



The 10 *New Rules* of Time Out

1. Use the time out tool as a circuit breaker.

A time out is a rip stop: it is the cord pulled to stop a runaway train; it's a break, the thing used to HALT an interaction that either has crossed over into, or is quickly crossing into, haywire. Time outs have one job and one job only- to abruptly stop a psychologically violent or unconstructive interaction between you and your partner.

2. Take your time out from the "I."

Calling for a time out has everything to do with the person calling the time out and NOTHING to do with the other person in the interaction. Calling a time out means that we don't like how we are feeling and/or what we are doing or about to do or say. It also means that we are saying to the other person that, regardless of their sense of the problem or perception of the interaction, "I need a time out so I'm taking one".

3. Take distance responsibly.

Time outs are a form of distance taking, and like all forms of distance taking, there are two ways to do it- provocatively or responsibly. Responsible distance taking has two key pieces that make it *responsible*: 1.) an explanation and 2.) a promise to return: e.g. "This is why I'm taking distance, and this is when I intend to come back". Provocative distance taking has neither of these key pieces- in provocative distance taking the person takes distance without any explanation or addressing a partner's worries about the person who is doing the "leaving". Additionally, provocative distance taking can also look like ineffective distance taking as the person taking provocative distance may get chased, verbally, emotionally, or physically.

4. Use the phrase "time out" or the gesture (the "T" sign) as an abbreviation.

There are times when if we open our mouths to speak, demons will fly out. We may not be able to control that, so instead of indulging the impulse to say or do disrespectful, unkind, or verbally violent things, use a hand gesture (the "T" sign) instead of trying to speak, or simply say "time out". While we may not be able to conjure kind words in the moment, we do have control over our ability to turn heel and leave. Having a pre-agreed on meaning: "Honey, no matter how you may be feeling or assessing things, I don't like how I'm feeling, and I don't trust what I'm about to do. So, I'm taking some time to regain my composure and I will be back to you when I'm more grounded."

5. Don't let yourself get stopped.

Time outs are unilateral. They are an effort to avoid immature words or actions. Unlike virtually every other communication tool for partners to use, time outs are a non-negotiable declaration- "I'm leaving (and will be back)." Using this tool is not asking permission, when called, we must not allow ourselves to be stopped. Don't call a time out and continue talking or staying in the room. Leave the room and go into another- for example a bedroom- and close the door (gently). If your partner won't leave you alone, leave the house- with or without the kids- and go down the block for a cup of coffee or take a walk to clear your head. If you are physically blocked, you may need to consider calling a friend or, in very extreme cases, the police- regardless, asserting your right to take space for the good of the relationship is essential.

6. Use check-ins at prescribed intervals.

Responsible distance taking is not a punishment or retaliation for a “misbehaving” partner, but rather a relationally responsible move to calm things down; as such, it’s crucial to check in with the person from whom you’ve taken distance at regular intervals. Intervals are as prescribed: 20 minutes (minimum), 1 hour, 3 hours, a half day, a whole day, and overnight (max). Check-ins can be done in person, though a text or call is often most effective- these are to gauge the temperature of the relationship- are you ready to return? Is your partner ready for you to come back? Respecting each persons’ limits is a crucial component of the time out tool.

7. Remember the goal.

Time outs are about one thing- stopping emotionally immature, violent, or destructive behavior in its tracks. Stopping such behavior is a goal that supersedes all others in any given moment in intimate relationship. Improved communication, more emotional presence or sharing, or increased negotiation are all important, but none of these things will happen until we are able to successfully stop ourselves from indulging our impulse to act out with nasty words or deeds. Whatever the original upset, conflict, or point that was trying to be made, noting matters more than stopping these destructive interactions- so keep the priorities straight- nothing takes precedence over a time out.

8. Return in good faith.

Time outs are ended when both/all parties in the original interaction are grounded enough in their adult selves to have a positive interaction again; the only person who can really know if they are ready to return is the person themselves (i.e., partners cannot accurately evaluate this in each other, so don’t try). So! Being ready means no longer holding the person in contempt, having a chip on your shoulder, or being mired in shame. Come back when you know, in yourself, that peace is possible on your side of the street.

9. Use a 24-hour moratorium on the original content (and other high conflict topics)

A common mistake after the use of time out is trying to re-engage or “process” the original content of the conflict and/or the reasons the interaction went off the rails. This is a bad idea that will likely only restart the conflict. Instead, make a cup of tea, or give each other a hug. Wait 24 hours or schedule something at an agreed upon time later in the week before you tackle the original subject again.

10. Know when, where, and how to get help (and use it).

If there is a topic, or topics (e.g., kids, sex, money) that continually trigger nasty interactions, take that as a signal that some outside help and support are likely needed to have a more constructive conversation around these tricky subjects. A faith leader, financial planner, or mental health professional are all potential resources for help; if there are continual heated, unhelpful interactions around many subjects in the relationship, it may be that ongoing relational work is called for- acknowledging this reality is a sign of caring for your relationship, your partner, and yourself, not necessarily a sign of a bad relationship.