relationship of mutual understanding will become less.



The repair sequence begins when the “offending partner” ceases to respond defensively (i.e., from an Intent to Change the “aggrieved partner” – “Don’t be upset.”), and instead responds from an Intent to Understand the “aggrieved partner’s” experience from the “aggrieved partner’s” perspective. Ultimately, the “offending partner” does not necessarily need to agree with the other person’s perspective,¹ and can shift later in the dialogue of

¹ The goal of an Intent to Understand is **not** to define truth or reality. The goal is simply, **and solely**, to understand the other person’s experience from the other person’s perspective. Defining truth or reality would represent either an Intent to Task or an Intent to Change.

repair to an Intent to Change the other person's views, but this expression should wait until the relationship is more closely bonded, as an Intent to Change will reintroduce and expand the breach.

So the pair (i.e., the husband and wife, the parent and child, or close friends) will do a relationship dance of breach and repair. Responding defensively, with an Intent to Task, or with an Intent to Change will widen the breach by manifesting increased "difference" in the views of the partners. On the other hand, responding from an authentic Intent to Understand or an authentic Intent to Be With, such as authentic disclosures of esteem and affection for the other person, will lessen the anger, lessen the breach, and move the partners toward repair.

In effective communication, the couple should neither allow the breach to become too large, nor should they superficially re-unite if authentic differences remain. Instead, with effective relationship breach and repair sequences, the dialogue of relationship should continue until authenticity of self is integrated into authenticity of being together. The "intersubjective field" is a relationship of understanding the other person, and of being understood by the other person.

Phase 2: Initiating the Repair

Empathic failures and relationship breaches of the "intersubjective field" of shared mutual understanding are both common and important because breaches express authenticity of self-individuality that initiate the start of the breach-and-repair sequence that is vital in the development of both individual "self-structure" authenticity and complex psychological intimacy within the relationship.

Following the breach, the second phase of this vitally important relationship sequence is to repair the relationship and return to the shared psychological state of mutual understanding; i.e., the "intersubjective field" of understanding and of being understood. The repair of the breach is initiated by the **Apology Sequence**, which involves three steps.

The Apology Sequence

Step 1: Understanding what we did wrong

The first step is critical. The "offending partner" must communicate to the "aggrieved partner" an understanding for the nature of the empathic failure that produced the breach in the relationship. An apology offered too early, without first communicating an understanding for the nature of the empathic failure, will sound superficial and will not restore the relationship's "intersubjective field." However, once the "offending partner" responds non-defensively and with an Intent to Understand, Step 2 in the Apology Sequence can occur.

This first step, however, should continue into the communication dance of breach and near-repair and should not be ended too early out of a desire to achieve a superficial

termination to the breach. Authentic differences need to be discussed in a back-and-forth communication dance of understanding and expression. Near repairs to the relationship are followed by additional minor breaches, which are followed by additional near repairs, until the authentic self-experience of both partners can be expressed and integrated into a relationship of mutual understanding.

Non-defensively inviting criticism can be a particularly effective communication during this step of the apology sequence. The ability of one person to invite criticism typically occurs in the context of the other person expressing warm Intent to Be-With communications (e.g., affectionate endearments and kind words of support, admiration, and affection for the other person).

Step 2: The apology

“I’m sorry.” When authentically offered, these words can powerfully promote relationship bonding. The apology is an invitation to restore the “intersubjective field” of mutual shared understanding. The apology also initiates a “call-and-response” sequence. The apology is the “call” that automatically provokes the “response” of “that’s okay” forgiveness. The presence of both halves of this call-and-response, the “offending partner’s” **Invitation to Repair** the relationship that is provided by the apology, and the “aggrieved partner’s” acceptance of the invitation to repair through the communication of forgiveness and acceptance, effects the repair in the relationship breach prompted by the empathic failure of one person toward the other.

The bonding event of the two persons within the repaired “intersubjective field” is accomplished by a display of shared affection, typically a hug.

In some cases, however, when the empathic failure that created the breach was particularly large, or when the defensive argument occurring during Phase 1 was particularly hostile, the apology itself may not be sufficient to eliminate the entire hurt of the “aggrieved partner” so that the corresponding forgiveness from the “aggrieved partner” is not available to effect the repair in the shared “intersubjective field” of mutual understanding. In these cases, a third step may be required.

