

How to De-Escalate When You Can't De-Escalate

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Sometimes, attempting to change old communication patterns is not as simple as replacing unhealthy fight tactics with a healthier problem-solving model. You might find it challenging to halt those old dirty fight tactics. When taking a "time-out" feels out of reach, you're likely driven by a compulsion to keep going – perhaps to ensure you're understood.

Compulsion means feeling an overwhelming urge to do something, even when you know it's destructive. Continuing to communicate despite clear evidence that it's making things worse is a sign of an escalating argument. You need to take a step back or employ other de-escalation techniques to de-escalate. When a time-out seems impossible, that's the exact right tool for the moment.

Sometimes, to even consider taking a time-out, slowing down the process is essential for interrupting the momentum of the argument. While it might feel instinctual to go straight to well-rehearsed communication tactics, remember that these are learned behaviors and can be unlearned. Either partner can half the cycle of escalating emotional statements leading to a more hostile or emotional response from the other.

When you feel compelled to attack, defend, blame, or justify your next communication move, pause and take control of your response. It's neither automatic nor the other person's fault. You have control over your behavior, just as the other person does over theirs.

Slow down if you find yourself compelled to employ the same old dirty fight tactics from the past. You don't have to express every feeling or thought to the other person. If you're frequently arguing, you're probably not effectively communicating your feelings to your significant other.

So, stop. Ask yourself: What are my goals here? Some common goals for couples trying to break destructive cycles include:

- I want to save my marriage.
- I want to be happy in my marriage.
- I want to feel loved, wanted, cherished, and understood.
- I want to spend more time enjoying each other than in conflict.

Make a list meaningful to you. Memorize it. Write it down. Post it where you'll see it often. In the heat of an argument, or even as it's escalating, remind yourself of your goals. Then, ask yourself, "Will what I'm going to say help achieve my goal?" If it won't, refrain from saying it. The world won't end if you don't utter that statement again. Keep slowing it down. Put it in slow motion.

Try time-out again and let your partner know you'll return to finish the discussion once you've both calmed down. Then, remove yourself. If you feel compelled to say hurtful things, you need a time-out regardless of what your partner says. A time-out helps you slow down, regain emotional control, and consider what you want to communicate and how to do it effectively. While on a time-out, reflect on what you're really arguing about.

Couples often argue on different levels and never resolve issues. Your partner might be discussing the logistics of chores while you see it as a relationship issue. Consider what's truly at stake in the conversation and look for signs you might need to get on the same page.

Identify your feelings. Take responsibility for them? Ask yourself honestly, "Can I effectively communicate to my partner what I feel, what I want, and what I am willing to do to achieve my goals right now?" If the answer is "no, not yet," hold off. Spend more time reflecting on the argument, what you're trying to communicate, and how to work toward your goals while expressing your needs. If your goals and communication of your needs seem contradictory, you're not ready to resume the conversation.

Many couples find breaking out of old, destructive communication cycles challenging without the help of a good marriage counselor. A counselor

can coach them through developing new skills, identify the real issues behind the arguments, and help restore positive feelings toward each other.

Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published on this in 2011. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.



*After identifying strategies for de-escalating heated arguments, a few more well-placed Brief Lessons may be in order. **Communication 101** starts with the basics of "I" messages, which lays the groundwork for healthier dialogue. With **Fair Fight Tactics**, we'll uncover specific techniques to resolve conflicts respectfully and constructively. Couples can resolve disagreements without resorting to harmful patterns by learning to communicate while maintaining mutual respect. We continue to hone communication and relationship skills by establishing routine **Couples Feelings Meetings**, which provide a structured, dedicated approach to expressing emotions openly, fostering deeper connections and mutual support. These Brief Lessons offer invaluable tools for promoting understanding, empathy, and harmony within our relationships. See WWW.PEGGYFERGUSON.COM/MYSTORE for more information.*