

How to Use Timeouts Effectively

Taking a Needed Break, Pushing the Pause Button, Choosing a Strategic Retreat

Purpose: Stop what you are doing for a designated time, so you can cultivate mindfulness, regulate emotions, and prepare to effectively engage this person.

*This is not to escape or avoid an issue, a person or an unpleasant emotion.

How to Take an Effective Timeout in 3 Steps?

- **Step 1.** Recognize the escalating tension or arousal of negative emotion. Mindfully notice if you are heading into the red zone of emotion dysregulation. Propose to take a timeout from the interaction to reduce the intensity of agitation to a more workable level. If the agreed time allotted for a timeout may not fit, propose an alternative for when you can discuss the issue further.
- **Step 2.** Remain apart for the designated amount of time. Use the time to de-escalate, calm and regulate your emotions; cultivate mindfulness; take responsibility for your ineffective behavior and prepare to effectively engage your loved one. Breathe 3x. Clarify what your primary emotion is. Consider how you can express this directly and effectively. Consider how you can validate your partner.
- **Step 3.** Return at the agreed time. If the other person or you need additional time, negotiate this or reschedule a time to return to the conversation. Otherwise, begin by stating what you wish to validate in your partner's experience and what of your behavior you are willing to change to be more effective. In turn, each of you actively listen to what your partner expresses and again respond in validating ways.

A basketball analogy: 3 steps for an effective timeout. (*DBT skills in italics*)

When UNC and Duke engage in their classic basketball rivalry, Coach Williams and Coach K will *mindfully* observe their players during the game. At **Step 1**, when either team is not *effectively* executing, a coach can call a 75 or 30 second timeout. Each team has agreed to this as part of the rules of the game. Note: Both agree to temporarily stop play and one team does not continue play without the other. Neither team is quitting or avoiding playing the game.

Step 2. Each team gathers or "huddles" with their coach who describes the *problem (analysis)* and suggests *solutions* to get in synch with the flow of the game. The coaches don't spend this time berating the other team, rather the focus is on *what works*. The players become more focused (*one-mindful*) and calmer (*soothing distressed emotion mind*). They leave the huddle more organized to *effectively participate* based on their game plan and *goals (value = play to the best of their ability)*.

Step 3. At the agreed time, each team returns to the court to resume the game. The teams come back. While they may choose to take another timeout, they do not hop on the bus and leave. The teams return with a renewed effort to *effectively* perform, rather than to prove the other team is somehow wrong. Each team aims to do *what works*.

Let's practice! Some fine-tuning questions to enhance effectiveness...

1. **Step 1.** What are my signals or cues (body sensations, thoughts, emotions, urges) that I/we are becoming emotionally dysregulated or heading into the red zone?
2. What is our agreed way of communicating the need for a timeout? This could be a non-verbal signal or a verbal phrase.
3. What is our default period of time allotted for a timeout? Perhaps 5, 20, 60 minutes, or whatever works.
4. What is our agreement about completing a thought or communication when our partner signals a timeout?
5. Where do I need to go? What are our agreements about where we go or what we talk about (if anything) during the timeout period?
6. **Step 2.** What is the primary emotion that I am experiencing? What helps me to self soothe and reduce the intensity of my emotion? What helps me shift from emotion mind to more balanced, wise mind?
7. What helps me to recall my values and goals? What are more effective actions I can take this time when I return?
8. What are 3 ways I can validate my partner's experience, emotions, thinking, or needs?
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
9. What is one self-validation (that is non-judgmental) that I can give myself?
10. What else do I need to do before I can return to my partner and effectively participate?

The Big Question: What am I willing to change (or accept) to be more effective in this situation?
11. **Step 3.** Am I refocused on my goals and plan? Have I sufficiently soothed my emotional intensity?

If not, do I need more time, perhaps another timeout or do I want to propose we reschedule?
12. What aspects of my partner's experience do I want to validate?

Which of my behaviors will I tell her/him that I am willing to do differently to be more effective?
13. What helps me to stay on track with my goals as we reengage the conversation? What do I need to be mindful of as I nonjudgmentally listen to my partner and express myself to her/him?