

TIME-OUTS: They're Not Just For Kids!

The time-out has been a staple of effective parenting for a long time. When kids are acting “out of control” or reacting in ways that are not helpful to them or their parents, it has been a very helpful tool to separate them from the situation, allow them to think about what has been going on, and then come back to go through what happened in a more productive fashion. It has been used successfully for decades with children, but unfortunately, we as adults all too often have forgotten to use it for ourselves when we need to get away from a difficult or potentially volatile and explosive situation.

In fact, taking a respectful time-out, for adults, is a cornerstone in learning to handle explosive, demeaning, or punishing anger more effectively when you feel yourself escalating. It allows you to temporarily get away from a situation where you are potentially escalating to hostile and punishing behavior and to “take a break” to calm yourself in order to avoid doing or saying something that will be hurtful and unproductive to you and others. The time-out strategy is not a magic “cure-all” when it comes to handling anger, but it can be an important first step in learning to do something different when there is the potential for a destructive and volatile escalation. The time-out strategy can also be used by individuals who are feeling “stressed,” anxious, or overwhelmed in any particular situation.

If you think about it, a time-out in human relationships is not all that different from taking a time-out in a basketball game. The basketball coach and his or her players have a game plan and specific plays and strategies that work well for them as a team. When the other team is “running up points” and the game is getting “out of control,” what does the coach do? He or she calls a time-out and pulls the team away from the game temporarily into a huddle to help the players get back to the plays they run best and to the game plan that they have for themselves as individuals and for the team as a whole.

Although the goal in relationships is not to “win the game” or “score points,” it is important to ask yourself: “*What is the ‘game plan’ I have for myself when I am relating to others, especially the people who are most important to me?*” If your “game plan” is to treat those around you in a caring and respectful manner even, and especially, when you’re feeling annoyed, tense, irritated, or frustrated, you need to do something to intervene when you find yourself slipping out of who you really want to be. Taking a time-out assists you in remembering and getting back to this “game plan” that you have for yourself. It gives you the opportunity to step back from a distressing or difficult situation to re-assert your “game plan” about who you are, who you want to be, and how you wish to behave at a particular time.

Basically, using a time-out means “taking a break” or getting away from a situation where you are becoming increasingly tense, uncomfortable, anxious, or angry. The real goals in taking a time-out are to slow down your internal process (just think about how fast things start moving when you are getting angry), to work actively at letting go of tension you are experiencing, to begin to think more clearly and realistically (and empathetically) about the other person and the situation, and to avoid “feeling out of control” which can otherwise result in your becoming disrespectful, hurtful, punishing, or emotionally, verbally, or physically abusive with those around you. Using respectful time-outs can help keep you from doing and saying things that, from past experience, you know very well that you will regret later.

As an individual, you can take a time-out whenever you need to do so. You might take a time-out from yourself. This could include taking one during an activity when you are escalating to a point where you are feeling uncomfortable with how you are reacting or when you are becoming less effective in accomplishing the task you are attempting to do (e.g. fixing something around the house, handling a computer or printer problem). As an individual, you can also take a time-out on the job, at a social gathering, in a public place, or even in the car whenever you notice yourself becoming more escalated than you want to be. You may or may not decide to let others know what you are doing in situations outside your home, depending on the sort of relationship that you have with the people who are around you at the time when you need the time-out. It is not necessary to share exactly what you are doing with people who are not especially important to you (e.g. a boss or co-workers on the job, acquaintances in a social situation), but it is critical to have a clear and respectful process related to taking time-outs with the significant people in your life (e.g. a partner, your children, close friends, and family). Below are some specific steps and ideas about how to take a time-out with the important people in your life and with others as well.

THE FOLLOWING STEPS CAN BE USEFUL IN PUTTING THE CONCEPT OF TIME-OUT INTO PRACTICE:

Step 1: For couples and with the other important people in your life, sit down (when you are both calm and before you actually first use time-outs) to talk about the time-out concept and about the guidelines you will agree to follow in using it in a respectful manner. One especially important part about the guidelines includes how you will deal with your children if you have them (especially young ones) if either one of you wants to take a time-out. It is not okay simply to abdicate your responsibilities as a parent because you need to take a time-out. Make a conscious decision beforehand about how you will address your child care as a part of the time-out process. Being respectful in discussing these guidelines is absolutely critical. Come up with realistic and practical strategies to make time-outs work effectively for you and your partner. Work hard to make sure that the time-out does not become just another weapon in your arguments that you can use against the other person (e.g. a respectful time-out is not saying something like, “*I don’t need your bullshit; I’m out of here*” or simply walking away abruptly without saying anything at all). Rather, start to see the time-out as a tool that can bring about more effective conflict resolution and help to develop real intimacy in the relationship.