Step 3: Restitution

“What can I do to make it better – to make it up to you?” In cases where the psychological/emotional injury to the “aggrieved partner” has been particularly severe and so prevents the apology from initiating forgiveness, the “offending partner” may need to make amends for the empathic failure in order to demonstrate a sincere remorse for the level of pain caused to the “aggrieved partner.”

Once restitution is made, forgiveness becomes available, and the shared “intersubjective field” of mutual understanding can be restored.

If forgiveness is not available after sincere restitution is made for the empathic failure, then one or both partners probably lack sufficient motivation to repair and restore the

relationship, and an end to the shared relationship may be indicated, either for a short “cooling-off” period, or perhaps for a more long-lasting period.

Parent-Child example:

Child: May I have a cupcake?

Parent: No, honey, it's too close to dinner. <an empathic failure creating the breach>

Ch: <begins tantrum; anger in response to empathic failure of parent> But I want a cupcake!

Par: Oh stop it. <Intent to Change> It's too close to dinner for you to have any sweets.
<Intent to Task>

Ch: <angry-crying tantrum> But I want a cupcake!

Par: Why do you want a cupcake now? Are you hungry? <Intent to Understand>

Ch: Yeah.

Par: You could have some carrots as a snack. <Intent to Task, i.e., satisfying hunger; betrays earlier “Are you hungry” as a False Intent to Understand> Would that work? <Intent to Understand if the offer of carrots is satisfactory>

Ch: No, I don't want carrots. I want a cupcake.

Par: So it's not just that you're hungry, you just want a cupcake. <Intent to Understand> You really like cupcakes, don't you? <Intent to Understand> They are really tasty aren't they. <Intent to Be-With>

Ch: Yeah, can I have a cupcake?

Par: Oh, sweetie, <endearments communicate an Intent to Be-With; i.e., “I like you”> I'm sorry, <Invitation to Repair “call”> but it's just too close to dinner and it will ruin your appetite for dinner. <Intent to Task, maintaining authentic difference>

Ch: But I want a cupcake. <crying>

Par: Oh I know you do. <Intent to Be-With child's frustration and disappointment> You're really disappointed, aren't you? <Intent to Understand; offering the child a cognitive label (“disappointed”) for emotional experience> You really want a cupcake, but I'm saying “no,” and now you're frustrated and disappointed. <Intent to Understand; cognitive labeling of emotional experience for the child> I'm sorry, sweetie. <Invitation to Repair; endearment is an Intent to Be-With>

Ch: I want a cupcake. <not accepting apology's Invitation to Repair>

Par: Oh, I'm so sorry, sweetie. <Invitation to Repair “call”; endearment is an Intent to Be-With> You're so sad and disappointed. <Intent to Be-With; cognitive labeling of emotional experience> But it's too close to dinner. <Intent to Task, maintains breach, but in the context of repeated offers to repair> I wonder... is there anything we can do? <Offer of Restitution> I know, you can have a cupcake after dinner, as a dessert. <Offer of Restitution> Would that work for you; to have a cupcake after dinner? <Intent to Understand>

Notice how Intentions can shift from sentence to sentence. Each communication carries an organizing intention. The parent begins with a reasonable Intent to Change and Intent to Task, but when this only increases the breach, the parent shifts to a concerted effort of Intent to Understand (also providing cognitive labels for the child's emotional experience) and Intent to Be-With (in endearments) that gradually bring the relationship closer. The parent then begins to offer Invitations to Repair by offering the apology "call" ("I'm sorry"). However, the child appears too upset to accept the invitation to repair, and continues to seek the object-of-desire. The parent continues to respond from an Intent to Understand and Intent to Be-With (endearments), offering Invitations to Repair ("I'm sorry"), and closes with an Offer of Restitution (i.e., a cupcake after dinner compromise).

If the child accepts the Offer of Restitution, then the relationship can be repaired with a mutual hug. If the child continues to decline the Invitation to Repair, even after the Offer of Restitution compromise, then the breach is maintained and the relationship is not likely to be repaired at that time because the child remains too angry and disappointed. The parent can calmly and matter-of-factly return to the task of preparing dinner. After dinner (i.e., the "cooling-off" period), the parent can again seek to repair the relationship breach by offering the child a cupcake and another Invitation to Repair.

Par: <after dinner> How about a cupcake now, sweetie? Would you like a cupcake for dessert? <Intent to Understand>

Ch: Yeah.

