

ESCALATED

Redirect focus for de-escalation to get back in the zone:

Slow the pace of conversation

Focus on soothing breaths

Internal body scan--release tension

Dial down emotions

Focus on getting grounded

Change the subject to pleasant thoughts

Meditation exercise

Ask one partner to leave the room

Take a break



THE ZONE

The zone for optimum communication in marriage is the calm, connected space where both partners feel safe, emotionally regulated, and able to listen as well as express themselves. In this zone, neither person is escalated or shut down—they're balanced enough to stay respectful, curious, and collaborative, which allows real understanding and problem-solving to take place.

Focus on:

Mad, sad, glad, scared emotions

Needs and wants

Current unresolved issues

Past unresolved issues

Goals, hopes and dreams



SHUT DOWN

Focus on re-engagement:

Slow the pace of conversation

Focus on soothing breaths

Internal body scan--release tension

Dial down emotions

Focus on getting grounded

Change the subject to pleasant thoughts

Meditation exercise

Ask one partner to leave the room

Take a break

ESCALATED

Physical Signs

- Muscle tension (clenched jaw, fists, rigid posture)
- Flushed face or rapid breathing, restlessness (pacing, fidgeting, tapping)
- Loud sighs, rolling eyes, slamming doors, or other exaggerated movements

Verbal / Vocal Signs

- Louder or sharper tone of voice, faster speech, sometimes interrupting or talking over others
- Sarcasm, blaming, hostile remarks, and/or heightened sensitivity to perceived criticism or disrespect

Emotional / Cognitive Signs

- Narrowed focus on the perceived problem or “threat”
- Black-and-white thinking (“always,” “never”)

Behavioral Signs

- Interrupting conversations or dominating the dialogue
- Becoming defensive, dismissive, or argumentative (yelling, threats)
- Less ability to use problem-solving or rational reasoning

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SHUT DOWN

Physical Signs

- Slumped or rigid posture, often turning away, minimal movement (still, frozen, or withdrawn)
- Flat facial expression with little visible emotion, lack of eye contact (looking down, away, or staring blankly)
- Quiet or monotone voice, or complete silence

Verbal / Vocal Signs

- Long pauses or refusal to respond or one-word answers (“fine,” “whatever,” “I don’t know”)
- Dismissive “I don’t care” or “it doesn’t matter”
- Loss of ability to explain feelings or thoughts clearly

Emotional / Cognitive Signs

- Overwhelmed, flooded, or numb inside, difficulty accessing emotions or thoughts in the moment
- Desire to escape the situation—either mentally (zoning out) or physically (leaving)
- Detachment or shutting down to avoid further conflict or pain
- Difficulty listening or processing what’s being said, heightened sensitivity to perceived criticism or disrespect

Behavioral Signs

- Withdrawing from the conversation, either by going quiet or physically leaving
- Avoiding engagement (crossing arms, staring at phone, walking away)
- Refusal to participate in problem-solving, appearing indifferent, but often masking deep overwhelm