

TIME-OUTS: A CIRCUIT-BREAKER adapted from [Dr. Terry Real](#) by [Vivian Baruch](#), M. Couns.

RULE: THE BEST DEFENSE AGAINST VERBAL, PHYSICAL or EMOTIONAL ABUSE IS A RESPONSIBLE TIME-OUT.

Choose a calm time to make a contract with your partner about responsible time-outs. Let them know that there are times when **your** anger, anxiety or fear level will rise & **you** will need to leave the situation to calm down. Never tell them to take a timeout! Make sure you contract a **specific length of time** when **you will check back in** with them. Learning to take a responsible time-out is about preventing any abuse/harm in & to the relationship.

Some forms that abuse/harm can take are: criticism, contempt, withdrawal (without taking a responsible time-out), stone-walling, being right, controlling your partner, unbridled self-expression (constant complaining), retaliation (in small and big ways) & threatening to end the relationship,

When either partner calls a time-out by saying the words "time-out," by using the "T" hand signal, or by using any agreed-upon sign - **the interaction comes to an immediate stop**. The spoken or gestured signal is understood by both partners to be an abbreviation of the following words:

"Dear partner, for whatever reason, right or wrong, **I'm** about to lose it. If I stay here and keep this up with you **I'll** probably do or say something stupid that I know I'll regret. To prevent that, **I'm** taking a break to get a grip on myself and calm clown. **I'll check back in** using our agreed time-frame."

Notice that the time-out is always taken from an "I" position, never from a "you" position. It's a very bad idea to tell your partner that they need a time-out. **You** take it. If you say it's **your issue**, the big **advantage is that no one can argue with you about it**. Telling your partner that they need a time-out guarantees an argument. The other advantage is that cooperation from your partner is not necessary. Once the contract has been agreed to in advance, either partner has the right to leave the interaction whenever they choose and **should not be stopped**.

HOW MUCH TIME SHOULD YOU TAKE?

The default interval for a time-out is twenty minutes. You can specify something else, but if no time is specified, twenty minutes is when you need to check back in. Checking in can be either in person or by phone/text. If necessary, tell your partner that you need more time & how long. With each extension, the time-out interval gets longer. The recommended length between check-ins is:

- Twenty minutes
- One or two hours
- Half a day
- A whole day
- Overnight

Most people won't need that much time. But some will.

RULE: WHEN RECONNECTING AFTER A TIME-OUT, SET A SPECIFIC TIME TO TALK ABOUT THE SUBJECT THAT TRIGGERED THE INITIAL FIGHT. HAVE A REPAIR CONVERSATION.

After the time-out is over, whether it's twenty minutes or an entire day, when you're back into contact with

each other set 10-15 minutes aside to discuss the topic that started **you** off. If you need to call a time-out every time a particular subject is discussed, this indicates that **for now at least you and your partner are unable to navigate that particular topic** on your own. Either let go of the issue altogether or [get some help](#) with it. Obviously the frequent need to call a time-out whenever any serious topic gets broached also indicates you need to seek help.

COMMIT TO A LIFE WITHOUT ABUSE

Time-outs represent a **contract** in which you **both agree in advance** that your commitment to end physical and/or psychological abuse in your relationship is unflinching, and that **someone's right to leave a potentially abusive confrontation is unquestioned**. If you are a relationship grown-up, you know that no problem will ever get solved until both of you put blame & retaliation aside. **Immediate safety** takes precedence over retaliation in your relationship. Whatever the topic, if either or both of you becomes abusive, drop it. If there are kids, leave them or take them with you. Go to another part of the house and close the door. If your partner dishonors your contract and refuses to leave you alone, get out of the house. And if your partner physically bars you from leaving, then **call 000 & say "It's a mental health issue"**. Don't say it's domestic violence because they won't come as quickly. I mean that! Very few people need to experience calling the police more than once before they get the message that you're serious. You must understand: **Nothing short of a life-or-death emergency is more important than ending abusive behavior between you.**

There is no excuse for abuse. Period.

The good news is that, by using just this one tool, responsible time-outs, you can stop all abusive behaviors right now, today and from this day forward.

To take successful responsible time-outs, you need to **recognize your own anger or fear cues**, such as:

1. heart thumping or dry mouth.
2. trembling, shaking or freezing.
3. tension in your neck, chest, stomach, or other parts of your body.
4. tight jaw or fists.
5. feeling like your head is going to explode – seeing red.
6. feeling sure that you are right – feeling self-righteous.
7. feeling hurt, scared intimidated, powerless.

When taking a "time-out", ALWAYS self-soothe:

Compile a list of up to 20 things you can do to calm down & [self-soothe](#) when you're distressed. It must include what you can do whether you're inside or outside, it's daytime or nighttime, you're alone or with others. E.g. do some [soft belly breathing](#), make a cup of tea, have a bath/shower, go for a walk, do push-ups, listen to soothing music, play a video game, read a book, do a cross word puzzle etc. Keep this list in your phone, so it's with you always. [This link](#) will give you more ideas for emotion regulation.

1. Remind yourself that **your goal is to calm down** when you take a responsible time-out.
2. Read these instructions during your time-out. Keep them in your wallet/phone at all times.
3. Keep a copy of your calming down/self-soothing list with you & **do** one thing listed for 20 minutes or as long as you need to. Tell your partner if you need more time.
4. Take responsibility for keeping yourself (& any kids) safe & don't focus on your partner.