Par: <giving the child a cupcake> I'm sorry I couldn't give you a cupcake before dinner, honey. <Invitation to Repair supported by an Intent to Be-With endearment> But we needed to have dinner first. <Intent to Task maintaining authentic separateness in relationship> I love you. <hug> <Intent to Be-With affectionate repair and bonding>

Husband-Wife example:

<Husband arrives home from work at 7:30; an empathic failure creating a breach>

Wife: <angry> Where have you been? I've had dinner waiting since 6:00. If you were going to be late why didn't you call me to let me know?

Husband: I got caught up at work. <it's not my fault; defensive responding trying to deflect wife's anger/criticism> We have a big project we're working on and we're under deadlines. <It's not my fault; Intent to Change wife's anger by offering explanation>

W: But I've had dinner waiting. Why didn't you call to let me know you were going to be late? That's so inconsiderate.

H: I didn't know you were making dinner <It's not my fault; Intent to Change wife's anger by offering explanation> I just couldn't get away. <It's not my fault; Intent to Change wife's anger by offering explanation>

W: But if I knew you weren't going to be home, I wouldn't have made a big dinner for the both of us. I would have done something different. You can't take a moment to pick up a phone and call me?

- H: I'm sorry. <Invitation to Repair "call"; too early, it will not be accepted without communicating an understanding for the "offense"; but it communicates a shift away from defensive responding over to an intent to repair the relationship> You went to all the work of making dinner and then I didn't show up. <Intent to Understand> That must have been very frustrating. <Intent to Understand>
- W: You're damn right it's frustrating. How could you be so inconsiderate? <invitation to repair not accepted; still too much hurt>
- H: I'm sorry. <Invitation to Repair "call"> I just wasn't thinking. <Intent to Understand in accepting being inconsiderate> It was inconsiderate. <Intent to Understand in accepting being inconsiderate> I didn't realize. <It's not my fault, but Intent to Understand and accept being inconsiderate> I'm sorry. <Invitation to Repair "call"> You went to all the trouble of making dinner, and then I show up late. <Intent to Understand> I should have called. <Intent to Understand>
- W: Look at this dinner. It's lovely. And now it's ruined.
- H: Wow. <Intent to Be-With wife's effort> You're right. <Intent to Understand> You made a great dinner. <Intent to Understand> Thank you, honey. <Intent to Be-With appreciation and endearment> I'm sorry you went to all that work and then I show up late. <Invitation to Repair "call" and Intent to Understand> Can you forgive me? <direct Invitation to Repair> I won't let it happen again. <Intent to Understand how disruptive and annoying not calling was for the wife>
- W: I suppose. I was just so disappointed. <tentative acceptance of Invitation to Repair, continued expression of grievance>
- H: I'm sorry. <Invitation to Repair in response to continued expression of grievance> Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? <Offer of Restitution in response to tentative acceptance of Invitation to Repair>
- W: Yeah, maybe,... diamonds would work <laughs> How about you take me out to a really nice dinner on Friday. <settlement agreement for repair>
- H: Done. <hug> <Offer of Restitution> But you know, sweetie, this project at work does have me really stressed. <return to it's not my fault with Intent to Be-With endearment> We've got some serious deadlines we're working under and it's just consuming all my thought and attention right now. <Implied expression of grievance at wife's empathic failure> I'm sorry, I just got lost and didn't think about calling you. I didn't know you were making dinner. <Invitation to Repair; offer of mitigating explanation>
- W: It's okay, I understand. <hug> <more complete acceptance of repair based on wife's Intent to Understand her own empathic failure about husband's job stress> You can put your dinner in the microwave to warm it up. <expression of nurture (feeding her husband), return to normalcy>
- H: Thanks, honey. <Intent to Be-With communications of appreciation for nurture and endearment>
- W: Is there anything I can do about your stress at work? <Intent to Understand, Invitation to Repair her empathic breach>

H: Yeah, you can forgive me for forgetting to call you about being late. <settlement offer for restitution> I'm sorry, it just got away from me. <continued Invitation to Repair his empathic breach to stabilize repaired relationship>

W: I'm sorry too. <wife's Invitation to Repair wife's empathic breach> For getting so upset. <hug> <Intent to Understand and affectionate bonding seal of relationship repair> I was just looking forward to having a nice dinner together. <it's not my fault embedded in an Intent to Be-With>

The husband's failure to notify the wife of his late arrival home interfered with the wife's ability to plan and organize her life with him, which represented an empathic failure on the part of the husband. The husband initially responds with "It's not my fault" communications designed to deflect the wife's anger by offering justifications/explanations for his actions. When the wife does not accept these, the husband then seeks to repair the breach in the relationship by offering a concentrated Intent to Understand within the softening context of Intent to Be-With endearments. The husband does not try to defend his actions, but instead **seeks solely to understand** the wife's experience **from the wife's point of view**.

