

Controlling Emotional Reactivity

The following concepts can help you be less emotionally reactive in close relationships, especially when there is a conflict between you and the other person:

Time-Out

- Tell the other person you need a time out and then walk away, for at least 30 minutes.
- If the other person asks for a time out, always honor it and just say “OK”.
- Go somewhere you can think – talk a walk, go out in the backyard, or go to a place where you can have privacy, and then focus only on yourself.
- During the time out, be intentional about your breathing (breathe in allowing your abdomen to “inflate” with each breath, then breathe out allowing your abdomen to “deflate”). Do this for at least 5 minutes until you are feeling a sense of calmness.
- While you’re breathing, ask God for peace in your heart, and keep asking until you feel that your heartbeat has slowed down significantly.
- Lastly, realize that the other person didn’t “make you” feel the way you feel – the emotional reactivity came from your own thoughts. No one controls your thoughts and emotions but you. Don’t blame the other – be honest about your thoughts and beliefs that led to intense feelings.

Trip-In

- Stay with the internal focus you achieved during your time-out.
- Ask God to search your heart and mind – to show you what was going on inside of you before you got emotionally reactive. Ask yourself:
 - How was I internally defending myself?
 - What was I internally demanding of the other?
 - What effect did my self-talk have on me and the other?
- Ask God to help you become aware of the specific words you used in your head or in the conversation with the other person.
- Write down the words / phrases that caused you to get emotionally reactive – things like:
 - Cursing, name-calling, put-downs, judgments
 - Catastrophizing (i.e., “I’ve had it. This will never work. I can’t stand you!”)
 - Should, ought to, got to, have to, need to, must, etc.
 - I’m just trying to “get you to...” (understand, stop doing that, treat me better, etc.)
 - You make me so angry!
 - You always / you never...
 - You think you’re never wrong!
 - You don’t get to talk to me that way!

Try Again

- Allow at least 30 minutes to go by before attempting to talk to the other person again.
- Before you speak to the other person, commit to yourself and to God that you will seek first to understand rather to be understood. Do not go back into a conversation if you have the same attitude, thoughts, and feelings you had before. Maybe wait 24 hours.
- Pray for humility and love before speaking. Read the list of the fruits of the Spirit before starting a new conversation (Galatians 5:22-23) and then BE a spiritual person.
- Agree upon a time that is good for the other person to talk, and let them go first.