Link to TEMPO article: <https://www.drirena.com/stop-the-fight-avoid-relationship-problems/>

T (Trigger): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

E (Emotion and where you felt it in the body):\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

M (Meaning you interpreted): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

P (Protection, how did you protect yourself? What did you do? Self soothing?): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

O (organize the information for you and your partner):\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Stop the Fight: Avoid Relationship Problems and Keep Your Love Alive**

You walk in the door after work and your partner is watching TV even though there are dirty dishes overflowing in the sink. The two of you haven’t even said hello and you and your partner are already fighting. You get trapped in this cycle of arguing and withdrawal before you even realize what you’re doing. It’s possible to break this cycle and stop the fight, but first you have to slow down.

Anger and frustration can hit like lightning strikes, and sometimes the worst of them go on to light their entire surroundings on fire.

You and your partner know each other’s triggers—the things that never fail to get you to fighting. But it seems like, even though you know each other’s buttons, you can’t avoid pressing them.

These seemingly unavoidable fight cycles can trap couples for years or even lead to distancing or separation.

Let’s take a look at why we get into these negative cycles and how we can make them stop.

**You can’t stop the fight if you don’t even know why you’re fighting**

Relationship experts and hosts of the podcast Foreplay Radio Dr. Laurie Watson, a sex therapist, and George Faller, LMFT a couples therapist, weighed in on this problem in their recent episode “Stop The Fight—How To Break The Negative Cycle”(Watson & Faller)

Faller says “Emotions are fast.” You may not even know how you got there, but now you’re fighting. Something your partner does triggers an emotional response in you and you either lash out or turn away.

Of course, it’s easy to look at what your partner does , but it’s important to take a look at what kind of reaction it’s bringing up for you.

Dr. Watson and Faller have a strategy to help you slow down and take a look at what’s going on in these negative cycles. They say you can start with replaying the interaction step by step to identify four things: what triggered you, your emotions, the meaning you attributed to what happened, and your protective actions.

The strategy is known by its acronym “TEMPO.”

TEMPO teaches you and your partner to recognize triggers and name your emotions, what it’s doing to your body and your reactions, and what you need from each other.

**How to stop the fight with TEMPO**

The TEMPO sequence, designed to stop the fight cycle in your relationship, is a process you can use to slow down and identify what is going on for you, what you’re reacting to, and what you need.

Once you and your partner become practiced in this process, you can implement it individually and come together to make new choices for how you proceed in situations that would normally propel you into a negative cycle and a fight.

The following are the steps in the TEMPO sequence:

**Trigger**

First, you need to identify what triggers you. Be curious and explore what it is your partner does that you’re sensitive to. What are the specific actions or words they use that set off an inner reaction for you?

Being very specific in identifying triggers will help you work together to find other courses of action in future situations. You’re slowing down the process to figure out what happened and how the fight started.

An example of a trigger could be your wife’s sigh. The instant that little exhale escapes her lips, it sets you off.

But get more specific. Is it only when she sighs after you ask her a question? Or when she sighs while she’s working, and you see she’s bothered but she doesn’t share what’s going on with you?

Or maybe you are home with the kids and he walks in and goes straight to his office to finish working. You feel like he didn’t even look at you when he said hello and walked past.

**Emotion**

Next, you can figure out how you feel. When your emotions are triggered, your body will respond in a certain way. For instance, you feel your jaw clench, you get a sick feeling in your stomach, or tension builds in your chest. Maybe your shoulders get tight or your breath gets short.

Identify the physiological response for you at the moment you’re triggered—what’s happening in your body?

These body responses happen faster than your mind can identify and put words to your emotions. But when you’re able to identify what your body is doing, you can start to put these pieces together. You can connect what the body response means in your emotions and your mind.

Physiological signals can help you recognize when you’re feeling triggered, upset, angry, afraid, or lonely. Observing your body and reactions can also help bring you into the present of the moment, another key element to help you stop the fight.

**Meaning**

The next step in the sequence is determining how you make sense of what happened or what you tell yourself when you’re triggered.

Your wife sighs. You think, *why is my wife sighing?* And you tell yourself, *I must have done something wrong. She must be angry with me. She is disappointed in me.*

Your husband went straight to his study when he got home. You tell yourself, *I don’t matter to him, he only cares about his work. He doesn’t see me and how hard it’s been with kids at home all day long.*

Identifying the meaning you derive from the trigger is another step toward identifying the steps in your negative cycle and what sets it off.

If you don’t acknowledge and identify the response you’re having in your body and look underneath it to find the meaning, you sink into a fight or flight reaction. Your body is telling you there’s an upsetting situation, and you instinctively want to protect yourself.

**Protection**

The last step is identifying your action, what you do to protect yourself. What do you do when faced with a threat or in the presence of danger? How do you cope with unpleasant feelings?

Some people have learned to flee emotionally. You just withdraw from what’s making you feel tense or anxious. You get away from this thing that’s making your heart rate increase and your stomach tighten.

This might look like immersing yourself in work.

You have learned that going away is best way to deal with unpleasant emotions.

Others will push and push at their partner. You see the other person closing off and you keep poking and prodding to try to make a connection. Or when confronted with an issue, you turn the situation around and accuse your partner of wrongdoing.

The instinct to protect yourself in an emotional situation is entirely normal. But to stop the fight, you have to slow down, recognize your way of coping and how your actions affect your partner.