The husband continues to offer Invitations to Repair. The first Invitation to Repair occurs at the beginning of the husband's efforts to understand the wife's experience from the wife's perspective. This Invitation to Repair is rejected by the wife, since the husband has not yet communicated that he understood the "offense," the empathic failure. Yet this early offer of an Invitation to Repair communicates the husband's shift in his response set away from defending and toward repair.

As the husband maintains his continuing Intent to Understand the wife's experience from her point of view, the relationship gradually becomes closer and the breach less intense, until at last the wife tentatively accepts the husband's Invitation to Repair apology. The husband responds to the wife's tentative acceptance with an Offer of Restitution to more firmly cement the repair. The wife responds with a settlement offer for repairing the breach, which the husband accepts, and the repair of the marital bond is sealed with an affectionate hug.

However, the wife also initiated a breach in their relationship when she did not understand the husband's explanation regarding his stress at work, which represented a minor empathic failure by the wife. Once the "intersubjective field" is repaired, the husband returns to his hurt feelings regarding the wife's empathic failure, and the husband seeks a repair for his grievance. He now reoffers his explanations that he first tried to offer in response to the wife's grievance. He wants his wife to understand that his empathic failure was not because he doesn't care about her, but is a result of his stress and distraction at work. The wife accepts this explanation with a clear and direct statement of forgiveness and understanding, thereby repairing the breach with her husband by understanding his experience from his perspective (i.e., an Intent to Understand), and this second bonding is also sealed with an affectionate hug. The wife's minor restitution is her statement of nurturing concern for the husband (i.e., desire that he be fed), and the husband responds to

the wife's expression of nurture with Intent to Be-With communications of an appreciation for the wife's nurture and an endearment.

The wife then makes an Offer of Restitution within an Intent to Understand (i.e., "is there anything I can do about your stress?"), and the husband simply asks for her understanding. The wife apologizes for her minor empathic breach and offers her own justifying explanation couched in an Intent to Be-With communication.

Emotional Tone

There are four primary emotions, happy, sad, afraid, and angry. The emotions that most directly impact the breach-and-repair sequence are angry and happy.

Angry always breaches the "intersubjective field," and anger also signals that a breach in the "intersubjective field" has occurred. When there is anger, there has been an empathic failure within the relationship. Small-scale empathic failures are normal, common, and healthy expressions of self-difference because we are separate individuals in a shared relationship with another separate individual. The issue is not the presence of a breach, the issue is its effective repair.

The emotion of anger has three levels. The top two levels are "you hurt me, so I hurt you," with anger representing the "I hurt you" part. The third level, and the deepest level, of anger is "the reason you hurt me is because I care about you, and you don't care about me." In the previous examples, when the parent refused the child's request for a cupcake this communicated that the parent didn't care about the child's wants, and when the husband arrived home late without calling his wife, this communicated that he didn't care about the wife's plans and desires.

Whenever anger is evident on the surface, hurt is just underneath, and a feeling of not being cared about and for is just below that. In resolving relationship disputes, it is seldom wise to express anger. Anger is too violent an emotion and can lead us to say and do hurtful things to the other person that can damage the relationship, even after the argument is repaired. Instead, it is more productive to express anger as annoyance and irritation that is then quickly translated into either sadness and hurt, or feelings of love and caring that are not being returned (which is then creating the sadness and hurt).

We are also designed to read the "background emotional state" of the other person. Assertion, "voice," and power all emanate from a background emotional state of low-level anger. The presence of assertion, "voice," and power are not interpreted by others as representing a background emotional state of anxiety, or sadness, or happiness. Instead, assertion and "voice" are interpreted as representing a low-level background state of anger (a 1 or 2 on a 10-point scale).

Since anger always breaches the "intersubjective field," assertion and "voice" tend to inhibit the repair of the intersubjective breach resulting from an empathic failure. In dialogue to

repair an intersubjective breach, it is typically best to stay away from a background emotional tone of assertion and “voice.”

Instead, the emotion of happy/pleasure is the social bonding emotion. When we laugh in a social group, everyone starts to laugh. Happy/pleasure is contagious. It spreads from brain, to brain, to brain. It brings people together and invites psychological and emotional bonding.

