Self-regulation · About 4 minutes

A Pause That Helps You Respond

Making room while caring for what still needs attention

“Can we come back to this after dinner?” To the person asking, the words promise a little air. To the person hearing them, everything depends on whether they come back.

The usefulness of a pause depends on what it makes possible, including what happens to any responsibility that remains.

Take a fictional household problem. Mina agreed to book a repair appointment. She has not done it. When Evan asks about it, she starts explaining everything else she has been managing. Her load is real, and Evan has already rearranged work around an appointment that does not exist.

Mina may need a break from the conversation. She also needs to acknowledge the unbooked repair. One possible response is: “I haven’t arranged it. I’m getting defensive, and I want to take this in. I can look at the appointment options after lunch and tell you what I can manage.”

Evan might explain that the company closes before then. He might be doubtful because a previous promise was missed. His reply could change the practical plan. Asking for space need not close the conversation to information that matters.

A pause needs a purpose

There is no ideal number of minutes. Less noise, a more specific question or help with another task may be what you need. Gross’s model includes changing circumstances and directing attention among the ways people regulate emotion.[1] Flexibility research also emphasizes context and feedback: a strategy’s usefulness depends on the situation, not simply on its name.[2]

You could ask of Mina’s proposal: Will this give her room to think? Does it address the repair? Can she realistically do what she is offering? If the last answer is no, a smaller honest commitment is preferable to a reassuring promise she cannot keep.

Sometimes the truthful answer is, “I don’t know when I’ll be able to return to this.” That may be necessary, particularly with illness or exhaustion. It also leaves a practical problem to solve. An essential task may need another arrangement, and that arrangement may require help or money neither person currently has. Better communication cannot supply missing resources.

A safety distinction belongs here. You can end threatening, coercive or unwanted contact immediately. You do not owe a return to an unsafe interaction to demonstrate good intentions. Any continuing essential duty can be considered separately, with appropriate support.

Where the relationship is safe and further discussion is wanted, the return matters. Did you check the appointments? Did you update the person who was relying on you? Did the break help you hear something you were missing?

You might still feel hurt when you acknowledge a broken promise. You might still be angry when you explain a limit. A useful pause gives those responses more room; it does not have to remove the feeling first.

The person who asks for a pause takes responsibility for the return.

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After dinner, the sound that matters is the chair being pulled out again. Someone has returned to finish listening.

Companion reading · You Don't Have to Be Calm to Have a Choice

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Self-regulation (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[3] Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, *26*(1), 1–26. Source.

[4] Bonanno, G. A., & Burton, C. L. (2013). Regulatory flexibility: An individual differences perspective on coping and emotion regulation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *8*(6), 591–612. Source.

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