

Time Outs

Introduction:

“We always hurt the ones we love,” is not just a clever song title. In nearly every relationship where we have substantial intimacy the tension can rise around a conflict to such a point that we say things that hurt the other when what the other has said or done hurts us. We fight.

When we are at our best we regret these words and actions and may even apologize. But then we do it again.

Every time we get into a fight we harm not only the other but the relationship itself. And while we are fighting we are not only doing harm, we are reducing the opportunities for healing. For us to create healing in the relationship we have to first be able to stop fighting.

A Time Out is an agreement to stop the interaction whenever either party believes it is or is about to become a fight. Each party takes a break and connects to themselves such that each knows what he or she needs and they then come back together to talk about what happened and to move forward to create what they both need. A Time Out isn't an ending but a pause in the conversation.

Audience:

This topic is especially relevant to those who find themselves getting into repetitive fights in significant relationships.

A *significant relationship* is one in which we spend a significant amount of time with the other [as perhaps in a workplace], or we have strong feelings about the other whether positive or negative or both, or the other is someone whose choices have a big impact on us. So while this certainly includes someone with whom we

have a primary intimate relationship, other kinds of relationships are also significant and are contexts in which we may want to take a Time Out.

A *fight* is a reaction to stress or conflict by using tactics that cause the other feel as though we are trying to make them lose. When we feel as though the other is trying to make us lose, we typically react by trying to make them lose. This is not limited to physical or verbal aggression. Indeed, one common strategy in fights is to “give someone the silent treatment.”

Outcome:

While the ultimate goal is to not fight at all, the more immediate outcome of using this approach is that we become more aware of the fights and of the futility of trying to address our conflicts in that manner. We catch ourselves and suspend trying to address the conflict until we are able to do so from a place of greater emotional equanimity. This greatly increases the chance that we will genuinely create what we need.

Ideally we are able to come to an agreement with the person with whom we are fighting

- that such fights are harmful and
- that we would do better to avoid them and
- instead develop a mutual process by which we can actually create what we both need.

We do this by creating a ***Shared Time Out***.

Sadly, this is not always possible. The other may not be willing or able to stop generating and fueling the fights. When they don't participate with us, we are left with the more difficult option of creating a ***Unilateral Time Out***. While this is difficult to do it is better than fighting and will make a powerful statement that fighting doesn't resolve conflict.

Rationale:

We tend to avoid addressing conflict because we are afraid there is nothing we can do to resolve it. We have this fear because what we are doing to address it isn't working. It doesn't create what we need. This is largely because what we have been taught to do to address conflict doesn't work.

[If you want to know more about the ***Four Things We All Do that Don't Work***, follow the links at the end of this booklet.]

The practice of taking a time out addresses the problem of fighting... of making the other lose. As long as we are doing what doesn't work, and making the other person lose never creates the qualities we need, we are spending our efforts on something that actually makes things worse. The first best thing to do is to stop creating the problem

Process:

Here are the steps you need to take to construct, follow, and repair a Time Out

Pre-qualifying:

1. Is there agreement that you fight?
2. Is there agreement that it is destructive and that no one wins?
3. Is there agreement that you want to work together to find another way to deal with the fighting?

Address each of these separately in this order. If you are not in agreement or can't even talk about the fights, then you will not be able to do a ***Shared Time Out*** and should skip to the section on how to take a ***Unilateral Time Out***.

Anticipate the Fights:

Each make a list of the things you fight about and when the fights happen. Try to be as specific as you can about what you notice about the pattern of the fights. Note that it is highly unlikely that you will have the same list. When you do have the same items on your list that is a good sign because at least about that you are

on the same page, but it is not necessary or even to be expected that you will have agreement about your disagreements.

Create a specific plan for what you will do when a fight starts:

This will have to be a plan that is unique to you. No two couples will have identical plans. Indeed, you may need a different plan for different circumstances as one for *fights in the car* and another for *fights in the kitchen*. But while each will be custom made, there are certain features that each plan should have.

How do you call a Time Out and who gets to call it?

Agree to how you will know that the other is calling a Time Out. This can be a simple, "I want us to take a Time Out now," or it could be a special word or gesture. Sometimes the fight is arising in the presence of others and so some code must be in place to let your partner know that you want a time out without broadcasting that wish to everyone.

The Time Out is a pause, not an end to the discussion. It is very important that you clarify with each other when the Time Out starts when and where it will end. Each suspends the conversation with a commitment to return to it as a specific time and place.

It is important that each of you has the right to call a Time Out. This is a powerful tool and should be available to both of you. That being said, in most relationships one person is more likely to call the Time Out than is the other. Be sure to watch for how this happens for you. If you are going to end up on the same page it is important to start with balance.

What do you each do during the Time Out?

Be very specific about where you will go with your bodies and where you will go with your minds. You should be in separate physical spaces if possible, but even if you are riding in the same car you can be in separate mental and emotional space. What you should be doing is getting ready to come back together to address the

issue that started the fight. The Time Out is to avoid the fight, not to avoid the conflict or the issue that brings it up.

