

Have you ever looked back on a heated conversation with your spouse and found yourself wondering, “Why in the world did I say or do that?”

Researchers have found your body releases a large amount of adrenaline and other hormones during a verbal conflict. These hormones increase your heart rate and move your decision making process from the front part of your brain to the back of your brain.

The front of your brain allows you to think clearly, understand an issue from more than one perspective, think creatively in order to solve problems, and communicate your position in a way your spouse will understand. The back of your brain is wired to react by fighting or running away. Resolving conflicts with the back of your brain often damages your relationship rather than strengthens it.

Our bodies don't have a visible “alarm” that goes off when we stop thinking with the front part of our brain and start reacting with the back part of our brain. However, Dr. John Gottman has found a way to identify when this transition is taking place. In his

research with couples, he has found this transition begins when their heart rate rises 10% above their resting level. For example, if your resting heart rate is 85 beats per minute and it suddenly increases to 94 beats per minute, then your “alarm” is going off. You may think you are still in control but the back of your brain is actually taking over what you are doing and saying.



To know when your “alarm” is going off you need to learn what your resting heart rate is and how to monitor it during a disagreement with your spouse. At first, you may feel uncomfortable monitoring your heart rate during a disagreement. Remind yourself it is better to feel a little uncomfortable than to lose

control and say or do something that damages your relationship.

What should you do when your heart rate increases more than 10%? **Take a time-out!** During the time-out, do something that will help you to relax and calm down. **Do not use this time to think about the disagreement you just had.** As soon as both of your heart rates are back down to normal levels, you can continue the discussion. It is also okay to set a time later that day or the next day to finish the discussion.

How can you prevent your heart rate from skyrocketing in the first place? Force the front part of your brain to view and feel the issue from your spouse's perspective rather than from your own. Once you understand each other, you have significantly increased your chances of either resolving or managing the conflict in a way that strengthens your relationship.

Time-outs are an easy concept to understand but can be difficult to implement. However, by using time-outs you will significantly reduce the pain and misery and increase the joy and happiness in your marriage.

## Action Plan

What obstacles might prevent you from taking a time-out and how will you overcome them? e.g. pride, fear

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How are you going to prevent the back part of your brain from taking control during difficult discussions with your spouse? \_\_\_\_\_

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How will you recognize when the front part of your brain is shutting down and the back part of your brain is taking control? \_\_\_\_\_

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What will you do to calm down when a time-out has been called? \_\_\_\_\_

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Visit [healthymarriage.org](http://healthymarriage.org) to read the other topics in this pamphlet series.



For more information on gaining the basic relationship skills and knowledge to form and sustain a healthy marriage please visit:

## The New York City Healthy Marriage Resource Center

[nyc.healthymarriage.org](http://nyc.healthymarriage.org)

# Marriage

Increase the Joy  
Decrease the Misery



# Time-Out

A Key to Unlocking the Door to  
a Healthy and Happy Marriage