

ONE STEP CLOSER CO™

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EMERGENCY TOOLKIT · NO. 05

Conflict *Activation*

What to do when relationship conflict triggers your nervous system

Fight · Flight · Freeze · Fawn · Rupture · Repair

6 Core Tools for Nervous System Regulation · One Step Closer Co™

The Nervous System Regulation Toolkit Series

One Step Closer Co™

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A Note Before You Begin

Conflict is not the problem. Conflict is inevitable between any two people who both have needs, histories, and nervous systems. The problem is what happens when conflict activates us beyond our capacity to stay present with it.

When the nervous system reads conflict as threat — and for many of us, it does — reasoning, planning, and impulse control may become harder to access. We say things we don't mean. We go silent when we need to speak. We fawn when we need to hold ground.

You cannot resolve a conflict you cannot stay regulated enough to be in.

This toolkit is not about conflict resolution. It is about what has to happen first — returning to a state where resolution is even possible.

The tools here are for the moment of activation: during the argument, in the aftermath, in the long silence, in the lead-up you can feel coming.

Regulation is not retreat. It is the prerequisite for repair.

WHO THIS TOOLKIT IS FOR

This toolkit is intended for ordinary relational conflict in which both people can safely pause, communicate, and respect boundaries. It is not designed for abuse, coercive control, stalking, threats, intimidation, violence, or situations in which one person is afraid of the other. In those situations, prioritize safety and specialized support rather than mutual repair.

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit has two modes: in-the-moment regulation, and post-conflict repair. Know which one you need right now.

This toolkit contains six core tools, supported by a three-step protocol, quick-reference guide, personal profile, and customized action plan.

THREE WAYS TO USE IT

IN THE MOMENT

Stop the conversation. Go to the Quick Reference. Pick one regulation tool. Do not try to resolve anything until you've used it.

AFTER THE CONFLICT

When the heat has passed, use the Repair Language and Three Layers tools to re-enter the conversation with clarity.

BUILDING A PRACTICE

Complete My Conflict Profile. Know your pattern before the next conflict — so you can interrupt it earlier.

FIND YOUR TOOL BY WHAT'S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW

Activated, need to pause now

→ Tool 01: The Pause Protocol

Need to re-enter the conversation

→ Tool 03: The Three Layers

After a rupture, need to repair

→ Tool 05: Repair Language

Can't regulate on your own

→ Tool 02: Self-Regulation in Conflict

Don't know what to say

→ Tool 04: De-escalation Scripts

Conflict can't be resolved now

→ Tool 06: The Structured Pause

The most important rule in this toolkit: you cannot regulate and argue at the same time. Regulation always comes first.

What Happens in Your Nervous System

For some people, a raised voice, silence, criticism, or perceived withdrawal can activate a response that feels disproportionate to the present moment because it resembles earlier threat or relational pain.

COMMON CONFLICT-RESPONSE PATTERNS

FIGHT

Attack, escalate, raise the volume. The nervous system believes offense is defense. Often regretted immediately after.

FLIGHT

Leave, withdraw, go quiet, avoid the topic. Feels like self-protection. Often reads as abandonment to the other person.

FREEZE

Shut down, go blank, become unable to speak or respond. Not chosen — the system has overloaded and locked.

FAWN

Agree, appease, apologize for things you didn't do. Keeps the peace in the moment. Builds resentment over time.

None of these responses are character flaws. They are survival strategies, likely learned in earlier relationships or environments where they made complete sense.

Fawn is a commonly used trauma-informed term for appeasing, agreeing, or over-accommodating in response to perceived relational threat. It is not a formal diagnosis.

THE CONFLICT ACTIVATION LOOP

1

Trigger

Something is said, done, or implied that the nervous system reads as threat.

2

Activation

Heart rate rises. Thinking narrows. Survival response kicks in: fight, flight, freeze, or fawn.

3

Reactive move

You say or do the thing you'll likely regret. Or shut down entirely.