When we are in dialogue to repair an intersubjective breach it is highly beneficial to maintain a low-level background emotional tone of relaxed happy/pleasure (a 1 or 2 on a 10 point scale). This will invite bonding and repair.

This doesn't mean that we don't care, or that we're not involved. The happy/pleasure emotional state is also the psychological state that gives rise to feelings of compassion and caring for others. But happy/pleasure is also the calm and confident “let-go” emotional state of “no-worries,” and “everything is going to be okay.” Repair of the “intersubjective field” is made easier if we can remain relaxed and calm, engaged without being defensive, flexible and compassionately caring; in a low-level background state of relaxed happy/pleasure from which we can readily admit our inadvertent and unintended empathic failures with compassion and caring for the injury these inadvertent empathic failures have caused, and seek their quick and full repair in dialogue that is rich in intentions to understand and be-with the other person who is so clearly of value to us.

“Aggrieved” and “Offending” Partner Roles

The roles of the “aggrieved” and “offending” partner will necessarily shift during the dialogue to repair the breach in the “intersubjective field” of mutual shared understanding. However, these shifts should not occur too rapidly. A common defensive response of the “offending partner” is to try to reject the role of the “offending partner” by turning the reported offense back on the other partner through a communication derailment of **“Me!?... What about you!”** in which the “offending partner” goes on the offensive in return, and tries to adopt the role of the “aggrieved partner” for himself or herself.

This defensive response of **“Me!?... What about you!”** entirely derails productive communication and the potential repair of the interpersonal breach in the relationship by fundamentally challenging for the role of the “aggrieved partner” whenever there has been an empathic failure by that person that has created a breach in the shared state of mutual understanding. In order for there to be productive repair of the breach in interpersonal understanding, both partners must be psychologically and emotionally mature enough to accept the role of the “offending partner” for periods of the repair dialogue.

This does not mean that the roles do not shift and change during the dialogue. They do. However, the roles of “offending partner” (i.e., who initiated the “empathic failure”) and “aggrieved partner” should remain relatively stable until a repair or near-repair has been achieved within these assigned roles, before the roles are then reversed for continued authentic dialogue of repair. The roles of the “aggrieved partner” and “offending partner” are assigned solely on the basis of whether there has been an empathic failure on that

person's part in which he or she did not perfectly understand the other person. Empathic failures are normal, natural, unavoidable, and **HEALTHY** because they represent expressions of **authentic difference within an interpersonal context**. As much as the "intersubjective field" of mutual shared understanding feels good, we are nevertheless separate people, and **empathic failures will naturally occur**.

The productive repair of intersubjective breaches **requires** that **both** partners be sufficiently mature, emotionally and psychologically, to accept the role of the "offending partner" long enough to allow for the repair or near-repair of the breach, before then shifting to expressing his or her own authentic separateness within the relationship context. Chronic defensive responding, either through "It's not my fault" **explanations** or "Me!?!... What about you!" **communication derailments**, will only prevent repair that will result in relationship damaging interpersonal conflicts because of the inadequate and incomplete repair of relationship breaches.

Chronic Failure to Repair:

The chronic use of **defensive explanations** and **defensive communication derailments** typically emerges from people who are conflict avoidant because of prior life experiences with a chronic inability to effectively repair relationship breaches.

When relationship breaches are not effectively repaired, they leave each partner isolated and exposed in a **psychological state of loneliness and alienation**. When interpersonal conflict with close loved ones goes chronically unrepaired, the person will begin to fear interpersonal conflict, breaches in the shared experience of mutual understanding, as a precursor for the experience of psychological loneliness and alienation that results from chronically unrepaired relationship breaches, so that, at the first sign of a breach (i.e., the other person's anger and description of an empathic failure by the "offending partner"), the conflict-averse person will become highly defensive in a desperate effort to avoid the breach in interpersonal shared understanding that, according to past experience, will inevitably lead to psychological loneliness and alienation.

The solution is to **help the chronically conflict-averse partner learn** the steps for intersubjective repair:

- Accepting occasional **empathic failures as normal**, natural, and healthy relationship features
- Accepting the "offending partner" role, **at least for a period of time** to allow repair or near-repair of the intersubjective breach in shared mutual understanding
- Responding to descriptions of his or her empathic failure non-defensively and with an authentic **Intent to Understand** the partner's experience from the partner's point of view
- Then initiating the repair of the **Apology Sequence**
- And then possibly adopting the "aggrieved partner" role for continued authentic **Dialogue of Repair**