victimized is constantly scanning everything his partner does that might confirm the view that she is victimizing him, ignoring or discounting any acts of kindness on her part that would question or disconfirm that view.

These thoughts are powerful; they trip the neural alarm system. Once the husband's thought of being victimized triggers an emotional hijacking, he will for the time being easily call to mind and ruminate on a list of grievances that remind him of the ways she victimizes him, while not recalling anything she may have done in their entire relationship that would disconfirm the view that he is an innocent victim. It puts his spouse in a no-win situation: even things she does that are intentionally kind can be reinterpreted when viewed through such a negative lens and dismissed as feeble attempts to deny she is a victimizer.

Partners who are free of such distress-triggering views can entertain a more benign interpretation of what is going on in the same situations, and so are less likely to have such a hijacking, or if they do, tend to recover from it more readily. The general template for thoughts that maintain or alleviate distress follows the pattern outlined in Chapter 6 by psychologist Martin Seligman for pessimistic and optimistic outlooks. The pessimistic view is that the partner is inherently flawed in a way that cannot change and that guarantees misery: "He's selfish and self-absorbed; that's the way he was brought up and that's the way he will always be; he expects me to wait on him hand and foot and he couldn't care less about how I feel." The contrasting optimistic view would be something like: "He's being demanding now, but he's been thoughtful in the past; maybe he's in a bad mood—I wonder if something's bothering him about his work." This is a view that does not write off the husband (or the marriage) as irredeemably damaged and hopeless. Instead it sees a bad moment as due to circumstances that can change. The first attitude brings continual distress; the second soothes.

Partners who take the pessimistic stance are extremely prone to emotional hijackings; they get angry, hurt, or otherwise distressed by things their spouses do, and they stay disturbed once the episode begins. Their internal distress and pessimistic attitude, of course, makes it far more likely they will resort to criticism and contempt in confronting the partner, which in turn heightens the likelihood of defensiveness and stonewalling.

Perhaps the most virulent of such toxic thoughts are found in

husbands who are physically violent to their wives. A study of violent husbands by psychologists at Indiana University found that these men think like schoolyard bullies: they read hostile intent into even neutral actions by their wives, and use this misreading to justify to themselves their own violence (men who are sexually aggressive with dates do something similar, viewing the women with suspicion and so disregarding their objections).[17] As we saw in Chapter 7, such men are particularly threatened by perceived slights, rejection, or public embarrassment by their wives. A typical scenario that triggers thoughts "justifying" violence in wife-batterers: "You are at a social gathering and you notice that for the past half hour your wife has been talking and laughing with the same attractive man. He seems to be flirting with her." When these men perceive their wives as doing something suggesting rejection or abandonment, their reactions run to indignation and outrage. Presumably, automatic thoughts like "She's going to leave me" are triggers for an emotional hijacking in which battering husbands respond impulsively, as the researchers put it, with "incompetent behavioral responses"—they become violent.[18]

FLOODING THE SWAMPING OF A MARRIAGE

The net effect of these distressing attitudes is to create incessant crisis, since they trigger emotional hijackings more often and make it harder to recover from the resulting hurt and rage. Gottman uses the apt term *flooding* for this susceptibility to frequent emotional distress; flooded husbands or wives are so overwhelmed by their partner's negativity and their own reaction to it that they are swamped by dreadful, out-of-control feelings. People who are flooded cannot hear without distortion or respond with clear-headedness; they find it hard to organize their thinking, and they fall back on primitive reactions. They just want things to stop, or want to run or, sometimes, to strike back. Flooding is a self-perpetuating emotional hijacking.

Some people have high thresholds for flooding, easily enduring anger and contempt, while others may be triggered the moment their spouse makes a mild criticism. The technical description of flooding is in terms of heart rate rise from calm levels.[19] At rest, women's heart rates are about 82 beats per minute, men's about 72 (the specific heart rate varies mainly according to a person's body size). Flooding begins at about 10 beats per minute above a person's resting rate; if

the heart rate reaches 100 beats per minute (as it easily can do during moments of rage or tears), then the body is pumping adrenaline and other hormones that keep the distress high for some time. The moment of emotional hijacking is apparent from the heart rate: it can jump 10, 20, or even as many as 30 beats per minute within the space of a single heartbeat. Muscles tense; it can seem hard to breathe. There is a swamp of toxic feelings, an unpleasant wash of fear and anger that seems inescapable and, subjectively, takes "forever" to get over. At this point—full hijacking—a person's emotions are so intense, their perspective so narrow, and their thinking so confused that there is no hope of taking the other's viewpoint or settling things in a reasonable way.

