

# Five-Minute Time Out

## Putting an End to Escalation (and Withdrawal) for Couples

by Kevin Downing Ph.D. MFT

The research is out on **escalation** in marriage – you know, the raised voices, hot tempers, and the ugly exchange of words.

Research reveals the following facts about escalation:

- 1) It is the first of the four **best predictors of divorce**. We call it a ‘pipeline of poison’ for your marriage.
- 2) We **deeply regret** what we say at the height of our anger. (This is contrary to the notion that the truth comes out when someone is upset.)
- 3) There is **nothing redeemable** about escalation. You won’t find a hidden value in it – it is completely destructive.

**Withdrawal** is the second of the four best predictors of divorce. It’s the cold war, the shutdown, not talking or the cold shoulder – it’s the Wall of disconnect. The great expectation in marriage is that we have a deep emotional relationship – what we call the **emotional bridge** – or safe harbor. When we are not connected – and can’t see when we will be – our marriage can go into great distress! A five minute time out can help us refocus and get cued up for reconnecting.

Call a Five Minute Time-Out when you suspect that **escalation** or **withdrawal** is or may be occurring.

## How to call a Five-Minute Time Out

**A) Either person may call a time-out by saying, “I’d like to have a Five Minute Time Out”.**

**B) The person who calls the time-out is also the time keeper.** They watch the clock and they re-initiate contact when the time is up.

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## C) When the time-out is completed:

-either of you may call another five minute time-out, then follow the above guidelines.

-you may drop the topic for 24 hours or say “Let’s talk about this tomorrow morning. - or – you could save it for your next counseling session if you're counseling.

-you may continue on with your topic after an agreed upon 20 to 30 minute break using the Speaker-Listener technique.

PLEASE NOTE: 1) You have NOT called a time-out if you have not said “I’d like to have a Five Minute Time-Out” (or some other agreed upon phrase).

2) You have NOT called a time-out if you have not re-initiated contact after the five minutes. (If more than five minutes goes by and your partner has not coming back you may go to them and say “I’d like a five minute time-out” and re-start the process.)

## What happens if my spouse doesn't honor my time-out?

Remember that escalation takes two. Regardless of your partner’s behavior you can choose to not participate. Establish with your partner ahead of time what will happen if a time-out is not honored. I suggest the following:

**A) Go to a separate room** when a time-out is not acknowledged.

(Sometimes this doesn't end it. Your partner may follow you into that room and continue talking.) If so...

**B) Leave the house.** Go to a peaceful place and in 20 minutes call home.

If you hear an apology for not honoring the time-out and a promise to honor it when you get home, then return home. If you hear a gush of escalation DO NOT engage your partner. Say over the top of them “Good-bye I’m hanging up. Good-bye I’m hanging up.” Then hang up and wait another 20 minutes before calling again.

Finally I know some people who have a bag packed in their car. Staying away for a night sends a strong message – “I will not escalate with you!” It’s also an indication that professional counseling is something that should be pursued. If alcohol or drugs are involved – also, get professional help right away!

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## **Spiritual Insight:**

Not surprisingly the Bible identified the problem of **escalation** thousands of years ago. Here are some timeless truths –

**Through patience a king can be persuaded,  
and a gentle tongue can break a bone. Proverbs 25:15**

(There is more power in your whisper than any amount of volume you can create!)

**A patient man has great understanding,  
but a quick-tempered man displays folly. Proverbs 14:29**

**My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen,  
slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring  
about the righteous life that God desires. James 1:19-20**

**A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger. Proverbs 15:1**

**Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit,  
for anger resides in the lap of fools. Ecclesiastes 7:9**

And the Bible addresses **withdrawal** in talking about the **oneness** of marriage and Christian love...

**'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to  
his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'. So they are no longer two  
separate people but one. Matt. 19:5**

**Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your  
neighbor, for we are all members of one body. Eph. 4:25**

Dedicating yourself to the following practical guidelines can help you get escalation and withdrawal out of your marriage and other important relationships. For more read: *A Lasting Promise* by Scott Stanley

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