

## Retire – Time-out for Couples in Conflict

The first task of relationship conflict first aid is to remove the risk of further harm from your relationship conflict. If you can begin to rebuild trust in one another to adhere to a few simple safety measures, you are likely to see a greater willingness in both parties to show up and work through the difficult conflict.

One way to do this is to forge an agreed framework for hitting the pause button when a conflict is about to head into a danger zone\*.

The 'Time-out' technique, most well-known for its parenting application, is a mechanism for pausing conflict, with the commitment to return to it, after a pre-arranged cooling period.

### Planning your time-out:

1. Develop your customised time-out plan together, away from problem-conflict, when you have uninterrupted time to give to the exercise
2. Respect each other's subjective experience of the conflict as you build your time-out rules framework
3. Be specific in your agreements around what will trigger a time-out being called and how long the time-out should be

Language	What words/language will we agree to avoid, and which words/language are agreed triggers for a time-out to be called. Typically, these are 'danger zone' words, which are perceived, by one or both parties, as aggressive, disrespectful or generally unhelpful in building positive communication
Tone	We may not always realise when our tone has shifted and may be perceived as aggressive, contemptuous, critical, dismissive, or otherwise disrespectful. How might you address the perception of vocal tone in your plan?
Physicality	What physical indicators tell you that you are heading for a danger zone. It could be a reddening in your partner's face, or the clenching of fists. It could be physical closeness which feels aggressive or intimidating. How will this be recognised in your plan?
Content	Staying focused on the content at hand is important. Veering into old stories or complaints is likely to muddy the waters. How will you know when this is happening and when might you call time-out
Place	Consider where you might both go, when time-out is called. This should be a place or space which will support a sense of calm, so that you can prepare to return to the conflict at the agreed time
De-escalation strategies	When time-out is called, it is not enough to just go away and stew. It's important to use this time to engage whatever strategies work for you, to calm yourself, so that when you return you have a better chance of a more successful conflict
Time	Time-out can be for an hour, or three hours, or 'before sun-down'. Work out the time frame that fits for the two of you and honour it, consistently.
Code Word	Whether you call "Time out" or "Pause" or just use a physical gesture, choose the signal between you and use it consistently, only when you feel you are approaching a danger zone

## Enacting your time-out:

1. Anyone can call a time-out when one or more of the time-out agreements is breached. When time-out is called, it must be respected
2. When time-out is called, both parties must cease conflict and go to their separate spaces and engage in their de-escalation strategies, as per the plan, above
3. The time-out plan is not complete until both parties have returned at the agreed time and tried to correct the problems in the first run of the conflict discussion.
4. Time-out is not a way to avoid uncomfortable conflict and it must include the commitment to return at the agreed time
5. If you are the one being 'put on pause' you may find this extremely frustrating. Hopefully this frustration will be eased by your partner's commitment to return at the prescribed time. Stop, breathe, walk away. You can do this.

Change happens through small, incremental actions, performed consistently over time. Your attempts at time-out will not always be successful. Debrief the successes and the stumbles together, when you feel able, and try to do better next time.

\*by 'danger zone', I mean that there is a heightened risk of further hurt and possibly trauma taking place, for either or both partners, and others who might be impacted, such as children