



WHAT TO DO WHEN ONE OF YOU GETS FLOODED

A gentle guide for couples when
conversations become
overwhelming

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What flooding means



Flooding is when a conversation starts to feel too emotionally or physically intense to handle clearly.

It can happen during conflict, intimacy talks, conversations about betrayal, or moments when one or both people feel criticised, overwhelmed, cornered, or unsafe.

When someone is flooded, they often cannot think, listen, or respond well.

This is not stubbornness.

It is usually a nervous system response.

Flooding may sound or look like:

- going silent
- walking away suddenly
- getting defensive very quickly
- snapping, shouting, or escalating
- feeling panicky
- saying “whatever” or “forget it”
- mentally going blank
- feeling frozen or shut down
- wanting to escape the conversation

In the body, it may feel like:

- tight chest
- racing heart
- clenched jaw
- shaking
- nausea
- dizziness
- heat, panic, or pressure

What flooding can look like

Why this matters

When someone is flooded, trying harder usually does not help.

Pushing for answers, clarity, reassurance, or resolution in that moment often makes things worse.

The goal is not to force the conversation through.

The goal is to reduce harm, regulate, and return later with more steadiness.



First step: name what is happening



A very useful first step is simply naming it.

You can say:

- “I’m getting overwhelmed.”
- “I think I’m flooded.”
- “I want to keep talking, but I’m not steady right now.”
- “I need a pause before I say something unhelpful.”

Naming it helps stop the spiral from turning into blame.

How to pause without _____ abandoning the conversation

A pause should be clear and respectful.

Try:

- say that you need a break
- say roughly when you will return
- keep it calm and simple
- do not storm off without a word if possible

A helpful script:

“I want to come back to this, but I’m too overwhelmed right now. Can we pause and talk again in 20 or 30 minutes?”

This is very different from:

- shutting down completely
- leaving without explanation
- refusing to return
- using the pause to punish



What not to do during the break

During the pause, try not to:

- rehearse your attack
- send angry messages
- use alcohol or other substances to numb out
- scroll in a rage
- obsess over proving your point
- use the break to silently withdraw for the rest of the day

The pause is for regulation, not avoidance or escalation.

What helps during the break

Use the pause to calm the nervous system.

Try:

- slow breathing
- walking
- stretching
- water or tea
- grounding through touch or movement
- sitting somewhere quiet
- noticing what you are feeling in your body
- reminding yourself that you do not need to solve everything in one moment

A helpful phrase:

“My job right now is to steady myself, not win the conversation.”

If your partner is the one who is flooded

If your partner is overwhelmed, try not to chase, corner, or force them to continue.

Instead:

- lower your voice
- keep your words brief
- do not stack new complaints on top
- avoid sarcasm or “fine, just leave then”
- agree on a return time if possible

Helpful responses:

- “Okay, let’s pause and come back.”
- “I don’t want this to get worse.”
- “Let’s talk again when we’re both steadier.”

How to return to the conversation

Coming back matters.

When you return:

- begin more slowly
- stay on one issue
- speak more gently
- avoid reopening everything at once
- remember the goal is understanding, not punishment

You can begin with:

- “I’m ready to try again.”
- “What feels most important to say first?”
- “Can we keep this to one piece at a time?”

WHAT IF ONE OF YOU NEVER COMES BACK?

If pauses repeatedly turn into:

- avoidance
- refusal
- silence for days
- one person is always chasing and the other disappearing

Then the issue is no longer just flooding.

It may mean the relationship needs help with:

- conflict structure
- emotional safety
- accountability
- repair
- or deeper patterns of withdrawing, chasing, or repeated disconnection

A GENTLE REMINDER

Flooding does not mean the relationship is broken.

It means the conversation has moved beyond what one or both nervous systems can manage well in that moment.

Many couples improve not by forcing harder conversations, but by learning how to pause and return differently.

IMPORTANT NOTE

This guide is for general relationship education and reflection. It does not replace counselling, psychotherapy, medical care, legal advice, crisis support, or safeguarding intervention.

If there is fear, coercion, intimidation, emotional abuse, physical violence, sexual pressure, threats, or immediate danger in the relationship, communication tools may not be safe to use without appropriate professional support.

If you are in immediate danger, contact emergency services or a crisis support service in your area.

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