Of course, most husbands and wives have such intense moments from time to time when they fight—it's only natural. The problem for a marriage begins when one or another spouse feels flooded almost continually. Then the partner feels overwhelmed by the other partner, is always on guard for an emotional assault or injustice, becomes hypervigilant for any sign of attack, insult, or grievance, and is sure to overreact to even the least sign. If a husband is in such a state, his wife saying, "Honey, we've got to talk," can elicit the reactive thought, "She's picking a fight again," and so trigger flooding. It becomes harder and harder to recover from the physiological arousal, which in turn makes it easier for innocuous exchanges to be seen in a sinister light, triggering flooding all over again.

This is perhaps the most dangerous turning point for marriage, a catastrophic shift in the relationship. The flooded partner has come to think the worst of the spouse virtually all the time, reading everything she does in a negative light. Small issues become major battles; feelings are hurt continually. With time, the partner who is being flooded starts to see any and all problems in the marriage as severe and impossible to fix, since the flooding itself sabotages any attempt to work things out. As this continues it begins to seem useless to talk things over, and the partners try to soothe their troubled feelings on their own. They start leading parallel lives, essentially living in isolation from each other, and feel alone within the marriage. All too often, Gottman finds, the next step is divorce.

In this trajectory toward divorce the tragic consequences of deficits in emotional competences are self-evident. As a couple gets caught in the reverberating cycle of criticism and contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling, distressing thoughts and emotional flooding, the cycle

itself reflects a disintegration of emotional self-awareness and self-control, of empathy and the abilities to soothe each other and oneself.

MEN: THE VULNERABLE SEX

Back to gender differences in emotional life, which prove to be a hidden spur to marital meltdowns. Consider this finding: Even after thirty-five or more years of marriage, there is a basic distinction between husbands and wives in how they regard emotional encounters. Women, on average, do not mind plunging into the unpleasantness of a marital squabble nearly so much as do the men in their lives. That conclusion, reached in a study by Robert Levenson at the University of California at Berkeley, is based on the testimony of 151 couples, all in long-lasting marriages. Levenson found that husbands uniformly found it unpleasant, even aversive, to become upset during a marital disagreement, while their wives did not mind it much.[20]

Husbands are prone to flooding at a lower intensity of negativity than are their wives; more men than women react to their spouse's criticism with flooding. Once flooded, husbands secrete more adrenaline into their bloodstream, and the adrenaline flow is triggered by lower levels of negativity on their wife's part; it takes husbands longer to recover physiologically from flooding.[21] This suggests the possibility that the stoic, Clint Eastwood type of male imperturbability may represent a defense against feeling emotionally overwhelmed.

The reason men are so likely to stonewall, Gottman proposes, is to protect themselves from flooding; his research showed that once they began stonewalling, their heart rates dropped by about ten beats per minute, bringing a subjective sense of relief. But—and here's a paradox—once the men started stonewalling, it was the wives whose heart rate shot up to levels signaling high distress. This limbic tango, with each sex seeking comfort in opposing gambits, leads to a very different stance toward emotional confrontations: men want to avoid them as fervently as their wives feel compelled to seek them.

Just as men are far more likely to be stonewallers, so the women are more likely to criticize their husbands.[22] This asymmetry arises as a result of wives pursuing their role as emotional managers. As they try to bring up and resolve disagreements and grievances, their husbands are more reluctant to engage in what are bound to be

heated discussions. As the wife sees her husband withdraw from engagement, she ups the volume and intensity of her complaint, starting to criticize him. As he becomes defensive or stonewalls in return, she feels frustrated and angry, and so adds contempt to underscore the strength of her frustration. As her husband finds himself the object of his wife's criticism and contempt, he begins to fall into the innocent-victim or righteous-indignation thoughts that more and more easily trigger flooding. To protect himself from flooding, he becomes more and more defensive or simply stonewalls altogether. But when husbands stonewall, remember, it triggers flooding in their wives, who feel completely stymied. And as the cycle of marital fights escalates it all too easily can spin out of control.

HIS AND HERS: MARITAL ADVICE

Given the grim potential outcome of the differences in how men and women deal with distressing feelings in their relationship, what can couples do to protect the love and affection they feel for each other—in short, what protects a marriage? On the basis of watching interaction in the couples whose marriages have continued to thrive over the years, marital researchers offer specific advice for men and for women, and some general words for both.

Men and women, in general, need different emotional fine-tuning. For men, the advice is not to sidestep conflict, but to realize that when their wife brings up some grievance or disagreement, she may be doing it as an act of love, trying to keep the relationship healthy and on course (although there may well be other motives for a wife's hostility). When grievances simmer, they build and build in intensity until there's an explosion; when they are aired and worked out, it takes the pressure off. But husbands need to realize that anger or discontent is not synonymous with personal attack—their wives' emotions are often simply underliners, emphasizing the strength of her feelings about the matter.

