

S.T.O.P. ! A four–step strategy for handling conflicts and healing your relationship

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By Betsy Sansby, MS, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist

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Brain researchers have found that when people are angry, scared, or hurt, they're incapable of thinking straight. That's because stress hormones—designed to fuel the fight or flight response—flood the body, causing the rational part of the brain to shut down, and the irrational part to take over. That's why angry people don't talk to each other, they rant and rave. They pout and drink. They work on their trucks, buy expensive shoes, kick in walls, or slap their kids.

The STOP Strategy is a process I teach all the couples and families I work with in my family therapy practice. It's a simple method for stopping the hurt, disconnecting so you don't cause harm, cooling down until you're both thinking straight again, and reconnecting from a better place.

The best way to learn how The STOP Strategy works is to read through this article (when you're calm) so you'll understand how it works when you really need it. Once you understand the four steps, practice using the strategy whenever little things come up between you and your partner. That way, you'll know the steps by heart when something big happens.

This strategy not only works with couples, it also works great with kids. What's different here is that The Stop Strategy isn't designed for just one person. It's designed for two (and could be used by more). And unlike a typical Time Out—where one person banishes or abandons another—with the STOP Strategy, a Time Out begins with two people agreeing to separate in order to come back together after both have done some work on themselves.

This is where the healing begins. During a Time Out, both people are expected to reflect their own behavior and are asked to take responsibility for having done things that may have hurt someone else. They're also asked to think of what they could have done to make things better. The last step requires both people to make a Peace Offering, a gesture that restores a spirit of goodwill to the relationship.

Here are the four steps:

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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 gives you a chance to take a break without blaming your partner for your discomfort.

2. TIME OUT.

This means physically separating from each other in order to stop the hurt. It means going away for 30–60 minutes and coming back after both of you have calmed down and have completed Step 3.

- Brain researchers have found that once the heart is beating 95 bpm or above, the thinking brain shuts down and the emotional brain 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 my partner.
- Showing anger and contempt for my partner in public (includes: attacks on character or appearance as well as acting as if my 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 my partner by bringing in kids, in-laws, other allies.
- Excusing my bad behavior by blaming my partner for it: "I wouldn't drink if you weren't so controlling."
- Doing any of the above in front of our children.

Every act of overt muscling by one partner leads to 2 equally powerful acts of covert defiance by the other! Don't mistake submission for devotion, or obedience for love.

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

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- 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 I 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 my affection for others in front of my partner.
- Lying or hiding the truth.
- Bad-mouthing my partner to our children, friends, family.
- Developing a social network that excludes my partner.

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!

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Betsy Sansby is a licensed marriage & family therapist in Minneapolis. She has just produced a communication tool for couples called: The OuchKit—Marriage Counseling in a Box: www.theouchkit.com.

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