



Emotional Flooding: How to Take a Time-Out That Actually Helps

An explainer and couples time-out agreement · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- "Flooding" is when emotions overwhelm your ability to think, listen, or stay kind during conflict.
- Once flooded, no productive conversation is possible. Your body is in fight-or-flight.
- A planned time-out, followed by a return, protects the relationship.

What flooding looks like

Dr. John Gottman's research with couples found that during heated conflict, many people experience a surge in heart rate and stress hormones. He called this "diffuse physiological arousal," or flooding. When flooded, people lose access to humour, empathy, and creative problem-solving. They either attack or shut down.

- Heart racing or pounding
- Feeling hot, tense, or shaky
- Thoughts like "I can't take this" or "Here we go again"
- Raising your voice, interrupting, or saying things you regret
- Going silent, staring away, or wanting to leave (sometimes called "stonewalling")

Why time-outs work, and why they often fail

A time-out gives your body time to settle so your thinking brain can come back online. But time-outs often fail when one person storms off, refuses to return, or spends the break rehearsing arguments. The difference is having an agreement in advance.

What the research says

Gottman's research found that physiological flooding during conflict predicts relationship breakdown, and that couples do better when they learn to self-soothe and take breaks (Gottman, 1994).

Gottman recommends breaks of at least 20 minutes, because it takes the body about that long to settle after flooding (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Tool: Our Time-Out Agreement

Complete this together when you are both calm, not during a conflict.

Our agreement	Our answer
Our signal word or gesture for "I'm flooded":	
How long our break will be (at least 20 minutes):	
Where each of us will go:	
What we will do to calm down (not rehearse the argument):	
How and when we will come back to the conversation:	
What we will say when we return:	

Sample time-out script

"I'm getting flooded and I don't want to say something hurtful. I need 30 minutes. I promise I'll come back and we'll finish this."

Returning: "I'm calmer now. I want to understand you. Can we try again?"

Strategies to try

- **Check your pulse.** Some couples use a heart rate of about 100 beats per minute as a cue to pause.
- **Self-soothe during the break.** Walk, breathe slowly, listen to music, or stretch. Avoid replaying the fight.
- **Always return.** A time-out without a return can feel like abandonment.
- **Start softly.** When you return, use "I feel... about... and I need..." instead of "You always..."
- **Take turns.** One person speaks, the other summarizes before responding.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Use a "floor" object.** In a method from the PREP couples program, only the person holding an object (like a coaster) speaks, while the other listens and then summarizes. It slows conversations that tend to escalate.
- **Set a heart rate alert.** If you wear a smartwatch, set an alert at around 100 beats per minute as a cue to pause before you're fully flooded.

- **Ask about the dream.** For recurring fights, ask, "Is there a story, hope, or dream behind your position?" Gottman found many gridlocked conflicts hide deeper meaning.
- **Write when talking is too hot.** If speaking keeps escalating, try exchanging short written notes or texts about the issue, then talk once you're both calmer.

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

What are my body's first signs that I'm getting flooded?

What do I tend to do when flooded: attack, defend, or shut down?

What do I most want my partner to understand when we argue?

What helps me feel calm enough to come back to a hard conversation?

When to reach out for support

If arguments regularly escalate, you feel stuck in the same fight, or conflict feels unsafe, couples therapy can help you understand your pattern and learn new ways to connect. If you ever feel physically unsafe, please reach out for help right away.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

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