Men also need to be on guard against short-circuiting the discussion by offering a practical solution too early on—it's typically more important to a wife that she feel her husband hears her complaint and empathizes with her *feelings* about the matter (though he need not agree with her). She may hear his offering advice as a way of dismissing her feelings as inconsequential. Husbands who are able to

stay with their wives through the heat of anger, rather than dismissing their complaints as petty, help their wives feel heard and respected. Most especially, wives want to have their feelings acknowledged and respected as valid, even if their husbands disagree. More often than not, when a wife feels her view is heard and her feelings registered, she calms down.

As for women, the advice is quite parallel. Since a major problem for men is that their wives are too intense in voicing complaints, wives need to make a purposeful effort to be careful not to attack their husbands—to complain about what they did, but not criticize them as a person or express contempt. Complaints are not attacks on character, but rather a clear statement that a particular action is distressing. An angry personal attack will almost certainly lead to a husband's getting defensive or stonewalling, which will be all the more frustrating, and only escalate the fight. It helps, too, if a wife's complaints are put in the larger context of reassuring her husband of her love for him.

THE GOOD FIGHT

The morning paper offers an object lesson in how not to resolve differences in a marriage. Marlene Lenick had a dispute with her husband, Michael: he wanted to watch the Dallas Cowboys-Philadelphia Eagles game, she wanted to watch the news. As he settled down to watch the game, Mrs. Lenick told him that she had "had enough of that football," went into the bedroom to fetch a .38 caliber handgun, and shot him twice as he sat watching the game in the den. Mrs. Lenick was charged with aggravated assault and freed on a $50,000 bond; Mr. Lenick was listed in good condition, recovering from the bullets that grazed his abdomen and tunneled through his left shoulder blade and neck.[23]

While few marital fights are that violent—or that costly—they offer a prime chance to bring emotional intelligence to marriage. For example, couples in marriages that last tend to stick to one topic, and to give each partner the chance to state their point of view at the outset.[24] But these couples go one important step further: they show each other that they are being listened to. Since feeling heard is often exactly what the aggrieved partner really is after, emotionally an act of empathy is a masterly tension reducer.

Most notably missing in couples who eventually divorce are attempts by either partner in an argument to de-escalate the tension. The presence or absence of ways to repair a rift is a crucial difference between the fights of couples who have a healthy marriage and those of couples who eventually end up divorcing.[25] The repair mechanisms that keep an argument from escalating into a dire explosion are simple moves such as keeping the discussion on track, empathizing, and tension reduction. These basic moves are like an emotional thermostat, preventing the feelings being expressed from boiling over and overwhelming the partners' ability to focus on the issue at hand.

One overall strategy for making a marriage work is not to concentrate on the specific issues—childrearing, sex, money, housework—that couples fight about, but rather to cultivate a couple's shared emotional intelligence, thereby improving the chances of working things out. A handful of emotional competences—mainly being able to calm down (and calm your partner), empathy, and listening well—can make it more likely a couple will settle their disagreements effectively. These make possible healthy disagreements, the "good fights" that allow a marriage to flourish and which overcome the negativities that, if left to grow, can destroy a marriage.[26]

Of course, none of these emotional habits changes overnight; it takes persistence and vigilance at the very least. Couples will be able to make the key changes in direct proportion to how motivated they are to try. Many or most emotional responses triggered so easily in marriage have been sculpted since childhood, first learned in our most intimate relationships or modeled for us by our parents, and then brought to marriage fully formed. And so we are primed for certain emotional habits—overreacting to perceived slights, say, or shutting down at the first sign of a confrontation—even though we may have sworn that we would not act like our parents.

Calming Down

Every strong emotion has at its root an impulse to action; managing those impulses is basic to emotional intelligence. This can be particularly difficult, though, in love relationships, where we have so much at stake. The reactions triggered here touch on some of our deepest needs—to be loved and feel respected, fears of abandonment or of being emotionally deprived. Small wonder we can act in a

marital fight as though our very survival were at stake.

Even so, nothing gets resolved positively when husband or wife is in the midst of an emotional hijacking. One key marital competence is for partners to learn to soothe their own distressed feelings. Essentially, this means mastering the ability to recover quickly from the flooding caused by an emotional hijacking. Because the ability to hear, think, and speak with clarity dissolves during such an emotional peak, calming down is an immensely constructive step, without which there can be no further progress in settling what's at issue.

Ambitious couples can learn to monitor their pulse rates every five minutes or so during a troubling encounter, feeling the pulse at the carotid artery a few inches below the earlobe and jaw (people who do aerobic workouts learn to do this easily).[27] Counting the pulse for fifteen seconds and multiplying by four gives the pulse rate in beats per minute. Doing so while feeling calm gives a baseline; if the pulse rate rises more than, say, ten beats per minute above that level, it signals the beginning of flooding. If the pulse climbs this much, a couple needs a twenty-minute break from each other to cool down before resuming the discussion. Although a five-minute break may feel long enough, the actual physiological recovery time is more gradual. As we saw in Chapter 5, residual anger triggers more anger; the longer wait gives the body more time to recover from the earlier arousal.