Step 2: Write out and use the *Time-Out Plan* which is part of the *Individual Member Tasks* section of this workbook to determine the specific steps and guidelines you will follow in order to make this a respectful and effective tool in your life. Think about and jot down things like where you will go, what you will do while you are gone, how long you will be gone, and how you will re-enter the situation. It is helpful to share this with your partner and to encourage them to write out a plan if they are willing to do this as well.

Step 3: For couples, and with other important people, come to some sense of agreement on what you plan to say or do in order to communicate that you want a time out. For example, you might want to say *“I need to take some time,” “I need some space” “I need to get away for awhile,” “I need a break,”* or *“I need a time-out.”* You may want to use a non-verbal sign like the “T” hand signal for a time-out in sports. Remember that communicating the need for a time-out directly is an important way to show your partner respect and to begin to re-establish trust in the relationship.

Step 4: During a disagreement, conflict, or argument, be direct and straightforward in communicating your need for a time-out. Tell your partner or the other person that you are beginning to feel tense and that you need to take some time to slow down and think more clearly about what is happening between the two of you. Avoid statements like *“You’d better let me get out of here right now,” “Remember what I did the last time you wouldn’t let me leave when I was this pissed off,”* or *“I don’t know what’s going to happen if I continue to stay here right now,”* as these can easily be perceived by the other person as threats (and often, that’s how they’re intended). Learn to identify and tune into your cues and triggers that can serve to alert you when you are escalating and that a time-out is necessary (this includes lower-, middle-, and upper-level cues). It is important to respectfully communicate your desire for a time-out in order to let the other person know that you are not merely attempting to avoid the problem or the issue that has been raised in your current conflict. It is also important to be specific about approximately how long you will be gone before you re-connect with the other person or return to talk about the issue.

Step 5: Take clear responsibility for your own time-out. It is not up to someone else to tell you that you need to take a time-out when you are escalating (for many people, that would just escalate them more). Nor is it up to others to “keep you from being punishing or abusive.” Remember that the other person may not like or even agree with your decision to take the time-out and may actually react strongly with your leaving or argue with you about whether you should go away temporarily. Keep in mind that you do not need to get someone else’s “permission” or “approval” to take a time-out when you are experiencing an escalation. In the end, you need to make that decision for yourself, communicate it respectfully, and then follow through with doing it (making sure that you come back to re-connect at the end of your time-out). Not returning after previous (and disrespectful) “time-outs” (i.e. just “blowing a partner off”) may, in fact, be some of the reason that your partner may seem so resistant to allowing you to take one in the first place as part of your beginning to address your anger more effectively. In reality, using a time-out when you have the potential to be punishing or explosive is a good way to take care of yourself and to communicate respect and caring to others around you (although this may not be recognized by the other person at first, especially if you have simply “run away” from unpleasant issues and conflicts in your relationship with them in the past and refused to return to talk with them about those issues).

Step 6: Get away from the person and/or the situation. Staying in the situation and thinking to yourself, *“I’ll just let what they’re saying to me ‘roll off my back,’”* especially if the other person is being disrespectful and punishing with you, generally does not work very well (you will only seethe internally and escalate even more, potentially leading to your own disrespectful behavior, at that time or even at a later point). For couples, at a minimum, go to a previously-agreed-upon place in your residence and stay

separated. If this does not work (i.e. your partner follows you), you may actually need to leave your house or apartment. Avoid the temptation to “get in the last word” or a “parting shot” as you are walking away. Make an effort to respond respectfully to your partner even if you believe your partner is being intentionally hurtful and “provocative” to you at this point! In a work situation, leave the situation to go to the bathroom, return to your work station or office, go to a break room, or go for a short walk, if possible.

