A fact sheet about

Repair after a disagreement

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Repair after a disagreement

What repair is, why the way back can differ, and one small step.



Key points

- After a disagreement, the way two people come back to each other is called repair (definition below). It is about feeling close again, not about who was right.
- People need different things before they can repair. Some need time alone, some need to talk it through, and some need to do something together.
- Repair does not have to be a spoken sorry or a long talk. A message, a cup of tea or sitting together can all count.
- Repair takes two people. It is not only your job, and it is fair to ask the other person to meet you partway.

What repair is

On Sunday you and your sibling disagreed about how to help a parent who is unwell. Voices got loud, and you went quiet and left. Now it is Tuesday, and nobody has sent a message. You want to come back to them, but the usual advice is a calm talk and a clear sorry. For some people that is the hardest way back, and it is not the only one.

Repair is what two people do to come back to each other after a falling-out. Some people call the falling-out a rupture.

Research with couples in general looked at what helped during a disagreement. The attempts that worked best were about feeling close again, not about logic or solving the problem. They included a shared joke, a bit of warmth, showing you understand, owning your part, or a sign that you are still okay together.

That research was about couples in the middle of a disagreement. But the idea may help afterwards too, with anyone close to you. That could be a friend, a parent, an adult child, a housemate or a support worker. You can come back to each other and still not agree.

Why the way back can look different

Neurodivergent adults often describe time alone as the way they step back from overload, settle and recharge. After that, they feel ready to be with people again. Some found it easier to be with people while doing something, like walking or a film. It gave them something else to focus on.

A disagreement can also tip into a meltdown or a shutdown. Neurodivergent adults have said that during a meltdown it is hard to think and remember. Many try to leave or find a place alone, partly so they do not harm themselves or their relationships. So leaving the room, or hours of silence, may be a way of protecting the relationship.

In one study with women, autistic women were less likely than others to keep trying to talk a falling-out through. But they were more upset when a friendship broke down. So talking may not be your way back, and that does not mean you care less.

You may make someone a cup of tea to say sorry, and they may not see it as a sorry. They may want a long talk that feels to you like a second argument. This two-way gap is part of the double empathy problem. You can read more about the double empathy problem here.

Silence can be hard on the other side too. Some people are very alert to signs of being pushed away. This is called rejection sensitivity.

If you are ADHD or neurodivergent in another way, you may recognise all of this too.

More broadly, research on autism and neurodivergence has often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other marginalised groups. Your lived experience is what is most valid.

The one thing to try: take one small step to reconnect, without needing a big talk

First, wait until you can both think and communicate again. If the other person is not ready, that is not a no.

Then choose one small way back that suits you, and them if you know what they like:

- A short message, such as "I am still here. I would like to sort this out when we are both ready."
- Something you do for them, such as making a cup of tea, bringing a snack, or putting on a show you both like.
- Being alongside them, in the same room or on a walk, with no need to talk.
- Talking it through later, if you both want to.

Most of these need no speaking: you can type, write a note, send an emoji or bring the tea. A support person can help you pass on a note or offer written choices or pictures.

If your way back might be missed, say in one line what it means: "This tea is my way of saying sorry about Sunday."

You can keep a few ready messages in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app, by talking or typing. Then one is ready on the day you need it.

Repair is not only your job. Autistic adults have asked non-autistic people to assume they meant well, and to ask what they meant rather than guess. So it is fair to ask the other person to reach back too.

This step comes from what neurodivergent adults say has helped them. It has not been validated in research yet, so it is anchored in lived experience and in what the community shares about it. And lived experience is valid too.

If the first try does not land, wait for a calmer day. For next time, you can read more about agreeing a pause and come back plan here. If a meltdown left you feeling ashamed, you can read more about recovering without shame here.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, for example if the same falling-out keeps happening. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help you and the people close to you, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you.

You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

This page is about the kind of disagreement people have when they are safe with each other. If someone close to you frightens you, hurts you or controls you, that is a different situation, and support is there. Call 1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732, at any time of the day or night.

Sources

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Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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