



EFFECTIVE TIME OUTS

It is common when driving up a steep mountain pass to see cars on the side of the road, broken down, with steam rising out of their engines. Unfortunately for the frustrated drivers, they pushed their car's engine too hard and for too long. They probably ignored the car's internal gages, such as R.P.M. (revolutions per minute) and the heat indicator, not to mention the squealing engine's obvious plea for a rest. In most cases this kind of breakdown could have been prevented by pulling over the side of the road to cool down sooner – taking a preemptive “time out.”

Like cars on a journey, people in a conversation can also overheat, blow up and break down. This is especially likely to happen if they are engaging in Problem Talk. The atmosphere of control and all the talk about how bad the problem is tend to bring on frustration, resentment, and hostility. Most of us can tell when our mental and emotional engine is beginning to overheat, if we just listen to our internal gages. Simply pulling off the “conversation road” and giving ourselves time out to cool down, can save us from doing real damage to ourselves and to the relationships we value. Taking a time out allows us to more successfully climb the “relationship mountains” without breaking down or having our engine blow up.

CHECK YOUR GAGES

During a discussion, if either person feels as though they are getting too frustrated to stay calm and discuss the issue – the temperature is obviously rising and a time out might be needed. Your gage should also flash a warning...

- If either person engages in toxic communication such as yelling, criticizing, name calling, attacking the other person, or being defensive.
- If you are stuck on proving how bad the problem is, with one person expressing a lot of anger and the other being defensive.
- If you've moved from tackling one specific issue to many issues, (i.e. going from discussing a poor score on a test to – you messed up this assignment, you forgot to take out the trash, your room is a mess and you were over your cell phone minutes last month, etc.)
- If you go from specific issues to generalizing, (i.e. going from the poor test score to – “you are always late, you procrastinate, you are stubborn and I don't like your attitude.”)

CALL A TIME OUT

It is always better to call the time out before your engine blows. Each person must take responsibility for calling a time out when they need one by saying something like, "I'm having a hard time listening right now. I need a time out."

To call a time out, you must state it out loud, because just walking away is not calling a time out. When anyone calls time out, both individuals should stop talking and avoid the temptation of trying to "get in the last word." Either before walking away or after cooling down, it's important to state when you want to continue the conversation. This is very important, as time outs are not to be called as a way to avoid discussing difficult issues.

Remember that occasionally, a second or third time out may need to be called before you eventually resolve the issue. If a third time out is called, it is probably best to put the issue on the shelf and discuss it with a helpful third party.

The person who did not call the time out needs to realize that even though he or she may feel fine and not want a time out, continuing to pursue the conversation will only bring negative results.

DURING A TIME OUT

- Cool Off
 - Give each other some physical space. It is best not to be in the same room together or talk with each other during the time out
 - Let yourself relax and calm down as best you can. You may wish to use muscle relaxation, guided imagery, meditation, or prayer to help you accomplish this task.
 - It may help to do something physical like taking a walk, exercising, stretching or doing a routine task.
 - Avoid the urge to vent your frustration to a friend in an attempt to gain support of your perspective of the issue. This can lead to a number of different problems. If you do find it helpful to talk with a trusted friend, be sure to invite your friend to help you see what you can do to improve the situation and work toward solutions.

Remember, using alcohol and/or other mood-altering drugs to calm down or escape will not resolve your conflict or help the situation. In fact, it makes it more difficult to achieve healthy solutions.

- Avoid Silent “Problem Talk”

It is critically important to avoid preparing arguments that are characteristic of an attitude of control and a focus the problem. For one thing, this generally does not help you calm down, but instead revs up your engine’s R.P.M. (Rage Producing Mind-set) and you return to the conversation “with your guns drawn,” ready for battle.

In addition, it can be easy to recite negative thoughts in your head such as “This is so stupid,” “I’m sick and tired of putting up with this,” or “He’s such an idiot.” These thoughts only serve to maintain feelings of frustration and will actually keep you from physically and emotionally calming down.

For some people it helps to try and analyze the situation (“Why am I so upset about this?” “What is the real problem here?”). For other people, analyzing the issue only tends to get them more upset. Each person should do what they find works best for them.

- Prepare Yourself to Use “Solution Talk”

The Comparison Chart: Problem Talk versus Solution Talk (found in the Parent Library under Solution Talk: Make It Real) can serve as a helpful resource in preparing to return to the discussion. In addition, here are some other suggestions:

Work toward an attitude of openness

- Begin to think about the situation from the other person’s perspective.
- It may help you to think about what the other person is feeling. Are they feeling hurt, unimportant, rejected, and so on?
- Let go of the need to “be right” and get yourself to a point that you can “do right.”
- Regardless of your position on the issue at hand, consider whether you treated the other person in an unkind way. If so, be strong enough to return to the discussion with an apology.

Recognize points of agreement

- Try to identify “common ground” in what both of you have mentioned during the discussion.
- Build on the “common ground” you share and search for ways each of you could compromise.

Look to solutions

- Begin to think of one or two actions you might take to solve the problem.
- You may wish to make some notes about the conflict and the potential solutions you are prepared to take. Often writing things down can change the way you look at an issue.
- Take responsibility for doing your part in creating the most positive outcome for the relationship.

Remember that your time out is a chance to pause, ponder and reflect. Give your mind a chance to decompress from stress, anger and frustration. Taking a time out should put you in a position to return to the discussion with positive energy, proper perspective and a focus on important priorities.

KNOW WHEN TO RETURN

As with any conversation, finding the right time to talk is crucial. Some individuals will tend to avoid returning to discussions while others feel compelled to resolved issues right away. Dr. John Gottman's research¹ has found that most people take at least 20 minutes to physiologically calm down. He explains that when people return to a discussion without having calmed down completely, their emotions are highly contagious. As a result, if one person is angry when the conversation continues, soon both people will be angry, defeating the purpose of the time out.

Given these findings, we suggest giving yourself at least 20 minutes (preferably an hour) before trying to discuss the issue again. And remember, even if you are calm, if the other person is not, it is wise to postpone the conversation to another time.

TIME IN

When returning to the conversation, hope can be renewed if remorse is expressed for letting the previous discussion get overheated (if applicable). Similarly, apologies for unkind statements or other hurtful behaviors can help restore feelings of trust and safety.

Occasionally, one or both individuals might realize that the argument was simply immature and unnecessary. If so, it is appropriate to simply apologize for what has happened and let it go. Be sure, however, to remain open to a discussion if the other person still feels the need.

If further discussion of the issue is necessary, continue to watch your gauges for signs of overheating. And remember to do your part in applying the principles of Solution Talk. Your goal is to have an attitude of "being open" and to keep the conversation focused on the future – on finding solutions.

Sources: ¹ Gottman, J., Silver, N. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*. New York: Simon & Schuster.