

HOW TO USE 'TIME OUT' EFFECTIVELY

Many people try to take time out when arguments get heated to avoid aggressive and violent behaviour. Any heightened arousal of emotions, including anger can lead to aggression so it is a useful technique. Unfortunately if you do not explain this to the other person (often your partner) they may read this as you being controlling of them by just walking off. Time out is a technique that takes time to learn and practice and it encourages you both to improve how you communicate. Read through this and then once you have grasped the stages of the approach, try to explain this to your partner when you are calm and not in the middle of an argument or perhaps give them a copy to go over with you. That way s/he will understand that when you say you need TIME OUT it is not to get one up on them or to be difficult, it is about keeping safe and a way you are trying out which shows you respect them and want to ensure you get to discuss the problem later when you feel calmer so as to make things work better another time.

Key Principle of TIME OUT:

Finding a means of negotiation that enables you to feel personal mastery over your strong feelings (including anger) as well as being able to work on improving how you relate with others in non violent ways.

1. MEASURING FEELINGS (S.U.D.S.)

Firstly you need to identify a personal measure for the level or intensity of the anger. This can be achieved with SUDS (Subjective Units of Distress Scale). This is used to help you gauge your feelings in the heat of the moment, without having to explain it all at the time when this is not going to be possible.

The SUDS is from 1-5 where 1 is relatively calm and okay and 5 is the highest point beyond your being able to discuss it there and then.

2. LEARNING TO IDENTIFY YOUR OWN SUDS LEVELS

Go back over a previous time when you felt very angry or upset and identify what a 1,2,3,4 and 5 are like using the Emotional Intensity Continuum so you get a good understanding of all the thoughts, feelings, actions and action urges you have as well as the physical sensations and the ways you talk to yourself. You might find this easier with the help of your therapist when you are trying this out for the first time.

3. RECOGNISING 'FILTERS'

Some of the self talk you notice will be what is called Filters. Filters are ways you learned to speak to yourself from back in history which might be something like 'I am a waste of space' or 'no-one ever listens to me' for example, and you filter everything you experience nowadays through that commentary. This in turn has an impact on you and your ability to respond to the other person in the here and now.

4. FINDING THE SAFETY ZONE

Identify the SUDS highest point that allows you to remain safely in contact with the other person. This will be the safety zone on the Emotional Intensity Continuum so if you are 'boiling over' at a 4 then don't wait until a 4, start addressing a TIME OUT option at a 3 for example. If you find yourself going higher, you will need to use a means of getting control which is likely to be TIME OUT.

5. USING A RECOGNISABLE PHRASE OR CODE WORD

Time out needs to be used rapidly without time for a long discussion. So agree a phrase or code word that both of you can understand and respect without challenging it. You will need to have agreed this BEFORE you are in the heat of the moment! It may simply be 'I need to take a Time Out' but in company of others you may like to have another phrase but don't make it overly complicated or you won't remember it.

6. TIME OF THE TIME OUT

The time frame for TIME OUT may need to be 1 hour at first but over time with practice you may also be able to state a shorter time (e.g. 'I need a 20 minute time out'). Even if you feel ready sooner, stay away for the time you stated and only come back at that time so both of you are clear about what to expect – no surprises. If you need longer, come back at the time agreed and negotiate a repeat time out (see below).

7. INITIATING A TIME OUT

State the fact you need time out (or use the code word you agreed). State how long you will be gone. Stick to that even if you are still at high SUDS on return (you can always negotiate extra time out if needed).

8. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Use the time out to allow time to calm and retain control. This can be assisted by using A physical activity that is not violent or driving during the time out phase to expend the pent up energy positively e.g. a brisk walk or push ups.

Do not drink, drive or use drugs during a time out. Do not hit things even when you are on your own as it will most likely increase your feelings of aggression and your feelings will remain mixed up rather than focused on wanting to resolve the current issue. Instead do things that help you gain physical release or that are relaxing and pleasant to you.

9. RETURNING FROM TIME OUT

Always come back at the stated time. If you come back much earlier, the other person may find this hard and even a bit controlling of you as they too need that time to recover. If you delay, the other person could be left feeling worried and this could reduce their trust in you. If you need more time, say 'I need more time' and say how much and go away again and repeat the TIME OUT until you are calmer. You may both need to do this if you are both working on managing strong emotions more effectively so this might take longer!

10. NEGOTIATING A DEBRIEF

Once you are calmer, agree when you will discuss – it might not be convenient to talk there and then so be prepared to wait a bit as this can be helpful.

11. TALKING IT OVER

Use the following approach which is non-blaming:

When you XXXXXX
I feel XXXXXX
Because XXXXXX

For example:

When you use a certain tone of voice or tell me I don't do things right,

I feel put down and angry

Because it reminds me of being a kid and I react strongly to that

(So I have to walk away to calm down so I can then discuss it with you later like I am doing right now).

12. GETTING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK

Consider asking for feedback on positive behaviour. For example:

It would help if you can tell me what I am doing that you like and I will try to do my best to do the same for you.

PRACTICE Try this out and discuss in therapy or with your partner what happens even if it does not work out. Keep a note of the times you use it, including the SUDS scores so that triggers can begin to be identified as well as you learning to work out how and when to use it best.