



## 5. Communicate your needs

After identifying an issue and sharing your feelings with your partner, it can be helpful to communicate what you need from them. Be specific and clear about what you would appreciate from your partner. This can be a helpful first step in working towards compromise and finding a solution together.

## 6. Know when to take a break

When an argument is getting heated and you begin to feel that you may not be able to control your emotions or are feeling overwhelmed, it is a good time to tell your partner you need to take a break. Taking a break in this situation can be a useful strategy to calm down so you are able to reflect on **what** you are feeling and **why** you are feeling that way before returning to the conversation. Clarify how long of a break you need and make sure to use this time to regulate yourself rather than to ruminate on the argument. Helpful strategies to use during this time can be deep breathing exercises, going for a walk, listening to music, guided muscle relaxation, or doing something physical. Once you have a clearer idea of why and what you were feeling, return to the conversation and try to talk things through with your partner. Take responsibility for your feelings and actions and share this with your partner.

## 7. Keep a lookout for unhealthy patterns

According to Dr. Sue Johnson (2008), when we don't feel safe and connected to our partner, we can get stuck in three different patterns which she calls "The Demon Dialogues":

**Find the Bad Guy:** includes mutual blame, accusation, or attack and can also be referred to as "It's not me, it's you". Couples stuck in this pattern spend an incredible amount of energy pointing fingers over who is to blame, bringing up issues from the past to prove their point, and arguing over whether or not the details are "true".

**The Protest Polka:** where one partner actively tries to get a response from the other, and the other withdraws. In this pattern, partners are driven to feel connected and reassured and when that doesn't happen, the pattern spirals out of control and can lead to the Four Horsemen mentioned earlier.

**Freeze and Flee** can develop over time and serves as a way for us to protect ourselves in times when we don't feel safe or responded to. Couples stuck in this pattern are often distanced and detached from each other and instead of arguing, there is silence.

Dr. Johnson recommends that couples try to stay in the present moment and focus on what is happening between the two of you, right now. Recognize that you both are part of this "dance" and work on shifting your thinking to see these patterns as the enemy, not your partner.

## References

Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The seven principles for making marriage work*. New York: Crown Publishers.  
Johnson, S. M. (2008). *Hold me tight: Seven conversations for a lifetime of love*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.