

# ◀ EXITING ▶

By Scott Braithwaite, PhD  
Department of Psychology, Brigham Young University

## *Big argument headed your way? It's time to turn around.*

**H**ave you ever seen road signs that say, “Do Not Enter,” “Danger,” or “Wrong Way”? These signs can prevent a driver from making a big mistake. They communicate the urgent need to change course to avoid serious harm.

In relationships, there are danger signs that reveal when a conversation is headed toward trouble. We've all gone down these wrong paths before. After a disagreement, we feel hurt, and we suspect that the other person does too. We wish we could have a do-over.

Why wasn't it clear that we were heading toward trouble?

### **NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND UNKIND WORDS**

When we feel strong negative emotions, we often feel emboldened to say things we later regret. These emotions make us feel so right that we stop listening to the other person. We want to win. We want them to not only see our point of view but also acknowledge that theirs is wrong.

Our emotions can also make it easy to assume that the other person's motives are more negative than they really are. That's why our regrets about the conversation usually come later, when the emotion subsides. Then we can more clearly see how we were misguided and unkind. Anger and “grievous words” go together (see Proverbs 15:1). But we've been told: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but [rather] that which is good [and] edifying” (Ephesians 4:29).

### **WARNING SIGNS**

So what are the signs that we are about to get into a damaging argument? Here are some important ones:

- You feel really angry (genius, right?).
- Your words are condescending or belittling.
- You're calling the other person names or using hateful language.
- You assume you know what the other person “really means” (i.e., mind reading).
- You feel like trying to talk is hopeless and you want to escape.

All of these indicate we are on the wrong road and we should change course.

If we see these danger signs, what should we do? Call a time-out!



# DANGEROUS

## CONVERSATIONS



### “TIME-IN”

Coming back to talk about it—calling a time-in—matters because we don’t deal well with problems by avoiding them. We need to address the issue, but we want to do it under better conditions.

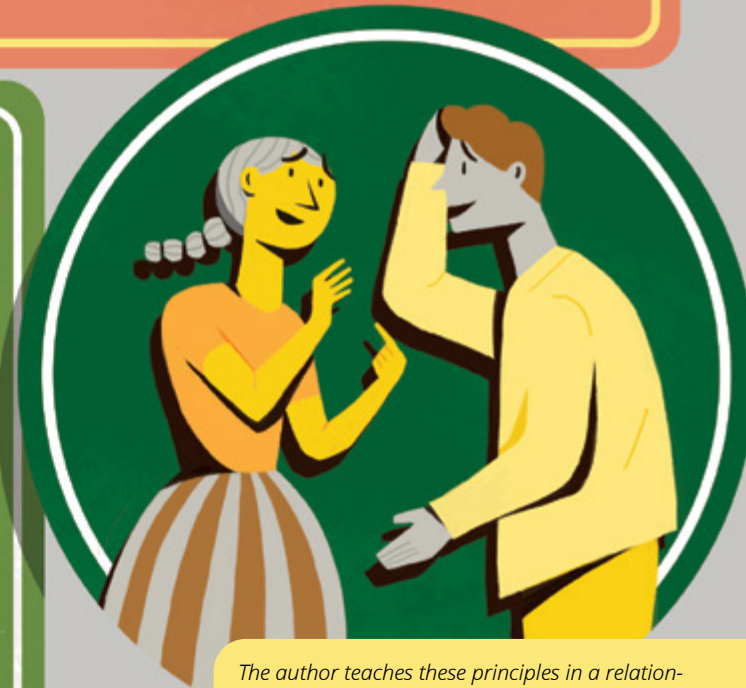
Most of the time, with people we love we can have a constructive conversation if we’re not overwhelmed with negative emotions. So, next time your conversation feels like you are speeding past a “Do Not Enter” sign, choose to put on the brakes and call a time-out until the danger signs disappear. **NE**

### “TIME-OUT!”

Calling a time-out is not merely escaping a conversation. Instead, you’re choosing to avoid a destructive interaction with a plan to talk later, when you can do a better job. It’s one way of being “slow to anger” (Proverbs 16:32). Sometimes we think that the best way to keep our relationships healthy is to stick with a conversation, no matter what. But that’s not always the case. Sometimes, especially when we feel a lot of negative emotion, continuing to talk is likely to do more damage than good.

The best way to call a time-out is to say something like this: “I’m worried that if I keep talking I’m going to say things that I don’t mean. Can I take a little bit of time to collect my thoughts and come back and talk about this with you soon?”

Notice that you called a time-out on yourself, and not the other person? Calling a time-out on the other person won’t work as well (for instance, “You are out of control and acting like a child! I’ll talk to you later when you can grow up!”).



*The author teaches these principles in a relationship education seminar along with colleagues Howard Markham and Scott Stanley.*