

# **When My Spouse Takes Space**

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We at Focus on the Family's Hope Restored Intensive programs advocate strongly for the safety of each spouse in a marriage. We believe that to the extent each person feels safe, is the extent to which the relationship has potential to thrive. Therefore, we advocate for each spouse to make effort to learn what it means to take good care of themselves and their wellbeing.

Sometimes to safeguard themselves, a spouse takes space. This space is an emotional distance (and sometimes physical) in order to protect and care for oneself. When a spouse takes space to preserve safety, it often raises concerns in the other spouse. It can be a scary time filled with uncertainty about what their spouse is doing and whether they will return to the conversation or even the marriage.

This article will attempt to answer the question of what you can do when your spouse needs to take space—*especially if they don't feel safe with you.*

## **The Status Quo**

It is important to note that you always have the option to keep doing whatever you have always done. However, my guess is you are not reading this because you want to do things the same or have the same outcome. Bear in mind that as we look at alternative options, you have no guarantee as to how your spouse will respond. So, if you try something new, do it because you think it might be a healthier option for you, your spouse and your marriage.

### **Honor the Request for Space**

The first thing you can do when your spouse feels unsafe and makes a request for space is to grant it. This runs contrary to what many of us want to do. Generally, we try to keep our spouse from taking space. However, trying to prevent someone from taking steps that feel safe to them when they feel threatened—is threatening—even if it is not your intent.

Consider honoring your spouse's request for safety. Enable them to care for themselves and feel safer. While you don't really have the power to stop your spouse from doing what they will do, when you are able to acknowledge that their wellbeing matters to you, it adds to the level of safety.

You may not agree that your spouse should feel unsafe, but reality is, in that moment, *they do*. If you try to explain yourself or talk them out of feeling unsafe, you potentially

add to the level of unsafety. So, consider taking your spouse's feeling of unsafety and request for space at face value, and give them room to sort out their fears and take care of themselves.

## **Use Your Own Space**

Once you grant the space to your spouse, take your own space to self-examine and care. That's right! It is wise for you to tend to yourself because your wellbeing and safety matters, too. Most likely, you feel something related to your spouse feeling unsafe, reacting and seeking distance. You might feel anger, fear, rejection, etc. Be honest. Invite the Lord into the process to help you truly look at yourself.

As you examine yourself, look to do things to care about what you discover. Simply tuning in to your emotion may be all the care you need, or you may need to take further steps to care for what hurts. In addition, make sure you take care of your wellbeing in general. Do the things that energize and charge you in a healthy way. Again, it could be as simple as just paying attention to what hurts, journaling, exercising, prayer, talking with trusted others, etc.

Also, it would be a good time to be gut level honest and ask yourself if you were doing or saying something that was not safe, even if unintended. One way to measure

safety is by paying attention to how you treat another person's inherent value and vulnerability. We propose that if we lose sight of our spouse's value and vulnerability for even a moment, we are not being safe. It might even be inadvertent, yet still unsafe.

Again, ask the Lord to help you examine you. If you don't find anything, great. But if you do, it gives you a chance to humble yourself and seek continued growth.

## **Prepare for Your Spouse's Potential Return from the Space**

Strive to be intentional in preparing for your spouse to reengage with you. By caring for yourself as mentioned above, you are taking important steps toward this. In addition, there are a few things to avoid and some ideas to try.

Avoid doing things that intensify your hurt and pain or violate your integrity. Don't make assumptions about the motives behind your spouse's actions. Resist rehearsing over and over in your head what your spouse did wrong. Don't dwell solely on the negative. Don't try to predict the future and be leery of projecting pains of the past onto your spouse. There are more, but I hope you get the idea. Most of these things will just make you feel worse and leave you unprepared for your spouse's possible return.

Instead, try widening your curiosity. Be compassionate about what might be going on for your spouse. Assume you *don't* know what their motives are until you hear from them. Purpose to be soft, considerate and gentle when your spouse returns. Be genuinely interested in what's going on from their perspective.

Also, think about sharing how taking space affected you in a careful and considerate way versus in a blaming, accusatory or hostile way. As best as you can, let your spouse know it was hard for you when they were in their space, yet, ultimately you do want what is best for them and desire they feel safe. Continue to monitor your own wellbeing and take your own space as needed to care for you.

Two people feeling safe together in marriage is ideal. Sometimes we need space to help us get there. That space can be managed well on both sides. So, do your best with what is within your power to do, which is stay safe and be safe.

Safety gives your marriage the best chance to repair and thrive.