

Cooling Hot Heads



Have you ever been so upset with your partner that you can't think straight? It is normal to have moments of frustration and anger in relationships. How we manage strong emotions in our relationships is what matters. Being filled with uncontrolled, unmanaged anger during an argument is not constructive for you or your partner and can have long-term damaging effects to the relationship. So, what can you do to cool down and reach a point where you can think more clearly and problem solve with your partner?

When you or your partner get to a point where you are feeling overwhelmed or "flooded," it is important to take a break from the situation for at least 20 minutes, about the amount of time that it takes for the parasympathetic anti-stress hormones to put the brakes on runaway emotions (Navarra, 2021). Taking a break can help you to prevent further escalation and possibly saying or doing things that you will regret. Consider creating a signal that you need a break such as a code word. Use this time away from each other to calm yourself and get your mind off the situation by doing something such as:

- Focused breathing: Take ten slow, deep breaths, pausing for one or two seconds after inhaling.

- Positive imagery: Close your eyes and think of a positive, relaxing experience, time or place.
- Get active: Take a short walk to help you decompress, burn off extra tension and reduce stress or, if it works better for you, try non-strenuous, slow yoga-like exercises to relax your muscles to feel calmer.
- Progressive muscle relaxation: slowly tense then relax each muscle group.
- Listen to calming music.
- Slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as “relax” while breathing deeply.

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Once you are both calm enough to have a conversation, make sure you approach each other to try talking again. At some point, it may also be helpful to talk about what may have triggered such intense emotions (such as past experiences/history). While intense feelings and conflict are uncomfortable, with effort, difficult conversations can also lead to increased closeness. For more information see this article:

The positive side of anger in relationships: A door to increasing intimacy.

References

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