You may want to [check out this guide](#) to making a durable agreement as a framework for how to address the issue when you end the Time Out. In short you need to prepare by being sure that you can state:

1. What was happening when the Time Out was called? What did you see going on? Try to frame this such that the other would agree that your description was accurate.
2. What emotions, sensations, thoughts and memories came up for you when this happened? What does it mean to you when this happens?
3. Try to find words to express this such that the other will likely understand what you are trying to say.
4. See what may make it unsafe for you to tell the other what came up for you. Identify what might have to happen for you to feel safe.

How will you know when to get back together to address the issue?

A part of the plan will be to figure out how long it will take before each of you is ready to come back to the conversation. Again, this will have to be flexible. It may be that you can talk in 5 minutes or 15 minutes but it might have to wait until “tonight after the kids are in bed.” But it is essential that each know that this conversation is not over, just waiting until it can be addressed productively.

How will you address the issue when you get back together?

And finally, the plan has to lay out what you will do to address the issue when you end the Time Out. Some possible guidelines are in the materials for creating a durable agreement. You may want to decide who talks first. In general it is a good idea to allow the person who has the biggest feelings to go first or maybe you want to say that the person who calls the Time Out gets to go first. The most important thing is that you have a plan and it is really clear what you will each do.

Do a “Fire Drill:”

Just as we did fire drills and tornado drills back in school, you should walk through what you are going to do when there is no fire. It is really hard to do new things and especially hard when we are under stress. If you can't take a Time Out when there is no issue, you won't be able to take one when you are under fire.

Practice at the slightest opportunity:

Some folks feel as though they have failed if they have to take a Time Out. Let me suggest that you flip that around. The sooner into a potential fight you can call a Time Out the bigger the success. For one thing you are not causing harm and for another you are recognizing that this is an issue that requires great clarity and so you are each preparing for it.

Evaluate the process and revise it:

The Time Out will evolve over time, or at least it will if you keep it alive. Keep making alterations in the agreement to make each one better than the last. You may get to the point where you can take 30 second Time Outs.

Stumbling Blocks:

Here are some common circumstances that trip us up making the “Time Out” feel unsafe or unsuccessful.

Not calling for a “Time Out” soon enough

If we don't catch it soon enough the fight can be in full hurricane mode before we know it. When that happens we have such high feelings and so much damage to repair that we may just throw in the towel and join in the fight. The trick is to learn to catch it early on.

As I said above, it is important to see a Time Out as a success not a failure. I am a success when I can see it coming and call it early. Sometimes our partner may criticize us saying, “That was no big deal. We don't need a Time Out.” In that case,

use as the issue in talking about the relationship the event which is the statement, “We don’t need no stinkin’ Time Out,”.

Either person not honoring a “Time Out” when the other calls it

There are a couple of reasons that partners don’t honor a Time Out when the other calls it.

- **Emotional overwhelm:** The feelings get so big so fast that the Time Out doesn’t douse the fire. In this case use the Anger Workout to get connected to the feelings so they don’t have the power to hijack you.
- **Lack of trust that they will get back to the issue:** If this is important and we have to deal with it now and the other wants to wait then I may not be willing to take a break. Renegotiate how soon we will deal with the issue and practice more often with smaller issues.
- **Sense that the Time Out is being used as a tactic to dominate:** make the fact that you are feeling dominated the issue that you address when the Time Out comes to an end. The issues that get addressed when you get back together don’t have to be limited to the issue that triggered the fight. You can address anything that comes up, including the process of the Time Out itself.

Falling right back into the same fight over and over

All of the issues above could be a factor in why you can’t get out of the loop. But perhaps you are both just too close to the issue and you need someone to act as an objective third party. This would be a good time to find a therapist who can watch what happens and help you find a solution.

Unilateral Time Outs

This process of course works best when each party to the fight agrees to participate in the Time Out, but we may be unable to negotiate a Time Out with them. We may be able to just avoid the person with whom we are often fighting,

but when we have a significant relationship with someone who just keeps starting fights, we may have to do the work by ourselves for ourselves.

Start by figuring out where the breakdown occurs. Is it that you can't talk about any aspect of the relationship because to do so will start a fight, and therefore you can't talk about taking a Time Out? Or have you been able to plan what a Time Out would look like and then can't actually take one? Where is the process not working? It may be that if you both focus on that place you can fix it.

In the meantime, do your own work. Notice the pattern of the fights and anticipate them. Notice when it becomes clear to you that you are heading into a fight and let the other know that you are taking a break and that you will come back to the topic at a specific time and place and invite them to join you. Then go into your own space and figure out just what is going on with you and what you might say to communicate that. In short, do all the things you would do in a Shared Time Out but just do your half of it.

This may be enough to shift the relationship toward better awareness and begin to calm the storm. Or you may need more support for change. A good place to start is with the class called JustConflict: Basic at learn.JustConflict.com.

Links referenced in this document.

Four things that don't work to resolve conflict: a video on YouTube at

<https://youtu.be/H2MM07E7zD0>

Making a durable agreement: text and pdf link at

<http://www.creativeconflictresolution.org/jc/maps-1/conflict-resolution-meeting.html>

Getting to be friends with your passions: Taking an Anger Workout: text and pdf at

<http://www.creativeconflictresolution.org/jc/maps-1/2-anger-workout.html>

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