

## How to Deal with Emotional Flooding

Here are some things I have learned along the way from my own experiences, and from counseling other couples, that may help you and your mate find your ways when either of you gets derailed by emotional flooding:

- Make a commitment to try self-soothing the next time you find yourself caught up in a heavy emotion over this or that with your partner. The reality is that it is not easy to hold back from acting out when we are completely enraged or feeling utterly devastated. But if you have essentially accepted the idea that you can't entirely trust yourself and your perceptions when you are in a state of total reactivity, you at least have a fighting chance of pulling yourself back from the spiral. Some part of you will have registered the notion that you probably shouldn't be so quick to buy whatever blame narrative or catastrophic rendering of things that your mind has come up with.
- Mentally store a picture of your partner at their best -- a moment when you experience them as loving, generous and well-meaning. Add as much detail as you can to really capture how you experience your partner when you are feeling loved and cared for. I like to picture my husband standing at the top of the stairs waiting to greet me at the end of day with a look of pure happiness. Try shifting your focus to this image when you get trapped in a negative story about them. This helps your brain move out of the reactive myopia and reintegrate a more balanced view of your partner.
- When you do get flooded, you need to hit the pause button on your interaction and turn your attention inward. I find that before I can do anything, I need to reassure myself that I will be fine if I wait for this storm to pass. Like a standoff with an armed hostage-taker, I have to convince her to at least put down the gun before we can keep talking.

- Observe what's happening. This is the key to creating some distance between yourself and the storm of thoughts and feelings. Mentally note that you have gotten activated. Start to investigate what happens when you get emotionally flooded. Notice what thoughts take shape in your mind and what sensations move through your body.
- Use images to ground the process of slowing, observing and letting go. You might want to imagine your mind as a wheel that was suddenly spinning furiously. With each breath, you are able to slow down its speed until it is barely turning. Or picture your racing thoughts as a cloud of sand that has been kicked up in the water. Wait for the sand to sink back down to the seabed, leaving clear water. As your frantic thoughts subside, your nervous system can calm down, too. Imagine any constriction melting. Relax your hands, imagining yourself physically letting go of the story you created about what has happened with your mate.
- Take timeouts when you need to. Sometimes you can self-soothe on the spot. At other times, you may need to take a break from the interaction. Make a plan with your partner that if either of you gets too activated in an argument to hear the other -- to avoid saying things you will regret -- you will take a time out. Agree to come back together to continue the discussion within a certain period of time, but don't delay indefinitely. Use the time to actively soothe yourself rather than obsessing over your version of what went wrong, which will just keep you activated. The point here is to disengage with your reaction so you can re-engage with your mate.

And by all means, don't get down on yourself when you do get tripped up and act out. That's what "I'm sorry" is for.