



How to call a time-out in the middle of an argument

Cut out the card along the dashed line (6 by about 4 inches). Say one line, then stop and listen. Use your own words when they come.

Calling a time-out

1. Notice the surge: pounding heart, raised voice, not listening.
2. Say it: "I'm too heated to listen. I need twenty minutes."
3. Give a return time, and keep it.
4. During the break: walk, breathe, don't rehearse the fight.
5. Come back with: "Tell me the part I wasn't hearing."
6. If you are afraid, leave. You never owe a return time.

All the lines, and when to use them

I'm getting too heated to listen well. I need twenty minutes, and then I want to come back and finish this. (The standard version, the moment you notice yourself escalating. It names the problem as your state, not their point, and includes a return time.)

Hold on. My heart is pounding. Can we both stop for a second before I say something I don't mean? (Mid-sentence, when you feel the physical surge. A short pause can be enough if you catch it early.)

Can we agree on a word either of us can say when a fight is getting too hot? Maybe just "pause"? (On a calm day, not during a fight. Agreeing in advance means the signal reads as a shared tool, not a dismissal.)

I'm going for a walk around the block. I'll be back by 9:30. I'm not leaving the conversation. (When you need physical distance. Saying where you are going and when you will be back prevents the walk from feeling like abandonment.)

Okay. I don't love stopping, but I'd rather finish this well than finish it now. Eight o'clock? (Your partner is the one calling the time-out and you want to keep going. Agreeing and naming a time keeps it from becoming a stalemate.)

I'm back and calmer. Can you tell me again the part I wasn't hearing? (Coming back after the break. Starting with their side shows the pause was for listening, not for building a better argument.)

I'm still not settled. Can we pick this up tomorrow morning over coffee instead? (Twenty minutes was not enough. Extending is fine as long as you name the new time and keep it.)

I need you to tell me when we'll come back to this. I can wait, but I need to know we will. (Your partner leaves without a return time. It asks for the missing piece without chasing them out the door.)

Phrases to avoid

"I'm done.": Without a return time it sounds like the end of the conversation, or the relationship. Your partner is likely to chase, and the fight gets bigger.

"You need a time-out.": Assigning the break to them treats them like a child who misbehaved. Call the pause for yourself.

"Fine, walk away like you always do.": Punishing your partner for pausing makes it less likely they will pause next time, and more likely they will flood and say something worse.

"You're not leaving until we finish this.": Stopping someone from leaving is not persistence. It removes their choice, and it is a form of control.

"Whatever." (then leaving the room): A silent exit has none of the three parts. It works like stonewalling, not like a break.

If you are afraid of your partner, scripts are not the answer: call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or text START to 88788. In danger, call 911.