4

Escalation or withdrawal

The other person responds to your reaction, not your need. Distance or heat increases.

5

Rupture

Connection breaks. Neither person feels heard. The original issue remains unresolved.

The Three-Step Emergency Protocol

When you feel yourself activating in conflict — heart rate rising, thoughts narrowing, reactive words forming — run this sequence before you say or do anything else.

01

SIGNAL, DON'T DISAPPEAR

Say something — even just: "I need a moment." or "I'm getting activated — I don't want to say something I don't mean." Leaving without signaling often reads as abandonment. A brief signal is not retreat. Do not signal your location, plans, or return time when doing so would create a safety risk.

02

REGULATE YOUR BODY FIRST

Leave the space physically if you can. Breathe: inhale 4, exhale 8. Cold water on the wrists or face if available. Move. Significant activation often takes time to settle. Consider at least 20 minutes, and longer when needed. Do not return merely because the timer ended; return when both people can participate safely and respectfully.

03

RETURN WITH INTENTION

Agree a time to return before you leave: "Can we come back to this in an hour?" Then use the Three Layers tool to re-enter the conversation with clarity about what you actually need. A promised return time is appropriate only when contact is safe and desired.

→ Research by John Gottman shows that when heart rate exceeds 100 bpm, the ability to take in new information and respond non-defensively drops significantly. Regulation is not avoidance – it is the physiological prerequisite for resolution.

The Pause Protocol

How to stop before the damage

USE WHEN: Activated, need to pause now

The pause is the single most powerful intervention available in conflict. Not because it avoids the issue — but because it protects the relationship from what gets said and done in the flooded state.

HOW TO CALL A PAUSE

- 1 Notice the signal: heart rate rising, jaw tightening, thoughts narrowing, urge to attack or disappear.
- 2 Say something clear and non-blaming: "I need to pause. I'm getting activated and I don't want to say something I'll regret."
- 3 Name a return time: "Can we come back to this in 30 minutes?" or "Can we talk about this tonight?"
- 4 Leave the physical space. Do not continue the conversation from another room.
- 5 Do not use the pause to rehearse arguments. Use it to regulate.
- 6 Return when you said you would — or send a message if you need more time.

WHAT TO SAY

Instead of: storming out or going silent

"I need a few minutes. I want to talk about this properly and I'm not there yet."

Instead of: "Fine, whatever"

"I'm shutting down right now. That means I'm overwhelmed, not that I don't care. Can we try again in an hour?"

Instead of: "You always do this"

"I'm feeling activated right now. I need to stop before I say something I don't mean."

→ A pause is only effective if you return. Pausing and never coming back is withdrawal. Set the time before you leave.

THE FOUR ESSENTIALS

Signal the pause · State the purpose · Name a return time · Follow through

Self-Regulation in Conflict

Coming back to your window

USE WHEN: Can't regulate on your own

After calling a pause, you need at least 20 minutes of genuine regulation before re-entering conflict. During this time, the goal is not to think through the argument — it is to bring your physiology back to a state where productive conversation is possible.

Do not use this time to build your case. That keeps the nervous system activated. Regulation is not emotional suppression, forced calm, or pretending the issue does not matter. The aim is enough capacity to choose how you respond.

REGULATION PRACTICES — CHOOSE ONE OR TWO

Walk for 20 minutes

Sustained rhythmic movement can help discharge stress-response energy. Outside is better. No headphones if possible.

Cold water reset

Splash cold water on your face or hold cold water on your wrists for 60 seconds. A noticeable temperature change may help slow a racing system.

Physiological sigh

Double inhale through the nose, long exhale through the mouth. Repeat 3–5 times. One of the quickest breath-based resets.

Physical discharge

Push into a wall, shake, do vigorous movement. Conflict activates fight energy — it needs somewhere to go.

Write without editing

Write everything you feel — not to send, not to re-read. Just to move it out of the body. Then set it aside.

→ You cannot regulate by thinking your way through the argument. The physiology has to change first. That requires time and body-based intervention, not more thinking.

