

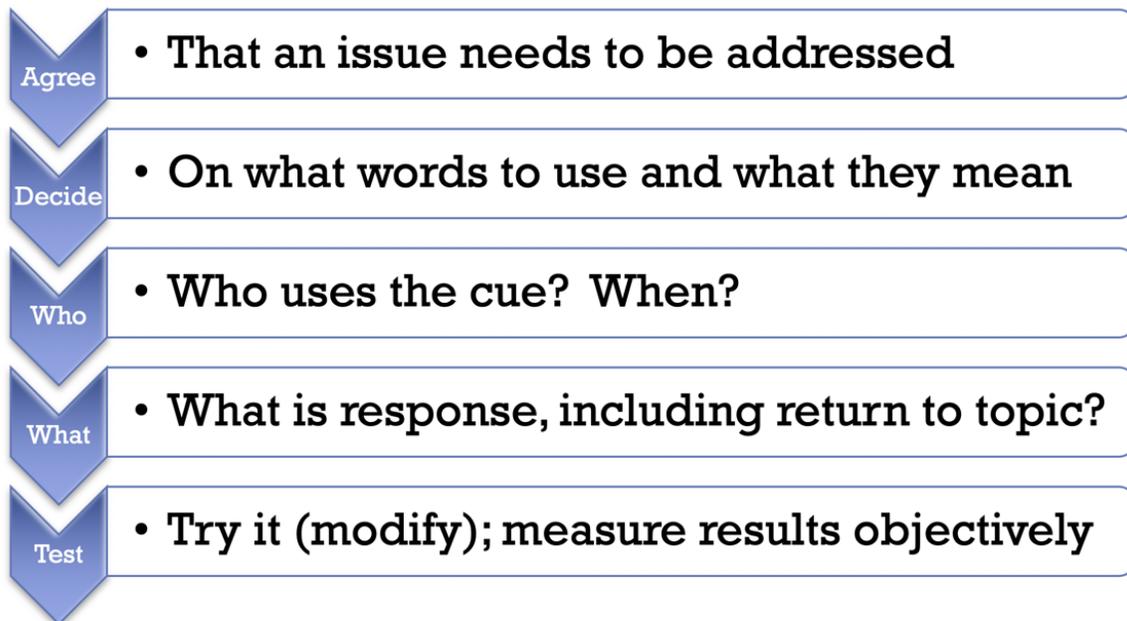
How to Set Up a Verbal Cue

Verbal cues are some of the most helpful – and simple – tools struggling couples can use to calm their relationship. The idea is that the two of you create a pre-determined ‘script’ to use during interactions that start to get difficult in order to change those interactions and improve them. The verbal cue is the indicator that it’s time to move into that script.

Verbal cues can be used to:

- Interrupt fights before they escalate into being toxic
- Change patterns of interruption
- Notify a partner when they are doing something they might not be aware of
- Identify behaviors that a partner is trying to change
- Provide a chance for a ‘do over’ if a partner heads in a direction that is unproductive
- Soothe a partner

The steps for setting a cue are simple:



I provide specific examples and explanation on the back.

Follow these three examples through the steps of setting up a verbal cue.

Agree on the issue

Choose a repetitive issue that you both agree needs to be changed. Examples:

1. One partner escalates quickly into difficult to control anger. After that, nothing positive happens between you.
2. Both agree that one partner could moderate their controlling behaviors. However, the controlling partner isn't always aware of what feels like controlling behavior to the other person, perhaps feeling their 'too sensitive.'
3. A partner gets easily overwhelmed, after which isn't really able to engage.

Decide what word(s) to use

1. Anger tends to gain momentum quickly, so select a surprising *word* that quickly stops you both in your tracks, such as 'aardvark' or 'escalator.'
2. This situation calls for being gentle. Select a *phrase* that identifies, but doesn't offend. "This feels more controlling to me than you might realize," or "That seems more like a demand than a request. Could you reword?"
3. Select a phrase that notifies your partner of your feelings, such as "I'm starting to feel overwhelmed" or "I can feel myself shutting down here."

Who uses the cue?

1. Most likely, the recipient of the anger will use this cue, since the angry person is already off and running.
2. The person who is not doing the controlling is likely to use this cue to gently help the other partner of their commitment to changing their approach.
3. The person feeling overwhelmed, since those feelings are inside that person.

What is the response?

This is one of the most important parts of the verbal cue! It's the responses you use that change your direction and interaction. Choose responses for BOTH of you, and make sure they are well-suited to the outcome you wish to achieve.

1. Both partners stop talking, then self-soothe, remind themselves of their commitment to change the interaction. When ready, the person who was getting angry rewords and tries again. If the angry person can't calm within a couple of minutes, write the topic on a piece of paper, leave it on the kitchen counter, and use that as a reminder to get back to it within 24 hours.
2. Both partners stop talking immediately. The controlling partner rewords into a request.
3. The other partner acknowledges the overwhelm, then quiets. If self-calming isn't possible, use a reminder to come back to the topic.

Try it and modify

You may not get it just right at first. For example, the angry person might not stop talking. If not, you may not have an interruptive enough cue. Or it's not being used early enough in the escalation. Revise your cue sequence based upon what you think isn't working and try again.