Step 7: Give yourself enough time to de-escalate, relax, and re-assert control over yourself and your emotional reactivity and defensiveness. This generally means thirty minutes to an hour for most people. When you become stressed and angry, the release of adrenaline, cortisol, and other chemicals in your body work to increase your heart rate and raise your blood pressure. Take the time that you need for these changes in your body to return to their normal state. You will get a better sense of how much time you need when you actually begin to practice taking your time-outs.

Step 8: Actively work to calm yourself both physically and emotionally after you have left the situation. Immediately after you leave, go to a “quiet space” in you mind. This involves visualizing a place you have actually been or a place you can imagine yourself being where you feel calm, peaceful, relaxed, “grounded,” and safe. This “quiet space” might be a beach on the ocean or walking in a beautiful woods. Go there in your mind at this time to start the process of de-escalating and centering yourself. Avoid continuing to brood about the perceived “wrongs” that you believe your partner has done to you. Try to think about and appreciate their perspective and what they might be experiencing and feeling about the issue. Remind yourself that you actually care about (or love) that other person (if this is the case). Catch your negative self-talk and, instead, use positive self-talk to try to look at the situation in a different and more helpful way. Slow down your breathing and take deeper breaths. Go for a walk or a bike ride. Contact a friend who can be supportive and calming (not someone who's simply going to “bash” the person you’re already angry with). Use a combination of strategies to help you de-escalate. It is not recommended that you drive a vehicle during a time-out since you may escalate further as a result of other drivers’ behavior and since your vehicle can become a lethal weapon (for you and others) when you are feeling explosive already (although you can certainly drive to a destination (e.g. a coffee shop or restaurant) to work at calming yourself down. Nor is it recommended that you use alcohol or other mood-altering chemicals during a time-out as these can contribute to a more serious escalation and make the problem even worse.

Step 9: For couples especially, a vital part of the time-out process is making a clear commitment to return to discuss the issue and then actually following through with this commitment on a consistent basis. This is especially important if you have not been willing to return to conflicts or disagreements in the past. Actually returning to re-connect serves as a means to begin to address your relationship issues, to talk about your feelings with one another as they come up, to learn to resolve conflict in your relationship together, and to build respect, trust, and safety back into your relationship. Otherwise, the time-out strategy can become just another hurtful “weapon” and a way to avoid and escape from the things you and your partner really need to address and discuss. As part of the process of returning, it is

also important to ask clearly and directly if your partner is ready to talk once again (he or she may still be angry about what has happened and may not be ready or want to re-engage at the time you approach them). If your partner is not ready at that point, then your time-out needs to continue until your partner communicates a desire to re-connect with you (you can also ask them to get back to you at this point, if they are willing to do that). This re-entry time is also an opportunity to apologize for anything you have said or done that you do not feel good about prior to actually taking the time-out. If you return to the situation and again begin to escalate, take another time-out until you are able to talk about the issue with less risk of being hurtful, punishing, or abusive.

Step 10: In order to truly integrate this skill into your life, you need to actively work at and practice the use of time-outs. Taking time-outs, if you are an angry person, does not “come naturally” and “goes against the grain” in terms of what you have done in the past and may even want to do in the present. Remember to give yourself time to make this into a positive tool in your life. Be patient with yourself as you are learning this new way of coping with your anger and your desire to punish and “get back” at the other person. Continuing to practice this strategy whenever necessary and making it an important part of how you want to behave can be an enormous step in truly intervening in your destructive attitudes and behaviors and in promoting trust, respect, safety, and intimacy in your relationships with your partner and others. If, at any time, you are feeling unsure about whether you should take a time-out on a particular occasion, keep the following phrase in mind:

“WHEN IN DOUBT, TAKE THE TIME-OUT!”

SOME QUESTIONS RELATED TO THIS ARTICLE TO THINK ABOUT FOR YOURSELF:

- 1) What are the most important anger cues or triggers which you need to attend to that indicate your need to take a time-out in a potentially explosive situation?
- 2) How will you communicate to your partner that you need a time-out? This can be verbal or non-verbal but needs to be respectful and needs to include the time when you will get back to the other person.
- 3) What excuses will you use (or have you used in the past) to avoid taking respectful time-outs in the past?
- 4) What positive self-talk or thoughts can you use in the future to promote your use of respectful time-outs?