



Kei Skeide, MS LMFT
7201 Metro Boulevard, Suite 550
Minneapolis, MN 55431
kei@kwscw.org | 612-208-6807

Taking a Time-Out: A Loving Way to Pause and Reset

Why Use a Time-Out?

Sometimes a conversation hits a point where one or more people in the relationship feel overwhelmed, flooded, shut down, or like they're about to say something they'll regret. In those moments, staying in the interaction often causes more harm than good. That's when a **Time-Out** can become a powerful tool—not to punish, but to protect connection.

Time-Outs are never about punishment. They're about *intentionality*—a conscious choice to pause, breathe, and return to the relationship from a more grounded place.

As couples therapist, Terry Real says:

“The best defense against verbal abuse is a formal time-out.”

What Is a Time-Out?

Calling a time-out is a relational act. It's saying:

“Dear partner(s), I'm at my edge. I care about you and this conversation, but I'm getting dysregulated. Rather than risk saying or doing something hurtful, I'm stepping away. I will check back in with you soon—this isn't me disappearing.”

This signal, whether it's verbal (“Time-out”), visual (the “T” sign), or agreed-on emoji/text, is a **commitment to emotional safety**. It's not withdrawal, silence, or abandonment. It's a bridge.



Kei Skeide, MS LMFT
7201 Metro Boulevard, Suite 550
Minneapolis, MN 55431
kei@kwscw.org | 612-208-6807

How to Use Time-Outs in Your Relationship(s)

1. Time-Outs Start With You

Call a time-out when *you* notice you're slipping out of your grounded self. This isn't about calling someone else out—it's about taking responsibility for your own presence and capacity.

2. Clarify Intentions

Let your partner(s) know:

- Why you're stepping away (e.g., "I'm starting to spiral")
- When you'll check in (e.g., "I'll text you in 30 minutes")

This clarity helps everyone stay connected, even in the pause.

3. Respect the Pause

Once someone calls a time-out, the conversation ends. Full stop. Don't chase. Don't linger. And if you're the one who called it—*honor your own boundary*. Go breathe, walk, shake, anything that helps your nervous system settle.

4. Use Gentle Check-Ins

If the pause extends, stay connected:

- "Still taking space. I love you. I'm not ready to talk, but I'm here."
- "Need a few more hours, still with you. Let's check in around 7?"

For polycules or long-distance dynamics, a voice note or timestamped message can help.

5. Don't Rehash the Fight

When you reconnect, avoid jumping straight back into the topic. Reconnection comes first. Try:

- "Can we sit and breathe together?"
- "Wanna watch something light and decompress?"

Terry Real recommends a **24-hour moratorium** on the triggering issue. Wait to return to the content—start with care.



Kei Skeide, MS LMFT
7201 Metro Boulevard, Suite 550
Minneapolis, MN 55431
kei@kwscw.org | 612-208-6807

6. Know What Time-Outs Are *Not*

- ❌ Not silent treatment
- ❌ Not “winning” by walking away
- ❌ Not a power play
- ✅ A tool for safety and reset
- ✅ A boundary you’re setting with yourself
- ✅ A skill you’re building together

Notes for Complex Dynamics

- Co-create signals (like 🌱, 🙋, or “brb heart”) that feel affirming and non-threatening.
- Acknowledge that for many of us, stepping away can feel scary. Build trust by checking in gently and consistently.
- Each dyad or pod may have different needs—be explicit about agreements and timelines.
- Consider naming in advance what a time-out *is* and *isn’t* for your system. (E.g., “If I call a time-out, I’m not leaving the relationship—I’m protecting us.”)

When to Return?

Return from a time-out when:

- Your heart rate is back to normal
- You feel soft enough to listen, not just defend
- You’re ready to reconnect—not re-fight

If you're still agitated, extend the time-out—but always **communicate**. Reconnection begins with transparency and good faith.



Kei Skeide, MS LMFT
7201 Metro Boulevard, Suite 550
Minneapolis, MN 55431
kei@kwscw.org | 612-208-6807

Example Language

Calling the Time-Out

“Time-out. I’m noticing I’m too activated to talk in a way that feels good. I care about you and want to come back clearer. I’ll check in in 30 minutes.”

Check-In Text

“Still a bit edgy, but I’m here. Need more space—can we reconnect after dinner?”

Reconnecting

“Thanks for giving me space. Can we do something gentle together before we talk more?”

Final Thoughts

Time-Outs aren’t easy. They require self-awareness, care, and collaboration. But they’re also a beautiful way to *practice love*, especially in moments that don’t feel loving.

“Love is not something you have—it’s something you *do*.” – Terry Real

The more you practice this skill, the easier it gets to pause, return, and repair. And in queer love, poly love, and chosen family—**repair is resistance**. Time-Outs help make space for that.