

2.8 When Triggered, Pause

If you're struggling to regulate your emotions, take a break.

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Sometimes conversations touch on sensitive topics, leading one or more participants to become emotionally triggered. In this state, people experience diminished self-control and may default to survival-oriented behavioral patterns, making it difficult for them to communicate effectively. Instead of being present and responding to what's happening in the here and now, they may enter a fight/flight/freeze mode where they are reacting to past trauma.

When you recognize that you or someone you're talking to may be triggered, it can be helpful to take a pause and allow that person's nervous system an opportunity to calm down and reorganize.

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- Nonreactive conversations have a connected quality, unlike most habitual communication.
- Even a brief pause can be enough to turn a conversation around.
- It takes two to argue but only one to de-escalate.

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- Noticing that you're triggered can be hard, especially in a real-time conversation when you're also listening and responding to another person.
- In a heated moment, telling another person that you think they're triggered can inflame the situation further.
- Your decision to take a break might not be well received.

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When you find your emotions getting the best of you during a conversation, that may be a sign to pause. In order to reconnect with yourself, you can take a couple of breaths or ask for a few minutes apart. To reassure the other person, you can tell them that you're not abandoning the difficult topic, you're just taking care of yourself so you can process it better and be more present with them. It's best not to check your phone or otherwise distract yourself but instead use the time to tune in to your body and breathing.

If you're low on emotional resources, a few minutes break might be insufficient, and you may need hours or days to process. Ideally, stating your need for a break should be done skillfully and effectively, which may take practice. Take care of yourself and ask for what you need—hopefully, your partner will understand. Even if they don't, your needs are your responsibility. Nobody can force you to be in a conversation you're not ready for.

An alternative to taking a break is slowing down and keeping the conversation going while staying present. If you want, you may also ask the other person to slow down, preferably in a way that respects their freedom to refuse (see Tool 2.2).

A good indication that you are ready to continue is that you can empathize with the other person.

This doesn't mean you need to agree with them—only that you're able to see things from their point of view while simultaneously maintaining your own. If you come to the interaction with empathy, odds are you'll connect better and be more likely to realize your goals in the conversation and relationship.

Being triggered in a conversation isn't necessarily a sign that something is wrong. Difficult conversations are a part of all meaningful relationships. This tool is about creating the space to conduct them effectively while also protecting your boundaries and keeping everyone involved safe.

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1. <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/familyperspectives/vol2/iss1/10/>.
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