

Managing a Relationship Pause

Couples may decide, often reluctantly, to have some sort of pause, break, space or time apart from one another. Usually, this happens because things have become fragile in the relationship. Perhaps the level of conflict has got out of hand, or something very upsetting has occurred. Perhaps one or both people are seriously considering ending the relationship, or feel a strong need to try to reset, reinvigorate or refresh it. The emotional stakes are usually very high leading up to a pause, so it is important to plan and manage it carefully and sensitively. I have seen some couples manage pauses well and others poorly. Here are some of the important considerations when trying to manage one well.

Explain your intentions for the pause clearly and sensitively

Even suggesting the idea of a pause or break can be extremely delicate, particularly if the person calling for it is already perceived as generally avoidant or less committed to the relationship. Indeed, the word 'break' itself may hold worrying connotations. 'Pause', 'space' or 'time apart' may be less emotive terms. The more sensitive or insecure partner might interpret a request for a pause as an attempt to end the relationship, even when this is not the intention. Of course, ending the relationship may indeed be what the person requesting the pause has in mind.

Nevertheless, it is very important for the person requesting the pause to be as clear as possible within themselves about their reasons for doing so, and then to convey their intentions to their partner as clearly as possible. Here are some common reasons people express for wishing to have a pause:

"I need some time and space apart from you to help me decide if I can be happy in the relationship."

"It feels like our conflict is getting out of hand, and I think we need to stop communicating for a while to let things settle down."

"I feel like I've lost touch with myself (or my identity) and need some time to myself to see if I can get that sense back."

Of course, you have the right to ask for time apart. But, especially if you want the option of ultimately staying with your partner, you should try to make it as easy as possible for them to understand your motivation. It might be important to add something like:

"I'm hoping this will give our relationship the best chance of surviving."

Establish clear conditions

Particularly for an insecure, sensitive or upset partner, the suggestion of having a pause can conjure up worrying thoughts about what damage might be done to the relationship during the time apart. The idea of both parties having some solitary time to contemplate the relationship might be agreeable or even comforting, but what if, during the time apart, the other person talks to someone who makes them feel more negatively about you, or even tries to persuade them to end the relationship? Worse still, what if someone tries to woo your partner? And what if your partner actually shares intimacy with someone else?

There can be no universal rules about exactly which conditions or boundaries should be in place during a pause. However, setting some is very important in order to manage anxiety and give the pause the best chance of working—whether that means saving the relationship or helping to end it smoothly. Here are some important considerations:

How long should we have no contact whatsoever?

While not always essential, a period of no contact whatsoever is often helpful to allow things to settle and give both people some clarity of mind. This period could be an afternoon, a day, a week, a fortnight or a month. Some of us may even know couples who have come back together after many years of zero contact. My suggestion is to try to determine the *minimum* period of no contact you think you need in order to gain some clarity.

Where will each of us be located?

Perhaps one of you can stay at home with the kids while the other stays at a friend's place. Or perhaps you both need to remain in the house but agree either not to interact at all or at least not to discuss the relationship for a set period of time.

How will we interact with others?

Again, there are no universal rules here, as this will depend on the circumstances of your relationship. It may be important to agree not to interact with someone one of you has had an affair with, or perhaps an ex-partner. You may both agree not to have any intimate or romantic contact with anyone else during the time apart. Or you may agree that 'anything goes'. What matters is that you determine and agree on the conditions of the pause together.

When and how will we reconnect?

I recommend establishing a specific time to check back in with one another and agreeing on who will initiate the contact and in what format. For example, you could agree that at 2pm on Sunday you will meet for half an hour to talk about how each of you has

experienced the time apart and how you are feeling about the relationship. To be cautious, you might even agree to resume communication only in your next counselling session. It may also be worth agreeing in advance on what will happen if either of you feels you need more time.

Final Thoughts

The most common mistake I see couples make when trying to manage a pause is vagueness about the conditions. This typically leads to confusion, uncertainty, insecurity, anxiety and misunderstandings. I recommend erring on the side of more rather than less structure. Above all, be sensitive and fair to yourself and your partner, and stick to the agreed-upon conditions.