

## Creating a Safer Environment for Change by Using Time Out



“**S**afety First” is a good concept. Many men find the idea of ‘time out’ useful as the most effective and immediate way of ensuring safety. Time out creates a safe zone for everyone and gives you time to sort out what is going on for you. As you get better at identifying your feelings and the beliefs or attitudes that drive your behaviour, you will find you don’t need to rely on this strategy as much. In the meantime, however, time out is very important.

Taking a ‘time out’ is not the same as staging a ‘walk out.’ Many men stage a ‘walk out’ during an argument or fight, leaving the other person unsure about when and if they will come back and what sort of mood they will be in when they return. This is unfair and disrespectful to the people involved. While a ‘walk out’ may be used with the partial intention of creating safety, it shows confused motives. The man may also be hoping to punish his partner for disagreeing by leaving her in a state of fear and uncertainty. In effect, a ‘walk out’ is saying, “I refuse to listen to you,” and is therefore a dangerous tactic that fails to convey a clear message that your aim is to create safety. *A walk out is a cop out!*

***Time out is not an excuse to go and see some mates, go back to work, or go for a quick drink.***

Time out, in contrast, is not a cop out. It has the clear purpose of creating safety and an opportunity cool down and think more clearly. Time out is not an excuse to go and see some mates, go back to work, or go for a quick drink. It is the serious task of relaxing and dealing with the uncomfortable feelings or thoughts that fuel abusive behaviour. Time out needs to be planned ahead of time so that everyone knows what is going on. We suggest you practise time outs before you need to use them. If you are going for a walk, try out your route, check how long it takes, and where the phone boxes are.

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## Time Out Guidelines

### Do

- **Talk about time out with people around you before you need to take it.** Negotiate a contract and what your time out signal will be.
- **Leave when you feel unsafe and are about to become abusive.** State clearly: "I am beginning to feel unsafe to be around and need to take time out. I will go for a walk (in such and such a place) and I will be back in (x number of minutes) once I have calmed down, worked out what is going on and know I can be safe towards you."
- **Do something physical to use up the charge of adrenaline from your conflict.** Go for a walk, run or bike ride. This will give you some distance from the situation and time to think through what was going on.
- **Phone a friend or one of the telephone counselling services** available in your community and talk over what is happening.
- **Phone the person who you were unsafe with** and find out whether the other person feels safe having you back.
- **Return at the time agreed to.** This helps to build trust in the relationship and shows that you are genuine in trying to act respectfully.
- **Negotiate a time within the next 24 hours to talk about what happened.** Talk about what it was you were reacting to in a non-abusive way, using 'I' statements but avoid statements such as 'I think that you ...' or 'I feel you ...' which are really blaming statements. Also avoid unhelpful strategies such as dragging up the past, blaming, not listening, and so on.

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## Don't

- ***Don't drink or take drugs.*** Alcohol and drug-taking has a high degree of association with abusive behaviour. While alcohol does not cause abuse, it can be used as an excuse. Being affected by alcohol, even slightly, makes it harder to make safe and non-abusive decisions as alcohol and drugs interfere with our ability to think clearly. Time out is for serious thinking and trying to understand what is going on. If you make responsible choices around this issue this will communicate to others you are serious about your decision to deal with your abusive and violent behaviour
- ***Don't drive.*** When people are highly aroused emotionally their ability to think and co-ordinate actions is affected. There are enough dangerous drivers on the road without you becoming another one.
- ***Don't do anything to harm yourself or others.***

Some men find it useful to photocopy these guidelines and put them on their fridge with a couple of magnets so that they can grab them on the way out the door. Others write them on a card that they keep in their wallets. Think for a moment about what would work for you. For a number of reasons some men find time out a difficult strategy to put in place. Firstly, men have been taught not to walk away from a fight. This is closely tied to the need to win. There are no winners when it comes to abusive behaviour. Another benefit of time out is that it helps us begin the process of negotiating with others, a very useful survival skill. It also signals to others that we are prepared to be responsible for our feelings and actions. If you handle it well, then others will see the benefits.

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## Exercise

Filling in the following chart may highlight your difficulties in taking time out.



What could I say to convince myself to stay?:

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What others might say to stop me from going:

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Compare your list with the following list that men from one of my groups came up with:

### *WHAT I WILL SAY TO CONVINC ME MYSELF TO STAY?*

I might lose if I leave.

The issue is too important to drop it now.

I've got to get my point of view across.

Why should I go? I'm the boss around here.

It's raining; it's cold.

We're expecting guests; I'll have to stay.

She'll win. She thinks she's won. She'll think I am a wimp.

Where's my pride?

If I leave they might harm themselves.

What will they think of me, an idiot perhaps?

I've got nowhere to go.

It's too late to go out now.

No friends.

I'll try and stay cool.

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This list came from a group of men who had been abusive in all ways imaginable — from physical assault to emotional putdowns. Notice that many of the ideas are about winning and losing, and the need to be in control of the situation.

## *WHAT OTHERS MIGHT SAY TO STOP ME FROM GOING*

Stay here and finish it.

You are always walking out.

Can't you handle it?

If you walk out now take your things and don't come back.

How am I going to manage when I'm relying on you?

When relationships are damaged, others may well be sceptical of you are leaving yet again. But the bottom line is: if you can't stay in the situation and guarantee safety, then you have to leave. Some men make the choice to leave home and go into a flat until they feel they are safe to be around.

Bernie found taking time out really useful. It made a profound difference to his relationship. He would ignore his partner until she was highly agitated. He would refuse to talk about issues; treating everything with an 'it's not such a big deal' attitude. As Bernie states:

*'I could see that over the years it has caused a lot of damage to my relationship and my decision now would be to say stop ... let's sort it out if we can ... if we are in a frame of mind to. If not, let's take a break and come back to it. Time out was the biggest thing for me.'*

## **Questions to Ponder**

- What would stop me using time out as a safety strategy?
- Will others respect me more or less if they see me taking steps to be responsible for my feelings and actions?

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