**Organizing**

When Faller and Dr. Watson talk about getting organized in the TEMPO process, they mean pausing the fast reactions that happen in the cycle of fighting with your partner and taking a slower look at what’s going on.

Stop and identify what triggered you.

Then recognize how it made you feel in your body.

Identify what you said to yourself in response to the trigger and the body reaction that created meaning.

And finally notice what you did to cope or to protect yourself.

Normally, these action-reaction steps all happen in less than second.

The negative aspect of this cycle stems from each person trying to [deal with their stress](https://www.drirena.com/why-couples-under-stress-fight/) and fear reactions and trying to protect themselves. Each person’s movements and way of coping triggers the other person and perpetuates the fight, each of you alternately pushing and retreating.

If you slow down and organize these pieces for yourself, it empowers you to make a choice about what to do in the situation.

Recognize that your partner also has all these responses in this incredibly fast sequence. After you are able to use TEMPO for yourself, you will eventually be able to also see the TEMPO process in your partner.

You will both be able to recognize your negative cycle and you’ll be able to avoid it before you get into a fight.

**An example couple learn to stop the fight cycle**

Let’s work through an example using TEMPO.

You and your partner revisit a fight: It started when you came home from work with an armload of groceries and after putting them all away, she sighed.

You felt your shoulders go stiff and your neck tighten beneath your hairline. Then you told yourself, *I did something wrong again. She’s disappointed in me and I didn’t do anything!*

In response to these feelings, you retreat to your study and immerse yourself in work. You don’t want to talk to your wife because you know that talking will lead to fighting. It will only make things worse.

Even the time it took to read this process was longer than the actual response in the moment of the fight. In the fight, the moment you heard that sigh, you were already gone.

But you need to create space between Trigger and Protection.

**One side to the story**

The first thing you can do is understand your side of the cycle.

First, you need to find your trigger–for example, when she sighs but doesn’t talk to you about what’s going on.

Identify the reactions that happen in your body. Become aware of what you do when you experience difficult emotions, what your protective strategy is. For example, *I feel my neck get tight and I shut down to protect myself.*

Then you can identify what meaning you are giving to these triggering moments. *When I am triggered, I’m thinking I’ve disappointed my partner. I’m thinking she won’t want to be with me.*

Next, identify what you do, your protective strategy to deal with your feelings, like when you go into your study and work.

Finally, think about what message your actions in the cycle are sending to your partner. *It looks like I don’t care when I walk away. It looks like I don’t want to be around her.*

Then your partner can do the same, understand what triggers her, how she feels in her body, what meaning she makes and how she acts.

**The other side to the story**

Partner two can use the same sequence to understand their own part in the cycle.

Trigger: *My trigger is when I’ve had a really busy day and you forget something I’ve asked you to do. I’m counting on you for help taking care of the family and you’re not stepping up.*

Emotion: *When this happens, my hands start shaking and I want to cry.* I feel sad.

Meaning: *I tell myself I don’t matter to you. You don’t see me at all. I’m alone in this relationship.*

Protection: *I start nagging you, or I raise my voice, hoping you’ll hear me. Hoping I can get you to help me. Maybe if I fight, you’ll see me and all the work I’m doing for us.*

**Recognizing how the cycle self-perpetuates**

As you and your partner working through TEMPO together, you’ll see that your actions and responses feed the other person’s actions in the negative cycle. When one of you retreats, the other fights to try to reach you, only making the first person retreat farther.

This concept is echoed in Dr. Sue Johnson’s book *Hold Me Tight* in what she calls the “Protest Polka”(Johnson, 2008). She explains that one person begins to demand connection with their partner and protest their withdrawal.

Here’s how it looks in practice:

You’re trying to finish a little more work to free up your weekend, and your partner comes home and sees you working. First thing she says is, “You’re still working?”

This is a trigger for you and sets off a physiological response. You start to feel tension in your body. You tell yourself you did something wrong again and you shut down to avoid conflict. This looks like burying yourself even deeper in your work or going off to take part in a hobby your partner can’t share with you.

Going away like this will set off your partner. She wants to connect after a difficult day and sees no response. When she doesn’t get the response she’s craving, her whole body tenses and she tells herself “He doesn’t care.”

In response (and protest) she goes after you, turning up the heat, becoming pushier and more critical. This is her protective strategy and how she copes when she feels alone and scared of losing you.

The more she goes after you, though, the more you’re feeling you did something wrong, and the more you’ll disappear. The more she feels you don’t care, the more heated she becomes.

These contradictory protective moves lead to a negative feedback cycle. By slowing down, you can start to see the bigger picture.

**Organization: how to stop the fight together**

Once you understand your moves in the trigger-response-protection sequence, you can start to slow down and organize your actions in a productive way.

You know your usual reaction response does not work to stop the fight or the negative cycle. You also know the underlying trigger and what it means to you—this is your clue to tell your partner that you’re getting into a negative cycle.

As a couple, you’ll need to practice identifying TEMPO for yourselves, and practice having the conversation with the other person about their TEMPO.

While each protection style works for one individual person, it does not work for the other. On the contrary, triggers the other.

Looking at the fight from this perspective can help you identify and strategize what you can do differently. Each person starts to recognize the other’s triggers and learns how to address their partner’s needs as well as ask for what they need themselves.

This kind of softer, more vulnerable conversation will not just stop the fight, it will change the whole cycle.