The Three Layers

Entering conflict with clarity

USE WHEN: Need to re-enter the conversation

Most conflict gets stuck because we talk about what happened without ever reaching what we felt or what we need. This framework — adapted from Nonviolent Communication — separates the three layers so the conversation can actually go somewhere.

THE THREE LAYERS

01 WHAT HAPPENED

The observable fact only. No interpretation, no blame, no adjectives. What would a camera have recorded?

Example: "You didn't reply to my message yesterday."

02 WHAT I FELT OR FEARED

Your emotional response to what happened. Own it fully — not 'you made me feel' but 'I felt.'

Example: "I felt anxious and then hurt when I didn't hear back."

03 WHAT I NEED OR REQUEST NOW

The underlying need behind the feeling. Not a demand — a need. What would have helped? What do you need going forward?

Example: "I need to know that silence doesn't mean something is wrong between us."

A need is not the same as a demand. A request leaves room for the other person's autonomy and response.

The need underneath the conflict is almost never about the surface issue. The dishes are rarely about the dishes.

De-escalation Scripts

What to say when activated

USE WHEN: Don't know what to say

Words said during activation are rarely the words we mean. These scripts are designed for the moment when you need language that de-escalates rather than inflames — for yourself and the other person.

WHEN YOU ARE ACTIVATED

PAUSING

"I need to pause this conversation. I want to keep talking, and I am not going to be able to do that well right now."

CLARIFYING

"I want to make sure I understand you. Can you say more about what you mean, so I do not respond to the wrong thing?"

DISAGREEING WITHOUT ATTACKING

"I see this differently, and I still want to understand your side. Can we talk through where we disagree?"

WHEN THE OTHER PERSON IS ACTIVATED

ACKNOWLEDGING IMPACT

"I can see that landed hard. That was not my intention, and I want to understand what it brought up for you."

REQUESTING A RETURN TIME

"I need some time before we continue. Can we agree on when we will come back to this instead of leaving it open?"

ENDING AN UNSAFE INTERACTION

"I am willing to discuss this, but I am not willing to be threatened, insulted, or prevented from leaving."

→ These scripts won't feel natural at first. That's normal. Practice them when calm so they're available when you're not.

Repair Language

Reconnecting after rupture

USE WHEN: After a rupture, need to repair

Rupture is inevitable in close relationships. Repair is what determines the health of those relationships over time. John Gottman's research identifies repair attempts as one of the strongest predictors of relationship stability — but repair has to land, not just be offered.

WHAT MAKES REPAIR WORK

- 1 Repair works when it is specific, not generic. "I'm sorry I raised my voice when you told me about your day" lands differently than "I'm sorry for everything."
- 2 Repair requires ownership without explanation first. Explain context later — after the other person feels heard.
- 3 Repair is not guaranteed to be received immediately. Offer it genuinely and give the other person time.
- 4 Repair does not mean the issue is resolved — it means the connection has been restored enough to address the issue.
Repair is not appropriate when it requires you to take responsibility for another person's abusive or coercive behavior.

REPAIR PHRASES THAT WORK

To open repair

"I've been thinking about what happened between us. I don't feel good about how I showed up in that conversation."

To take ownership

"I said [specific thing]. That wasn't fair and it wasn't what I meant. I'm sorry."

To invite reconnection

"I miss us being okay. I want to understand your side better — can we try again?"

When you're not ready to fully repair

"I'm not quite there yet but I want you to know I care about this and I'm working on it."

When repair isn't yet being received

"I understand you need more time. I'll be here."

The Structured Pause

When conflict can't be resolved right now

USE WHEN: Conflict can't be resolved now

Some conflicts cannot and should not be resolved in the moment. Trying to force resolution while both people are activated usually deepens the rupture. A structured pause allows time and honors both the relationship and the issue.

