



Time out

By Douglas Eames, Ph.D. & Doug Berger, M.D., Ph.D. | [ASK THE EXPERT QUESTION](#)



I know it is common for couples to have disagreements, but it seems that with my husband and I, we often escalate the conversation into a full-on shouting match. In the end, we are both feeling hurt and exhausted. Do you have any advice on how to avoid this situation? *Stephanie*

These situations are usually the result of a power struggle and tenacious stubbornness on the part of the parties to not want to be controlled by the partner or admit fault. Thus, they use this as a defense with their partner that may also come out in other situations.

During the discussion, both sides do not want to back down or give up, so the situation continues to escalate, except instead of a stalemate where neither side wins, it goes to the point where both ultimately lose. The main treatment for this would be insight-oriented psychotherapy to understand where one's power struggle issues come from, and to develop more adaptive defenses besides an all-out fight each time.

Another issue to look at would be the possibility that the irritability occurs due to an underlying mood disorder. Irritability can be a symptom of depression or anxiety, so it would be a good idea to rule these out. However, it is difficult to determine this with only the information you have



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A behavioral intervention that is often effective would be to use a “time out” to diffuse the situation and cool off.

The steps for a time out should be agreed to by both partners in advance so that there is a clear understanding of what will happen when one is called. This is necessary so that the person who does not call the time out is not left feeling abandoned or further frustrated when the other partner discontinues communication.

Pick a time to discuss the time out process with your partner when you are not at conflict. You should both agree on a word or phrase that has some significance to you, preferably humorous, to be used at the initiation of the time out. The time out can then be called when one senses that they themselves are unreasonably escalating the situation, or if they think their partner is.

One person calls a time out by saying the agreed-upon word or phrase.

The other person acknowledges the need for the time out.

For a cooling off period of 20-90 minutes, there is no communication (verbal or electronic), and preferably there is a physical separation.

After 20-90 minutes have passed, the person who called the Time Out reinitiates communication with their partner to determine if they will continue to discuss the issue then, or decide to do so at a future time.

In the case of severe fighting, the couple might agree ahead of time that one partner would stay out in a hotel for the night, but that they would always come back home the next day. This provides a negative reinforcement to the remaining partner to not fight intensely because of loss of the partner for the night and the cost of the hotel.

These are diffusing techniques that may help couples to cool off enough to prevent a shouting match, and to begin the psychotherapy work needed to actually get to the bottom of the issue. However the time out is generally a last-ditch technique and you may need to consider getting some help on learning more effective communication skills to avoid getting into such a situation in the first place. u

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[Drs. Eames and Berger of the Meguro Counseling Center in the Shibuya-Ebisu area provide mental health care for individuals, couples, and families, in both English and Japanese.](#)

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The logo for Tokyo Families Magazine, featuring the word "TOKYO" in a small, spaced-out font above the word "families" in a larger, lowercase, sans-serif font. To the right of "families" is the website address "tokyofamilies.com" in a smaller font.