

Flooding De-escalation Protocol

Managing Physiological Overwhelm

Overview

Flooding occurs when emotional arousal exceeds the capacity for productive dialogue. Heart rate exceeds 100 BPM, stress hormones surge, and the prefrontal cortex goes offline. Recognizing and responding to flooding is essential for productive sessions.

Signs of Flooding

- Visible physiological changes (flushing, sweating, shallow breathing)
- Sudden silence or withdrawal
- Escalating volume or intensity
- Repetitive statements (stuck in loop)
- Unable to hear or process partner's words
- Fight, flight, or freeze response visible

Immediate Response

1. Name it: "I'm noticing some flooding happening. Let's pause."
2. Normalize it: "This is a normal physiological response. It means we've hit something important."
3. Separate if needed: "Let's take 20 minutes. [Name], you can step outside or use the other room."
4. Provide grounding: Offer water, suggest slow breathing

Grounding Techniques

- Box breathing: 4 counts in, 4 hold, 4 out, 4 hold
- 5-4-3-2-1 sensory grounding
- Cold water on wrists or face
- Physical movement (walk, stretch)
- Distraction with neutral topic for 20+ minutes

Return-to-Dialogue Criteria

Before resuming difficult conversation, verify:

- Heart rate has returned to baseline (ask client to check pulse)
- Client can speak in normal tone and volume
- Client can summarize partner's perspective (even if disagrees)
- Minimum 20 minutes has passed

Teaching Self-Regulation

- Help clients recognize their own early warning signs
- Establish agreed-upon break signal for use at home
- Practice grounding techniques in session when calm
- Reframe breaks as skill, not avoidance