

Module 3: Interrupting the Mode Cycle (Timeout)

(Excerpt from: Roediger, E. & Frank-Noyon, E. (2026). Schema Therapy for Couples. The Module based Approach. Bognor Regis: Wiley & Sons.)

Indication: After introducing the model (Module 1) and analyzing the mode cycles (Module 2), the next step is to identify emerging mode cycles, stop them early, and go into a “timeout” in separate rooms without further discussion in order to calm down. The timeout serves as a kind of functional “Adult protector mode” replacing a rigid detached Coping mode.

Goal: After interrupting the dysfunctional interaction, to return to a functional inner stance and continue daily life functionally without further arguments. Content-related discussions should initially take place only in therapy.

Note: In an emotion-driven state we feel overly righteous, horse-blinded, zoomed-into (and trapped) in our view – like a blind (or drunk) person driving a car and wandering why they have accidents. We have to stop the fighting and the “bloodshed” first with a ceasefire, and shift into a wide-angle perspective without any ifs and buts.

Intervention: *"Now that you are familiar with your most important mode cycles, let me explain: being caught in a mode cycle is like being caught in a hail of bullets in a battle. There are no winners, only blood is shed—in this case, the ‘emotional substance of your relationship.’ That is why the mode cycle must be stopped without prerequisites. Like a ceasefire – without ifs and buts! It does not matter which of you first notices the beginning of the cycle. Whoever notices has permission to stand up and give the agreed signal. Which signal would you like to agree on? ... If I may suggest: show the other person crossed index fingers. That is more discreet than the ‘timeout’ signal used in basketball or hockey, especially when other people are present. ... Do you both believe this could work?"*

As soon as someone gives this signal, both stop without further discussion. The person who interrupts must also commit to saying when you will come back together to continue daily life. Life goes on after a pause! This is important because otherwise the other person may feel silenced or rejected. Try to keep the pause short at first. The sooner you manage to stop, the shorter the pause you need to get centered and balanced again. A pause is by definition time-limited. It should not serve as a pretext for withdrawal. If things do not calm down afterwards, you will simply need to interrupt again.

During the break, ideally go into separate rooms to calm down and regain balance. It works best while remaining standing, to bring both legs into awareness. You may also place two chairs for the both of you and look down at them, just as we are doing now in session. Then you may try to broaden your scope again. You can think about why you started this relationship in the first place and what makes it worthwhile. Or ask yourself: ‘How will I think about this situation tomorrow?’

When you come back together, please continue daily life without further content-related discussion. Only make practical arrangements. Treat each other respectfully, like ‘friendly strangers’—for example, like friends, nice neighbors, or colleagues. So for example, say “please” and “thank you”. You can do this in daily life, so you can also do it with each other. Your brains are capable of this! It may help to switch on your ‘observation camera.’ Or imagine the walls of your home are made of glass and everyone can see how you behave. Content discussions can take place here in session. Over the course of our work, I will of course also show you how to resolve your substantive problems. But one thing at a time. First, we must limit the damage. Do you have any questions? Do you agree with this procedure?"

Note: We cannot continue therapy unless the couple is able to recognize and interrupt the mode cycle. This is the first contribution the couple must make. Whether they succeed is an important indicator of how ready they are to truly change and work hard at it. It is normal, however, for it to take two or three attempts over several sessions (rarely more) before the couple really understands, takes seriously, and implements the principle. To support this, we ask about positive exceptions and differences: *"How did you feel when you managed to interrupt the cycle compared to other times?"*

In case a couple is not able (or willing?) to stop the cycles, this may be an indicator that they are emotionally checked out but don't dare to quit the relationship. Thus, we might be the catalyzer addressing "the elephant in the room" like described in module 13.

Homework Assignments:

- Interrupt an emerging cycle as often and as early as possible. *Couples usually do this far too late at the beginning.* Once sympathetic activation has really kicked in, it is very difficult to "climb back down from the tree." Therefore, interrupt early and avoid climbing up too high in the first place.
- The first sign is a felt activation and tension in the body connected with a deeper breath in resulting from the kicking in sympathetic activation. Teach the couple to *monitor these shifts* mindfully and stop immediately by leaving the situation. This might require some mindfulness training, e.g., with the *doorknob exercise* (see end of Module 1).
- *Fill out an MCC* in the timeout proving that they actually worked with the model in timeout.

Note: Interrupting with a timeout is quite a significant intervention in daily life and can sometimes be difficult to implement (e.g., in the presence of children or while in the car). If the couple has sufficient self-regulation skills, they do not necessarily have to go into separate rooms. It may be enough to say, "Let's take a break," in order to interrupt the interaction, allowing both to shift into an observer stance and rebalance themselves. It may also help to briefly leave the room (e.g., to the bathroom), open a window, or get a glass of water—to interrupt, stand up, and consciously bring both legs into awareness to rebalance and reconnect.

It is often easiest to resume the conversation by talking about practical matters ("Can you take the kids to school today, then I'll do the shopping"), neutral topics (the weather), or even gossiping about third parties. That creates connection in everyday life too.

Another Note: For dominant partners, a timeout initially feels very similar to the detested withdrawal behavior of the other person. In fact, it is a form of regulated withdrawal, guided by the adult mode. The main difference is that announcing the length of the pause give the "abandoned" partner a minimum of control and predictability. Therefore, it is crucial that the length of the pause is clearly stated and then actually kept by the interrupting partner.

A third note: Reconnection is a sensible process. If you approach another person on your BLUE leg with the intention to reconcile and you are rejected, you easily feel disappointed and flip back onto your RED leg. In these cases (once more) *slow is fast and less is more!* The partner who needs more time to open up for reconnection may use traffic light colors ("I am still in the yellow phase") to signal their basic willingness to reconnect as well as the need for a little bit patience.