For couples who, understandably, find it awkward to monitor heart rate during a fight, it is simpler to have a prestated agreement that allows one or another partner to call the time-out at the first signs of flooding in either partner. During that time-out period, cooling down can be helped along by engaging in a relaxation technique or aerobic exercise (or any of the other methods we explored in Chapter 5) that might help the partners recover from the emotional hijacking.

Detoxifying Self-talk

Because flooding is triggered by negative thoughts about the partner, it helps if a husband or wife who is being upset by such harsh judgments tackles them head-on. Sentiments like "I'm not going to take this anymore" or "I don't deserve this kind of treatment" are innocent-victim or righteous-indignation slogans. As cognitive therapist Aaron Beck points out, by catching these thoughts and challenging them—rather than simply being enraged or hurt by them

—a husband or wife can begin to become free of their hold.[28]

This requires monitoring such thoughts, realizing that one does not have to believe them, and making the intentional effort to bring to mind evidence or perspectives that put them in question. For example, a wife who feels in the heat of the moment that "he doesn't care about my needs—he's always so selfish" might challenge the thought by reminding herself of a number of things her husband has done that are, in fact, thoughtful. This allows her to reframe the thought as: "Well, he does show he cares about me sometimes, even though what he just did was thoughtless and upsetting to me." The latter formulation opens the possibility of change and a positive resolution; the former only foments anger and hurt.

Nondefensive Listening and Speaking

He: "You're shouting!"

She: "Of course I'm shouting—you haven't heard a word I'm saying. You just don't listen!"

Listening is a skill that keeps couples together. Even in the heat of an argument, when both are seized by emotional hijackings, one or the other, and sometimes both, can manage to listen past the anger, and hear and respond to a partner's reparative gesture. Couples headed for divorce, though, get absorbed in the anger and fixated on the specifics of the issue at hand, not managing to hear—let alone return—any peace offerings that might be implicit in what their partner is saying. Defensiveness in a listener takes the form of ignoring or immediately rebutting the spouse's complaint, reacting to it as though it were an attack rather than an attempt to change behavior. Of course, in an argument what one spouse says is often in the form of an attack, or is said with such strong negativity that it is hard to hear anything other than an attack.

Even in the worst case, it's possible for a couple to purposely edit what they hear, ignoring the hostile and negative parts of the exchange—the nasty tone, the insult, the contemptuous criticism—to hear the main message. For this feat it helps if partners can remember to see each other's negativity as an implicit statement of how important the issue is to them—a demand for attention to be paid. Then if she yells, "Will you *stop* interrupting me, for crissake!" he might be more able to say, without reacting overtly to her hostility, "Okay, go ahead and finish."

The most powerful form of nondefensive listening, of course, is empathy: actually hearing the feelings *behind* what is being said. As we saw in Chapter 7, for one partner in a couple to truly empathize with the other demands that his own emotional reactions calm down to the point where he is receptive enough for his own physiology to be able to mirror the feelings of his partner. Without this physiological attunement, a partner's sense of what the other is feeling is likely to be entirely off base. Empathy deteriorates when one's own feelings are so strong that they allow no physiological harmonizing, but simply override everything else.

One method for effective emotional listening, called "mirroring," is commonly used in marital therapy. When one partner makes a complaint, the other repeats it back in her own words, trying to capture not just the thought, but also the feelings that go with it. The partner mirroring checks with the other to be sure the restatement is on target, and if not, tries again until it is right—something that seems simple, but is surprisingly tricky in execution.[29] The effect of being mirrored accurately is not just feeling understood, but having the added sense of being in emotional attunement. That in itself can sometimes disarm an imminent attack, and goes far toward keeping discussions of grievances from escalating into fights.

The art of nondefensive speaking for couples centers around keeping what is said to a specific complaint rather than escalating to a personal attack. Psychologist Haim Ginott, the grandfather of effective-communication programs, recommended that the best formula for a complaint is "XYZ": "When you did X, it made me feel Y, and I'd rather you did Z instead." For example: "When you didn't call to tell me you were going to be late for our dinner appointment, I felt unappreciated and angry. I wish you'd call to let me know you'll be late" instead of "You're a thoughtless, self-centered bastard," which is how the issue is all too often put in couples' fights. In short, open communication has no bullying, threats, or insults. Nor does it allow for any of the innumerable forms of defensiveness—excuses, denying responsibility, counterattacking with a criticism, and the like. Here again empathy is a potent tool.

Finally, respect and love disarm hostility in marriage, as elsewhere in life. One powerful way to de-escalate a fight is to let your partner know that you can see things from the other perspective, and that this point of view may have validity, even if you do not agree with it yourself. Another is to take responsibility or even apologize if you see