

When to STOP Communicating

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

You've probably heard that communication is a vital component to a healthy relationship. After all, communication is the pathway for sharing what you and your partner need from each other. That said, it's also important to know that there will be moments when talking about a particular issue does more harm than good. In those cases, it's better to put communicating on hold until you both can address the topic in a more helpful way.

When should you postpone communicating for the sake of the marriage or relationship?

Heated topics, irrationality and the inability to listen

There are several blocks to effective listening, but one in particular seems to worsen relationship problems and keep couples counselors in business:

Attempting to communicate while you're experiencing *Intense Emotions*.

We all have trigger points—strong reactions to certain events or things your spouse/partner says or does (or doesn't do). When triggered, you become emotionally overwhelmed. Shelly's trigger point is her husband's failure to respond to her requests. "It drives me crazy! I have to ask him something three or four times before I get any reaction. By then I'm usually yelling and I look like the bad guy...he makes me feel invisible."

Being ignored/feeling invisible is Shelly's trigger point.

Whenever you and your partner trigger one another, the discussion is likely to get heated and strong emotions end up standing in the way of healthy communication. Think of yourself as having an *emotional thermostat*: when the thermostat gets too high, you're in danger of reaching your emotional boiling point.

Relationship Trouble: Once you hit this critical emotional point the following is likely:

1. You become *irrational* (the part of your brain that deals with logical, rational thought shuts down for the moment);
2. You become *defensive* (you enter the survival mode of self-preservation, which encourages you to protect your self-esteem by winning the battle);
3. Your ability to *really* listen and see your partner's perspective is severely compromised.

And here's another point to remember: when you and your partner trigger each other, you're both becoming more irrational, defensive and unable to listen at the same time!

Learning to monitor and control your emotional thermostat

Lessons learned from parenting:

When a discussion gets heated, it's going to be important to monitor your own emotional thermostat. And when your feelings become too intense, you need to call a "time-out" and temporarily stop communicating. When a parent sees that a particular situation is overwhelming a child, the parent may respond by removing his/her child from the provocative situation.

At times, couples can benefit from this approach.

Here's how this might look in your marriage or relationship: You've been trying to have a discussion but you and your partner keep butting heads. Your partner is upset and you're feeling increasingly angry—if the discussion continues under these provocative circumstances, your emotional thermostat will continue to escalate and real communication will be long gone.

At this point you might say, "We're both upset and I'd like to calm down. Can we take a 'time-out' and when we're both feeling calmer, we can try this again."

Even adults need a time-out.

Rules of calling a communication time-out:

- a. In the above example, note that the person who suggests a time-out doesn't say to his/her partner, "**You** need to calm down, so I'm calling a time-out." You call a time out for the benefit of the relationship and because you need to regroup—focus on what you need.
- b. You agree to come back to the issue. Too often, one spouse or partner may use the time-out as a way to avoid important issues. It is the responsibility of the person calling the time-out to reschedule the discussion once both parties feel more emotionally centered.
- c. When you feel calmer, use your "time-out" time wisely—don't just let a few hours or a day pass and end up saying the same exact things, in the same way, and expect a different outcome! This will only lead to repetitive, unresolved arguments.

As you practice monitoring your emotional thermostat, you will become more attuned to the impact your feelings have on your ability to communicate. This is an important skill to develop. Work with your partner to effectively utilize time-outs when appropriate and you'll begin to notice that irrational arguments will give way to rational discussions.

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Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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