

# The STOP Strategy:

## Instructions for Therapists

### INTRODUCTION

The STOP Strategy is the homework tool I give to couples whose fights prevent them from making progress in therapy. It teaches them how to interrupt a fight before it gets out of hand and reconnect from a calmer, saner, more respectful place.

The handout includes good instructions, so you don't need to spend more than a couple minutes explaining it. You just need to say what it is, why it works, and how you think it will help. I recommend you give each couple two copies of the handout. That way if one person "loses" their copy, they always have another.

Below is a script you can use to introduce The STOP Strategy to your clients. I wait to introduce it until I've either witnessed a fight or have just heard about a fight that occurred during the week.

*(I just timed myself reading the script below and it took 2 minutes.)*

### THE SCRIPT

"It sounds to me like the two of you could use some help handling your conflicts better, so you can stop hurting each other and start resolving some of the issues that brought you here."

"The best tool I know of for helping couples do this is called The Stop Strategy. It's a simple, 4-step process that begins with a Time-Out and ends with the two of you reconnecting from a calmer, saner, and more respectful place."

"The 4 steps are easy to remember because each step starts with one letter of the word STOP: **S**top, **T**ime Out, **O**wn your part, **P**ease offering. The handout tells you exactly what to do at each step, so I won't go through it here, but the basic idea is that when people get upset, the rational

part of their brain shuts down and the irrational part heats up. That's why we say and do stupid, awful things to each other when we're hurt, mad, or scared."

"By taking a Time Out, we literally give our brains a chance to cool off until the rational part of the brain is once again in control and we can respond more thoughtfully and more respectfully to the situation."

"From now on, I'd like you to use this strategy as soon as either one of you feels like you're heading down the wrong path and you're too upset to change direction. Either one of you can say: '**STOP! I need a Time-Out,**' but both of you must honor the request."

"When you call for a Time-Out, it's important to set a reasonable and specific time limit so your partner isn't left hanging. It's okay to ask for 30 minutes, as long as you come back in 30 minutes. But it's not okay to say, 'I'm taking a Time-Out and I'll be back when I feel like it.'"

"And remember, asking for a Time-Out is just the beginning of The Stop Strategy. You also have to calm yourself down, reflect on your own attitudes and behaviors, and be ready to come back together with a Peace Offering. If you haven't done all 4 steps, then you haven't completed The Stop Strategy."

(If your couples are already using the **OuchKit**, you can have them fill out **Ouch!** and **Sorry** cards for each other during their Time-Outs. Because writing requires the rational part of the brain, the act of filling out the cards will automatically calm the central nervous system and re-engage the higher level functions of the brain.)

*Have fun, Betsy*