

THE COUPLES CURE

Miraculous Recovery for Couples on the Brink

10 Commandments of a Time Out (by Terry Real)

1. Use time outs as a circuit breaker

A time out is a rip stop; it is the cord you pull to stop a runaway train, a brake, the thing you use to HALT an interaction that either has crossed over into or is quickly crossing over into, haywire. Time outs have one job and one job only -to stop abruptly 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 me and NOTHING to do with you. Calling for a time out means that I don't like how I am feeling, what I am doing, or about to do. Whether or not you think you have a problem with how you're behaving or how "it's" going between us is strictly your business.

3. Take distance responsibly

Time outs are obviously 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 pieces to it:

1) An explanation and 2) A promise of return. "This is why I am seeking distance, and this is when I intend on coming back." Provocative distance taking, by contrast, has neither-you just take the distance without any explanation or taking care of your partner's anxieties about your leaving. I also speak of provocative distance taking as incompetent distance taking since it tends to get you chased.

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

There are just times when, if you open your mouth to speak, demons will fly out. You may not be able to control that. What is always under your control is the ability to turn heel and leave. The phrase "time out" or the T sign as a gesture are abbreviations for the following phrase: "Honey, no matter how you may be feeling or assessing things, I don't like how I'm doing and I don't trust what I am about to do. So, I'm taking some time to regain my composure and I will be back to you when I do."

5. Don't let yourself get stopped

Time outs are unilateral. They are your last-ditch effort to avoid immature words or actions. Unlike virtually every other Couple's tool, time outs a nonnegotiable declaration - "I'm leaving." You're not asking permission and you cannot allow yourself to be stopped. Don't call a time out and stand there to keep talking! Leave. Leave the room and go into another-a bedroom for example - and close the door.

If your partner won't leave you alone, then leave the house - with or without the kids, your call. Go down the block for a cup of coffee. If your partner physically blocks you from leaving call the police, have them come to assist you. I have rarely met a couple where the police had to be called more than once.

6. Use check-ins at prescribed intervals

Since you're not using a time out to punish your partner but rather to calm things down, it is critical that you check in with your partner from time to time in order to take the emotional temperature between you.

The intervals I suggest are:

- an hour
- three hours
- a half day
- a whole day
- an overnight

Check-ins can be done in person although cooler media might be advised. You can check on by phone or even by texting.

7. Remember your goal

Time outs are about one thing - stopping in its tracks emotionally violent, immature, destructive behavior. Stopping such behavior in your relationship is a goal that supersedes all other goals. You may need to work on better communication, more sharing or negotiation, but none of that will happen until you succeed in wrestling the beast of nasty transactions to the ground. Whatever point you want to make, whatever the content of the issue, nothing matters more than ending these sorts of transactions - so keep your priorities straight - nothing takes precedence over a time out.

8. Return in good faith

When are you ready to end a time out. When you and your partner are both reseeded enough in your adult selves to have a positive interaction again. That means you too. Don't return with a grudge or a chip on your shoulder - you'll just start up again. Come back when you are truly ready to make peace.

9. Use a twenty-four-hour moratorium on triggering topics

A mistake a lot of couples make when they re-engage is to try to "process" what just happened. Bad idea. When you come back from a time out just make nice to each other. Give your partner a hug and a cup of tea. Do NOT try to sort through whatever the topic was that triggered the time out for twenty-four hours.

10. Know when to get help and use it.

If you find that a certain topic - kids, sex, money - ALWAYS triggers a nasty transaction, take that as a signal that you need some outside support to have that conversation constructively. Go to a minister or a mental health professional for help. If you find that heated, unhelpful transactions occur with enough regularity that you are frequently resorting to time-outs, take that as a signal that you and your partner need some ongoing Couple's work.