

When Emotions Take Over: Learning to P.A.U.S.E. Before You React

Rian Gordon

08/26/2026



When Emotions Take Over: Learning to P.A.U.S.E. Before You React

You know the moment.

Your partner says *that thing in that tone*, and suddenly the conversation you intended to have calmly is no longer very calm. Your chest tightens. Your heart starts beating faster. Maybe your voice gets louder. You start mentally assembling evidence for why you are absolutely right.

Or perhaps you go the opposite direction. Your mind goes blank. You stop talking. You stare at your phone or retreat into another room because you simply cannot do this conversation anymore.

Most couples have experienced some version of this. And while it can feel like a communication problem, sometimes the first problem isn't actually what you're saying to each other. It's what's happening *inside* you while you're trying to say it.

Relationship researchers sometimes refer to this experience as [physiological flooding](#)—a state of heightened physical and emotional response during conflict. When we're flooded, listening, empathizing, and problem-solving can become much more difficult.

When that happens, pushing harder to "solve the problem" may not help. Instead, it might be time to **P.A.U.S.E.**

P — Prepare for Your Predictable Pressure Points

One of the best ways to manage emotional activation is to recognize the situations that are likely to trigger it *before* they happen.

Every relationship has pressure points. Maybe conversations about money make you anxious. Perhaps criticism about parenting immediately puts you on the defensive. Maybe your partner looking at their phone while you're talking makes you feel dismissed. Or certain disagreements stir up painful experiences from earlier in your relationship—or even long before you met each other.

Instead of waiting until you're in the middle of another argument, take a moment right now to get curious about your patterns.

Ask yourself: *What conversations tend to activate me? What does my partner say or do that I have an especially strong reaction to? What meaning do I tend to attach to those moments?*

Knowing your triggers doesn't mean your partner has to tiptoe around you. It means you can enter difficult conversations with greater awareness. You might even tell your partner beforehand: *"Money conversations can make me anxious, and sometimes I get defensive. I really want to talk about this well. Can we both try to go slowly?"*

You can't prevent yourself from ever getting upset, and you shouldn't. [Anger and other strong emotions](#) are an important part of being human and being in relationship. But recognizing and being honest about what really gets you riled up can help you and your partner prepare for a more successful and productive conversation, especially when you have to talk about the hard stuff.

A — Attend to What's Happening in You

Here's a simple but powerful principle: **Name the state, don't narrate the story.**

At its heart, this is a practice in mindfulness—non-judgmentally observing the situation rather than making assumptions or placing meaning on what's happening. This principle can be incredibly helpful during couple conflict.

Imagine your partner interrupts you. The **story** might sound like:

- "They never listen to me."
- "They don't care what I think."
- "They always have to be right."

But attending to what's happening inside of you sounds different:

- "I'm getting angry."
- "My chest feels tight."
- "I'm starting to shut down."

That small shift matters. Research on [affect labeling](#)—putting emotions into words—has found that naming emotional experiences can reduce activity in brain regions involved in emotional reactivity.

So, before deciding what your partner meant, notice what's happening within you. Your emotions are information! Listen to them before you let them just take the wheel and drive.

U — Use a 10-Second Regulation Move

Here's the good news: you don't necessarily need to become completely calm before you can respond in a way you're proud of. You just need to create enough space between what you *feel* and what you *do* to make a more intentional choice.

When you notice yourself getting upset or activated, try something small. Take ten seconds to just slow things down. Press your feet into the floor. Unclench your jaw. Drop your shoulders. Open your hands instead of crossing your arms. Take one deep breath with a longer exhale. Lower your voice slightly. Slow your speech by 10%.

And if ten seconds isn't enough, don't be afraid to ask for more time. If either partner becomes truly flooded, relationship researchers John & Julie Gottman recommend taking a break of [at least 20 minutes](#) to allow your brain and body to calm down before trying again. The important part is communicating that you're taking a break, not abandoning the conversation, and agreeing to come back to it.

Try: *"I care about this conversation, but I'm too worked up to do it well right now. Can we take 30 minutes and try again?"*

Then actually use the break to regulate. Take a walk, listen to music, breathe, stretch, do something that really calms you down. Rehearsing your closing argument for 30 minutes doesn't count.

S — Select Your Next Move

This may be the most important part of the P.A.U.S.E.

Once you're a little more regulated, you have the ability to consider how you want to respond and then make a choice that reflects the kind of partner you want to be. Do you need to listen? Ask a question? Explain how you're feeling? Apologize? Set a boundary? Ask for a break? Reach for your partner? Let something small go?

In a healthy relationship, sometimes your next move may be: *"I want to understand what you're saying. Can you say that again?"* Other times it might be: *"I want to talk about this, but I don't want us to call each other names. Can we start over?"* The goal isn't to choose the perfect response. It's to give yourself the chance to choose how you want to respond instead of simply being carried along by your initial reaction. That distinction can change the direction of an entire conversation.

E — Evaluate, Then Engage Again

After a difficult interaction, couples often spend plenty of time evaluating what their partner did wrong. Try evaluating something else: the pattern.

Ask yourself:

- What happened in me?
- What helped—or didn't help?
- What needs to change next time?

Maybe you realized you shouldn't start difficult conversations at 11:30 p.m. Maybe your spouse learned that following you from room to room when you ask for space makes it harder for you to calm down. Maybe you discovered that when your partner says, *"I need a break,"* you hear, *"I don't care about you."* Those discoveries can help you create a better plan for next time.

Then comes the relational piece: engage again. A pause shouldn't become avoidance or punishment. [Taking a break from conflict](#) works best when couples return to the conversation after they've had an opportunity to regulate. Otherwise, a helpful timeout can turn into prolonged withdrawal or a stalemate.

Come back. Repair. Try again. You might even say: "*That didn't go how I wanted it to. Can we start over?*" Those may be some of the most relationship-strengthening words we can learn to say.

Your Earliest Signal Is Your Best Opportunity

The earlier you notice that you're becoming activated, the more options you have. When you're getting emotionally activated, what usually happens first? Maybe your jaw tightens, your stomach drops, your heart speeds up, or you start talking faster. Maybe you even become sarcastic, feel an overwhelming urge to prove your point, or suddenly stop feeling much of anything and just want the conversation to end.

That first signal can become your reminder:

P.A.U.S.E.

- P** — Prepare for predictable pressure points.
- A** — Attend to what's happening in you.
- U** — Use a 10-second regulation move.
- S** — Select your next move.
- E** — Evaluate, then engage again.

The goal isn't to never become upset with your partner. Strong relationships aren't built by two people who never get angry, defensive, hurt, triggered, or overwhelmed. They're built by people who gradually become better at noticing what is happening inside themselves, regulating enough to choose what happens next, and responding in ways that protect their connection even when emotions are running high.

Sometimes one small pause is all you need to make a different choice, and one different choice can change the whole conversation.