



## S.T.O.P.

### A four-step strategy for handling conflict without hurting your relationship

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#### 1. STOP!

As soon as you notice yourself getting uncomfortable with the way your conversation is going, STOP! Then say: I need a time out. This tells your partner you need a break, without blaming her (him) for your discomfort.

#### 2. TIME OUT.

Time out means **physically separating** from each other in order to **stop the hurt**. It means going away for a short time (30-60 minutes) and coming back after both of you have **calmed down** and have completed Step 3: OWN YOUR PART.

- Brain researchers have found that once the heart is beating 95 bpm or above, the thinking brain (neocortex) shuts down and the emotional brain (amygdala) takes over. This means it does no good to keep arguing when you're both upset, because the reasonable part of your brain is no longer listening.
- John Gottman's research on marital satisfaction found that *couples who disengage* when things start heating up, and try again after both people are calmer, *stay together* and *report greater satisfaction* in their relationships.

#### Techniques for calming yourself down:

Going for a walk, taking a hot bath, listening to quiet music, writing in a journal

#### 3. OWN YOUR PART.

This means taking responsibility for your part in creating the problem instead of attacking your partner or defending your position. To do this, answer the following questions:

#### Q: Have I engaged in any acts of overt *muscling*?

- Demanding sex and/or obedience
- Controlling resources: \$, freedom, time
- Using violence or threats to control partner
- Showing anger and contempt for partner in public (includes: attacks on character or appearance as well as acting as if partner is invisible)
- Shouting or intimidating with words or gestures (includes: sarcasm, mocking, finger-pointing, cornering, taunting,)
- Blaming, belittling, interrogating, name-calling
- Hammering a point to death
- Ganging up on partner by bringing in kids, in-laws, other allies
- Excusing your bad behavior by blaming your partner for it: I wouldn't drink if you weren't so X
- Doing any of the above in front of your children



Four-step Reminder Card

Every act of overt muscling by one partner leads to equal power-acts of cover defiance by the other! *Don't mistake submission for devotion, or obedience for love.*

**Q: Have I engaged in any acts of covert defiance:**

- Withdrawing or Avoiding (includes: the garage, the kids, work, school, alcohol, etc.)
- Stonewalling (includes: the silent treatment, refusing to talk)
- Withholding affection, attention, tenderness, appreciation, sex
- Making excuses for why you didn't follow-through . . . again
- Making and breaking promises and agreements
- Procrastinating
- Chronic "forgetting": "Oops. . . You know how my memory is."
- Chronic lateness
- Chronic apologies without subsequent changes in behavior
- Flaunting your affection for others in front of your partner
- Lying or hiding the truth
- Bad-mouthing your partner to your children, friends, family
- Developing a social network that excludes your spouse

**Q: *What could I have done that would have been more helpful, more considerate, more kind?***

**Q: *What vulnerable feelings were beneath my anger or defensiveness?* (Examples: fear, guilt, embarrassment, sadness, hurt).**

**Q: *What vulnerable feelings might have been beneath my partner's behavior?***

After you've answered these questions and have a better understanding of what went wrong and what part you played, you're ready for the last step: *PEACE OFFERING.*

**4. PEACE OFFERING!**

Assuming you've done all 3 previous steps, you should be ready to come back together and talk. Each of you should take a turn sharing what you learned about yourself from your time away. This means owning your part, apologizing to your partner for the hurt you may have caused, and making a peace offering. A peace offering can be as simple as a hug or a kiss, or it can be a promise or an agreement to do something different. When both of you have completed this step, chances are you'll be feeling lots better.

**Here's an example of how this step might sound:**

*"At first, all I could see was what you did to make me mad, but when I went through the lists and saw: blaming, forgetting, and excusing--I realized that I played a part in what went wrong. I think I was attacking you because I was feeling guilty myself for forgetting to do X. Sorry. I know I let you down. Next time I can try to be more honest sooner, or I can at least stop blaming you before you've even had a chance to talk. I promise to do X by Friday."*

Sounds good, huh? You can do it, too. Practice the STOP strategy over and over until the steps are automatic. It takes lots of repetition, so hang in there! When you've got it down, try teaching it to your kids. If they're too young to understand it, use the strategy in front of them. They'll learn by example how to communicate lovingly and respectfully.

**Good Luck! Betsy**

Remember . . . it takes 21 days of daily practice for a *relatively neutral* new behavior to become a habit. It can take years of practice for a *highly-charged* new behavior to become a habit. So . . . Don't be discouraged if your first attempts are less than perfect! Trust me, they will be. Give yourselves full-credit for all positive efforts, and don't hesitate to stop whenever things start heading south—even if that means taking another break before trying again.