

## What do we mean when we said someone is “flooded”?

John Gottman ([www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com)) discovered in his 40+ years of research, of over 3000 couples, that in distressed relationships there is often heightened physiological arousal for both men and women. This can create a feeling of unmanageable stress. Diffuse Physiological Arousal, or DPA, is our body’s general alarm mechanism, inherited through evolutionary means. The purpose of DPA is to mobilize one’s body so that we can effectively cope with crises or emergencies.

Whenever we perceive a threat (this perception is instantaneous, requiring very little complex or cortical thought), a series of processes happen in one’s body, preparing one for an emergency. Our instinctual choice is to fight or flee. The heart races, adrenaline courses through our bloodstream, the more complicated process of reasoning shuts down, and we prepare to act – in self-defense.

Why this is important in relationship?

1. All people experience DPA or flooding.
2. For physiological reasons, when we are flooded we are unable to communicate effectively.
3. We are hypervigilant to signals of danger, nothing else.
4. **We are unable to listen well** when flooded.
5. **Trying to communicate when flooded is damaging to any relationship.**

When any of us is flooded, we are unable to listen, it is as simple as that. Without listening occurring, there is no effective communication. We are in a defensive mode and we simply cannot hear what our partner is trying to say to us. Moreover, engaging while flooded is the first step in the Distance and Isolation Cascade.

### Distance and Isolation Cascade

This is another concept from John Gottman's research ([www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com)). These are the steps John noted which lead to distance in a relationship, isolation and often divorce. At the very least distance and unhappiness. Note that the first step is engaging while flooded. This step is the step that is under our control to change.

**Engaging while Flooded** → Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, four harmful ways to interact: Criticism, Defensiveness, Stonewalling and Contempt → Emotional Disengagement → Loneliness → Parallel Lives → Divorce

# Flooding Protocol

The reason the issue at hand has become so 'hot', is because it is touching one or both of you very deeply. There is something – some feelings, some need, some dream, some principle – that needs to be expressed, heard and honored. This is the direction you want to head.

First, come to an agreement that you both will stop any interaction between you when it is going south, that you will use your time-out signal as often as needed, recognizing that this is a positive communication skill.

Secondly, agree upon a non-offensive **hand signal**. (Verbal cues have a greater tendency to evoke defensiveness.)

Agree to use this signal when one or both of you is flooded OR when the conversation is deteriorating. When the signal is given, all communication stops. Then follow the steps below.

The person who calls for the time-out is responsible for:

1. Remembering the issue discussed.
2. Once calm, discussing with your partner when would be a good time to sit down and calmly discuss the disagreement. At least one hour later and no more than 7 days later.
3. Soothe yourselves during this time. This is critical. Resume the conversation only when both persons are calm.
4. Choose a process with which to discuss the topic: Loving Speech – Deep Listening or something else that you are familiar with that works for you.

The goal here is to listen deeply.

ONLY use dialogue if you find dialogue is successful.

Remember that the key to strong communication is hearing your partner and honoring his or her point of view as equally valid as one's own. I discuss this in a blog [Honoring your Partner's Subjective Reality](#). (To go there, click [here](#).)

Some couples have the agreement that once a time-out has been given, the person who requested it will send a sweet text to the other, something reassuring, something comforting. I've seen couples agree simply on a "Hello" to something more, such as "We'll get through this. I love you." If this fits for you, discuss this and come to some agreement.

Remember that the more highly-charged topics need a few to many discussions to reach equanimity.