

# **How to De-escalate An Argument When You Can't De-escalate**

**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

Sometimes when you are trying to change up old communications patterns, you can't simply replace old dirty fight tactics with a healthy problem solving model because you can't stop the dirty fight tactics. When the concept of taking a "time-out" seems impossible, you are probably experiencing a compulsion to keep going—perhaps to make yourself understood. Compulsion is an overwhelming urge to do something, even if you know it is destructive. Compulsion to continue to try to communicate in the face of overwhelming evidence that everything that you are saying and doing is making things worse is a hallmark of an escalating argument. In order to de-escalate, you have to take a time out or use some other de-escalation tool. When a time-out feels impossible, it is probably the right tool at the time.

Sometimes in order to accept the possibility that you can take a time out you have to slow down the process. You can break through the momentum of history repeating itself by slowing down the whole process. It may seem like your nature to move directly into certain communication tactics, but these are learned behaviors and can be unlearned. The process of one statement leading to a more hostile or emotional response from the other, which leads to escalating emotions and hurtful responses can be stopped.

When you feel compelled to attack, defend, blame, or justify your next communicational move, you can slow it all down and take control of your next response. It is not automatic and it is not the other person's fault. You have control over your own behavior. The other person has control over his/hers.

When you feel compelled to enact the same old dirty fight tactic you have used in the past, slow it down. You do not have to communicate what you are feeling or thinking to the other person. In fact, if you are engaging in frequent arguments, it is probable that you are not doing a very good job of communicating your feelings to your significant other anyway.

So stop. Ask yourself these questions: What are my goals here? Some of the goals that couples have when they are trying to stop this cycle of destruction include the following:

I want to save my marriage.

I want to be happy in my marriage.

I want to feel loved/wanted/cherished/understood.

I want to spend more time enjoying each other than in conflict.

Make your own list. Memorize it. Write it down. Post it on the refrigerator. Write it in lipstick on the mirror. Make sure you have immediate access to your goals.

In the heat of the argument or even when it is just heating up, remind yourself of your goals. Then ask yourself, “Is what I am feeling compelled to say next helpful in achieving my goal?” If it is not helpful, do not say it. The world will not explode if you don’t make this statement one more time. You will not explode either. Nothing bad will happen if you change your response. Don’t say it. Keep slowing it down. Move it into slow motion.

Call for a time out and let him/her know that you will be getting back to them to finish the discussion when you have calmed down. Then remove yourself. If you are feeling compelled to say hateful, hurtful things you need a time out regardless of what your partner is saying. A time out allows you to regain control over your emotion, to slow it down, so that you can consider what it is that you really want to communicate, and to say it in a way that your partner can hear it.

While you are timed out, take a look at what you are really arguing about. Many times couples will argue on two different levels and never resolve issues. Your partner may be talking about logistics of who is responsible for taking out the trash and you may see taking out the trash as a relationship issue. Think about what is going on in the discussion and look for evidence that you may not be talking about the same thing(s).

Identify what you are feeling. Take responsibility for your feelings. Ask yourself (and be honest), “Can I effectively communicate to my partner what I feel, what I want, and what I am willing to do to achieve my goals at this time?” If your answer is “no, not yet”, hold off. Spend some more time thinking about what is going on in the argument, what you are trying to communicate, and how you can continue to work toward your goal while communicating what you want or need. If your goals and your communication of your wants or needs seem to be mutually exclusive, then you are still not ready to resume the conversation.

Many couples find that they cannot break out of old, destructive communication cycles without the help of a good marriage counselor, who will coach them through developing new skills, help them identify the real issues they are fighting about, and help them restore the positive feelings toward each other.

Don’t keep doing the same old things over and over again, while raising the volume. You will not be able to problem solve when the emotional level is too high. You have to bring the emotions down to a manageable level in order to effectively deal with what is bothering you. Keep practicing slowing it down and taking responsibility for your own responses. Get help to accomplish your marital happiness goals.

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