THE AGREEMENT

- 1 Both people agree: "We are not resolving this tonight. We are pausing it."
- 2 Set a specific time to return: "Can we talk about this tomorrow at 7pm?" Vague agreements create anxiety.
- 3 During the pause: each person writes down what happened, what they felt, and what they need. Use the Three Layers framework.
- 4 Agree on one rule for the pause: no continuing the argument by text, no silent treatment, no recruiting others.
- 5 At the agreed time, one person opens: "I want to understand your experience. Can you start?" — and then listens without interrupting.
- 6 If you can't resolve it in the second conversation either, agree another pause. Some things take time.

A structured pause may last 30 minutes, several hours, a day, or longer depending on the issue and each person's capacity. The essential feature is a clear agreement about whether and when the conversation will resume.

DURING THE PAUSE, AVOID

Drafting the perfect argument

→ It keeps you activated and rehearsed, not regulated and open.

Texting to continue the conflict

→ Avoid using text to continue a high-intensity argument when tone, complexity, or reactivity make misunderstanding likely. Written communication may still be appropriate when it is safer, more accessible, or helps communicate carefully.

Talking to others to build a case

→ Venting to validate is different from seeking genuine support.

After the Conflict

Conflict activation leaves a physiological residue. Even after resolution, the body may stay alert for longer than expected. This is normal — and it needs tending.

RECOVERY RITUALS

- 1 Rest. Conflict is physiologically exhausting — it uses the same resources as a stress response.
- 2 Eat and hydrate. The body is depleted after sustained activation.
- 3 Do something that signals safety to your nervous system: warmth, movement, gentle contact.
- 4 Resist the urge to replay and re-adjudicate. The conflict is over. The replay keeps it alive.
- 5 If repair happened: let it land. Don't undo it with continued vigilance.
- 6 Journal: "What was I really afraid of in that conflict? What did I need underneath my reaction?"

Rupture followed by repair does not weaken relationships. Done honestly, it strengthens them. The repair is the relationship.

Every time you paused instead of reacted, every time you named your need instead of your grievance, every time you returned when you said you would — you were choosing the relationship over the reflexes. That is hard work. It counts.

When to Use What

TOOL 01 The Pause Protocol When: Activated right now	Immediate Immediate	TOOL 02 Self-Regulation in Conflict When: Need to come back down	20-30 min 20-30 min
TOOL 03 The Three Layers When: Re-entering conversatic	10 min prep 10 min prep	TOOL 04 De-escalation Scripts When: Don't know what to si	In the moment In the moment
TOOL 05 Repair Language When: After a rupture	When ready When ready	TOOL 06 The Structured Pause When: Can't resolve it now	Varies Varies

ALWAYS FIRST

Signal → Pause → Regulate → Return with intention

My Conflict Profile

Complete this after the conflict has resolved. Use it to recognize your pattern earlier next time.

What tends to trigger my conflict activation

Criticism, tone, silence, feeling unseen, injustice...

My default response when activated

Fight, flight, freeze, fawn — or which combination?

What I say or do that I later regret

Escalate, withdraw, go silent, over-explain...

The need underneath my conflict pattern

To be heard, to matter, to be safe, to be chosen...

My earliest warning sign — before full activation

The moment I can still choose a different response:

What I need from others when I am activated

My Personal Protocol

Choose your tools and write them in. Made when calm, for when you're not.

I KNOW I AM ACTIVATED WHEN...

MY THREE TOOLS — IN ORDER

01 FIRST

What I do immediately when I feel activation:

02 THEN

How I regulate during the pause:

03 FINALLY

How I re-enter the conversation:

WHAT I WILL NOT DO WHILE ACTIVATED

e.g. Send that message, say that thing, make any decision

MY REPAIR PHRASE

What I say to open repair after a rupture:

A FINAL NOTE

Conflict is not the enemy.

Reactivity is not failure.

Every relationship of any depth will have ruptures. The question is never whether you will hurt each other — it's whether you will find each other afterwards.

The pause you called instead of the thing you almost said. The return when you could have stayed away. The repair offered without guarantee of reception. These are not small things.

They are the whole thing.

Keep choosing to come back.

Conflict Activation

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