

The Time-Out Technique

A technique to use when you become physiologically and emotionally flooded during a disagreement.

WHAT IS FLOODING?

The difference between flooding and more manageable distress is one of magnitude. You reach the point when your thinking brain—the part that can consider other points of view, remain aware of the real state of affairs etc.—is shut out. This emotional hijacking is the hallmark of our nervous system in overdrive. Something happens—and it could be almost anything—in your interaction with your partner that sets off your internal threat-detection system. This is your parasympathetic nervous system in action, preparing you for battle or flight. In this state, you lose some of your capacity for rational thought. Science describes this as a decrease of activity in your pre-frontal cortex, the centre of higher cognition.

The stuff that works well when you are being chased by a dinosaur doesn't work so well in the home. Our instinctive reactions in these moments usually make the situation worse. The fight response we are primed for becomes a cascade of angry words that just deepen wounds. In flight, we might stalk out of the room or shut out our mate with icy silence. Basically, when we react in the grip of emotional flooding, we do and say the kinds of things that are likely to trigger emotional flooding in our partner. And then both people in the room are out of control. Although neither of you want to escalate the argument or to hurt the other, flooding overrides any attempt at rational thought or balanced thinking. You both lose control. So...if and when either of you becomes flooded, take a 'time-out.'

AIM: To pause a disagreement that is out of hand and re-start it when you are both in a physiological state and frame of mind that will allow the discussion to be more effective and productive.

THE TECHNIQUE:

- When one of you notices signs of flooding, such as feeling your blood pressure rise or your heart rate increase, or when you start to notice your partner becoming seriously upset, stop and say 'I need a time-out' or 'I think we need a time-out.'
- Pause the conversation.
- Agree how long the time out will be (at least 20 minutes), and where you will reconvene.
- Enact the time out.
- During the time out, self-soothe, reassure yourself that you will be fine if you wait for this storm to pass, observe what's happened and therefore create distance between yourself and the storm of thoughts and feelings, mentally note what happened that got you flooded, and mentally note what happens to you in this state, including the thoughts that took shape in your mind and the sensations that moved through your body.
- Reconvene as agreed.
- Confirm that the flooding has passed and you both are able to proceed. If not, extend the time-out timeframe and reconfirm where to reconvene.

- Discuss what got you flooded and how this can be prevented—remember you both want this discussion to be successful, so help each other to remain contained.
- Agree the topic for discussion and proceed. Stay ‘on topic.’ Don’t bring in side issues or unrelated past events. If these are genuine concerns, note them down for discussion at another time.

FLOODING QUESTIONS: FIGHT FLOODING AS A TEAM

During the time-out period, ask yourself some of the questions below so that you can talk about them and their implications when you reconvene.

1. What typically happens just before you start to feel flooded?
2. What particular words, actions, or topics seem to ‘trigger’ you to flood?
3. What would allow you to stay in an intense conversation without flooding?
4. How are upsetting topics introduced into conversations?
5. Do either of you bring up these subjects in a harsh way?
6. Are there ways that either of you could introduce these subjects so that you might stay calmer?
7. Do either of you tend to “store up” problems or try to deal with them all at once?
8. Can you do a better job of handling your problems one at a time?
9. What can you do to soothe yourself when you feel irritable, scared, or angry?
10. What can you do to soothe each other?
11. What signals can you develop for when either of you feels flooded?
12. How can you make sure you get back to the problem later on?
13. How can you conclude a discussion of a currently unresolved issue with a sense of reaching a temporary solution? What would this take from you? What would it take from your partner?

REMEMBER:

- Time-out requests must be genuine and real. Don’t ask for them simply to avoid a difficult conversation.
- Time-out requests must be honoured. Don’t deny a request just because you are champing at the bit to have your say. If either of you is flooded, having your say at this point will be pointless and could do even more harm.

Time-outs take practice, patience, determination, and a willingness to compromise. If you don’t see change happening overnight, don’t be discouraged. Think ‘small steps.’ Learning to pre-empt and manage flooding is difficult, but if you keep working on it together, you will be very happy with the results! Trusting your partner to be there for you when you are both fraying at the edges can change your entire relationship dynamic. If you can stop at the first smell of smoke, you can avoid having to put out a fire. You can keep each other safe.

Adapted from www.gottmanblog.com.