



How to Stop Escalation During Conflict

Most of us avoid conflict whenever we can. Our relationships are working for us in some ways and we don't want to lose whatever is working for us in a fight.

The following skills allow us to feel safer and more competent as we work through conflict.

Time-outs: Pre-agree to leave the scene if one of you begins to escalate. Pick a time-out signal either of you can use. Do not say, "You are making me angry." Or "You are getting out of control." Instead, if you need to say something, say, "I'm beginning to feel angry and I need to take a time out." **If you do leave, make sure you come back later to finish business.** While you are gone, do some physical activity or relaxation exercise to discharge tension. Don't ruminate on why you are angry. Search for solutions.

Rechanneling: Use mindfulness to analyze your typical anger pattern. When, in an argument, do you tend to get mad? Before you enter into a challenging interaction, plan ahead to do something different. When you feel the old pattern beginning, consciously use a new technique to rechannel the conversation. Be mindful throughout.

Inquiry: Instead of taking the bait of an escalating comment, get curious about the other person's process. Are they hurt? Is there some underlying pain? Start asking questions. Look for deeper content. Feed back their experience until they feel they have been heard and understood.

Calling Process: Instead of reacting with anger to an angry comment, comment on how the process is going. Take a step back and describe in a factual way what appears to be happening. "We both seem to be getting upset. I wonder how we can keep this conversation going but in a more productive way."

Clouding: When your partner exaggerates the facts, as in "You always..." or "You never...", agree with the part that is accurate. For example, if you partner begins with, "You're never around when I need you," you can counter with, "It is true that I *have* been home less than usual." Or you can offer the possibility that they are correct, "You *may* be right that..." Or you can agree in principle, such as "I can see where if you *thought* I wasn't around at all that you might be upset."

Limit the damage: Just because someone criticizes you, doesn't mean you are a bad person. Separate criticism of behavior from your sense of self. Likewise, restrict feedback to another person's behavior. Be careful not to label the person, just their *behavior*. Mistakes are inevitable in life. Nobody's perfect.