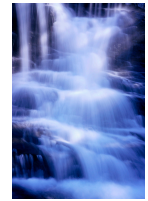


Flooding!



In troubled relationships, discussions of conflict can trigger *intense emotions* that sometimes lead to "flooding." **This means you feel so stressed that you become emotionally and physically overwhelmed. You're no longer able to think clearly, or to participate in the conversation in a fruitful way.** You'd rather be anywhere else than right here with this person. Obviously, this reaction gets in the way of sending or receiving bids for emotional connection.

Physical signs of flooding include a pounding heart, sweaty hands, and irregular or shallow breathing. Rather than focusing on what the other person is saying, your mind races with defensive thoughts like "I can't handle this anymore," or "I've had just about all of this I can take." You may feel like an innocent victim, cornered into a conversation from which you just want to flee. When you're in this state of mind, it's as if you're not capable of hearing new information or accepting influence. The other person may even make attempts to apologize or placate you, but it's as if you can't hear them.

Although flooding can happen to anybody in an emotionally intense situation, studies show that it occurs more often among men than among women. What's the best thing to do when you feel flooded? I recommend that you take a break from the conversation and do something that you find soothing for at least twenty minutes. That's the amount of time it typically takes the body to recover from emotional stress. You might want to read a magazine, watch television, or go for a run. But whatever you do, try to think about something other than the conflict during this break. Don't focus on thoughts of being righteously indignant or an innocent victim. Doing so is counterproductive and will just maintain your distress.

Many people find that it's helpful to use this time to meditate or to do a relaxation exercise (see below). Once twenty minutes have passed and you feel more relaxed, try to get back to discussing the problem, or schedule another time to discuss it soon.

Soothing Exercises

Here are a few simple steps you can take to soothe yourself when you're feeling emotionally agitated, overwhelmed, or "flooded,"

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable position.
 2. Close your eyes and think about your breathing. Take several slow, deep breaths, finding a comfortable, regular pace. Ten deep breaths a minute is a good choice.
 3. As you continue to breathe slowly and evenly, mentally scan your body, looking for any areas of tension. The face, jaw, neck, shoulders, and back are common trouble spots. When you find an area that's tense, deliberately tighten the muscles in that area, hold the tension for a few seconds, and then release them. Do it again-tighten, hold, and release. This will leave your muscles feeling more relaxed than when you began.
 4. Now relax each of those areas of your body by imagining that it's very heavy. As you envision gravity's pull, let your muscles relax and let the tension dissipate.
 5. Next, imagine that each of those muscle areas is very warm. Imagine that you're basking in the sun or sitting near a warm, relaxing fireplace. As you grow warmer, even more tension will flow away.
 6. Continue to relax by envisioning a place that's especially safe and restful to you. Maybe it's a warm beach, a quiet mountaintop, or a secluded forest. Stay in this place for a few minutes, noticing the details of your surroundings, enjoying its peace and solitude.
- Each time you do this exercise, your image of this setting will come more easily to you. Soon, simply thinking of it may help you to automatically relax.

Steps to Prevent Flooding

You can also take steps to prevent flooding from happening in the first place. This exercise includes questions to ask yourself about the times when you've felt flooded. Answering them may give you insights about the things that set off, or "trigger," this reaction and how to avoid such triggers. You may also discover new ways to soothe yourself when you're feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Don't do this exercise right after you've experienced feeling flooded. Wait until you're relaxed and feeling calm.

Begin by considering the following questions, thinking about recent situations in which you felt flooded. If possible, discuss your answers with a person with whom you've had conflicts in the past. The discussion may help the two of you to talk about problems in the future. If you feel that you can't discuss these issues with that person, then answer the questions on your own and discuss them with a trusted friend or write about them in your Emotion Log.

- What typically happens just before you start to feel flooded?
- Are there particular words, actions, or topics that seem to "trigger" you to flood?
- What would allow you to stay in an intense conversation without flooding?
- How are upsetting subjects introduced into your conversations?
- Does either of you bring up these subjects in a harsh way?
- Are there ways that either of you could introduce these subjects so that you might stay calmer?
- Does either of you tend to "store up" problems and try to deal with them all at once?
- Can you do a better job of handling your problems one at a time?
- What can you do to soothe yourself when you feel irritable, scared, or angry?
- What can you do to soothe each other?
- What signals can you develop for when either of you feels flooded?
- Can you take breaks?
- What can you do during these breaks to calm down?
- How can you make sure that you get back to the problem later on?