

Escalation! When Emotions Erupt In Your Marriage

The Four Conflict Styles in Your Marriage – Part 1

By Dr. Kevin Downing & Dr. Peter Robbins

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 one of the four best predictors of divorce. We call it a ‘pipeline of poison’ for a 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. (This is in contrast to something like, ‘criticism’ – where the person doing the criticizing usually has a ‘request’ but is expressing it in an unhealthy way.)

Time-Out / Practical Rules for Couples to Stop Escalating Conflicts in Their Marriage

1. Either person may call a time-out.
2. Whoever calls the time-out establishes its length. I suggest you use short time-outs, five or ten minutes.
3. The person who calls the time-out is also the time keeper. They watch the clock and they reinitiate contact when the time is up.
4. When the time-out is completed:
 - a. Either of you may re-establish another time-out and follow the above guidelines
 - b. You may continue on with your topic using the Speaker-Listener technique (Go to TurningPointCounseling.org / Click on View our Newsletter Archive / Click on ‘Marriage’ and Click on “Is Anyone Listening? – In Your Marriage”
 - c. You may drop the topic for 24 hours or save it for your next counseling session if you're in marriage counseling.

PLEASE NOTE:

1. You have NOT called a time-out if you have not said 'I want a time-out now' (or some other agreed upon phrase).
2. You have NOT called a time-out if you have not specified the amount of time you will break for and re-initiate contact after the time period is over.

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What Happens If My Spouse Doesn't Honor My Time-Out?

Remember that escalation takes two. Regardless of your spouse'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:

- 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 with their verbal barrage. If so...) B.
- Leave the house (or current location). Go to a local restaurant. Order a bowl of soup or cup of tea and in 20 minutes call home.

If you hear an apology for not honoring the time-out and a promise to honor it, then get home. If you hear a gush of escalation DO NOT engage your partner. Say over the top of the barrage of words 'Good-bye I'm hanging up. Good-bye I'm hanging up.' Then hang up and wait another 20 minutes.

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 prayer and professional counseling are necessary.

Scriptures for Escalation

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

"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

Dedicating yourself to prayer and using the following practical guidelines, can help you get escalation out of your marriage!

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