

## Strategies for Time Outs with Couples

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It is common for couples to have some level of domestic violence or chaotic conflicts in their relationship (Ehrensaft & Vivian, 1996). While moderate to severe domestic violence makes couples therapy contraindicated (Bograd & Mederos, 1999), many couples seeking therapy have mild or “common” couples violence.

**What is common couples violence?** Common couples violence is a kind of violence in which the couple has crossed the line into physical pushing, shoving, slapping, throwing things or other violence. The violence is generally not frequent, not severe and neither partner feels unsafe in the relationship. The violence should not have led to any kind of physical damage or illness. In common couples violence neither partner is typically violent in other life-situations and does not have a criminal record of violence. The intention of the partners is generally not to control or manipulate each other but is an extension of general conflict. Generally, common couples violence is two-way violence with both partners contributing to the chaos and aggression. While common couples violence does not typically escalate into something more serious and dangerous, intimate partner terrorism does (Johnson, 1995). Intimate partner terrorism is intended to control and manipulate the spouse leading to physical and emotional abuse (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Violent resistance is a kind of violence perpetrated by the typical abused partner towards his or her abuser. And mutual domestic violence is a kind of moderate to severe mutual violence with power and control issues at their core. Mutual domestic violence is more likely to occur when power and control becomes evenly distributed within the relationship (Olsen, 2002). Common couples violence is typically responsive to couples counseling to address the violent outbursts as part of a pattern of ineffective conflict patterns.

**Substance abuse and violence.** Note that substance abuse is often accompanied with common couples violence (Holtzworth-Munrow et al., 1995). Often treatment that addresses substance abuse problems will also help eliminate aggression and violence. However, addressing just aggression without addressing the substance abuse is highly unlikely to produce change. Therefore, a two-pronged approach addressing both problems is warranted. Substance abuse accompanied with any kind of violence is a situation where couples therapy is generally contraindicated, depending on frequency and severity of both problems.

**Time out Strategy.** A common strategy for helping prevent violence is teaching couples how to have an effective time out in the midst of conflict (Holtzworth-Munrow et al., 1995).

1. **The goal.** The goal of a time out is for the couple to calm down, cool off, and be able to use more effective strategies. Most of the time couples in these situations tend to “flood out” in their emotions to such a degree that they can’t think straight and “fly off the handle.” The goal of a time out kind of intervention is for the couple to preventing **flooding, flying and fighting**.
2. **The commitment.** Assess with the couple their motivation to prevent future violence or aggression. It’s important for them to understand that if there is any kind of physical aggression or violence that couples counseling will need to be put on hold and individual counseling used to handle the aggression. Couples counseling cannot continue if partners are unsafe. If they

cannot commit to using time out and other learned strategies to avoid aggression and violence, then couples counseling is contraindicated.

3. **The situation.** Talk to the couple about the kinds of situations they have had in the past that have led to pushing, shoving or other kinds of violence. Help them look at what happened before the aggression, what they felt like inside when the aggression happened, how to they disengaged or prevented further aggression and how they repaired it. Discuss using time out as a good strategy for similar situations that may arise in the future.
4. **Calling a time out.** Structure this part of the intervention for the couple. Either partner can call a time out if they feel emotionally flooded, like they might fly off the handle or that they'll engage in fighting. However, a time out should only be called on themselves and not on their partner. Ask the couple to role play calling a time out- what they would actually say to their partner if they felt very overwhelmed and needed to take a break.
5. **Set a return time.** Before separating from each other (unless violence is imminent) the couple should state when they'll come back together. This helps to prevent a distancer-pursuer pattern from arising where the person not calling a time out follows after the partner who just called a time out. Typically return times range between 1 hour and 24 hours. Even if the couples' schedule is busy, they can typically come back together by phone even if not in person.
6. **Cool down during the cool down.** Counselors should coach the couple in finding strategies for cooling down during the "cool down" time. It is not uncommon for couples to end up ruminating about the fight, thinking about counter-arguments to their partner and maintaining or increasing their anger and emotional flood. Instead couples should distract themselves from the fight and do things that are more productive. Typically these things include things like watching a movie, going for a run/walk, talking to a friend (but not complaining about the spouse), reading a book, doing housework, going to their workplace or surfing the net.
7. **Commit to come back together.** The couple then needs to stick to their commitment to come back together at the agreed upon time. If they still feel flooded at that point and are afraid they'll say or do things that they'll regret, they should ask for another brief Time out. Once the couple does come back together they should work to repair the situation and use their skills that they'll be learning in couples therapy to communicate and resolve conflicts in a more effective way. Remind them that the goal is to either let the issue go (why are we really fighting about this thing anyway?) or if a resolution is needed to try and resolve it without flooding out but instead using good patterns towards each other.
8. **Repair any damage.** If the couple did or said things in the original fight that were offensive or harmful, they should apologize for their own behaviors and take responsibility for their part of the fight. They should show their sincerity by demonstrating their love and care in a meaningful way towards their partner. And use the strategies taught in the apologies intervention in Hope Focused Couples counseling to make an effective apology and repair of the relationship.

**Time out as just part of the strategy.** While time out is often the first strategy taught to couples with common couple violence, or even chaotic fighting patterns, in couples's therapy it is not the only thing they will need. Couples will need to learn new behaviors for communication and conflict resolution. They will need to increase their intimate bond and trust in each other by engaging in mutually

trustworthy behaviors. They benefit from exploring family patterns of abuse or neglect and sharing them with each other. They also benefit from understanding their own anger and learning to accept the more vulnerable emotions that accompany anger such as sadness, loss, helplessness or disappointment (emotion focused couples therapy techniques teach this in particular). Therefore, it's important to lay out a plan for the couple of how the overall approach to counseling will help them extinguish aggressive and violent interactions.

### Suggestions for further reading:

Holtzworth-Munrow, A. (2000) Domestic violence: Combining scientific inquiry and advocacy.

*Prevention and Treatment 3.*

Jacobson, N.S., & Gottman, J. (1998). *When men batter women: New insights into ending abusive relationships*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

O'Leary, K.D. & Cohen, S. (2006). Treatment of psychological and physical aggression in a couple context. In J. Hamel & T.L. Nichols (Eds.), *Family interventions in domestic violence* (pp. 363-380). New York: Springer.

### References

Bograd, M., & Mederos, F. (1999). Battering and couples therapy: Universal screening and selection of treatment modality. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 25*, 291-312.

Ehrensaft, M. K., & Vivian, D. (1996). Spouses' reasons for not reporting existing marital aggression as a marital problem. *Journal of Family Psychology, 10*, 443-453.

Holtzworth-Munrow, A., Beatty, S. B., & Anglin, K. (1995). The assessment and treatment of marital violence: An introduction for the marital therapist. In Jacobson, N. S. & Gurman, A. S. (Eds.), *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (pp. 317-339), New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Johnson, M. P. (1995). Patriarchal terrorism and common couple violence: Two forms of violence against women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57*(2), 283-294.

Johnson, M. P., & Ferraro, K. J. (2000). Research on domestic violence in the 1990's:

Making distinctions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62(4), 948-963.

Olson, L. N. (2002). Exploring "common couple violence" in heterosexual romantic relationships. *Western Journal of Communication*, 66(1), 104-128.

Note: The MMATEcenter has a worksheet for therapists to use in-session with couples to teach them how to have a good time out. There is also a take-home card for couples to use at home.