

## **How to Overcome Defensiveness**

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The habit of defensiveness is a common communication problem. Marital researcher, Dr. John Gottman, calls defensiveness one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse because it is one of four main types of conflict interactions that predict separation and divorce in marriage.

Sometimes it's hard not to take things personally. A little bit of defensiveness from time to time won't harm your marriage in the long run. Habitual defensiveness, however, is another matter. There are several reasons why defensiveness is so harmful.

First, defensiveness puts us in a closed-minded, self-protective mode. We close our mind to the nugget of truth in our partner's point of view or to the truth of how our partner really feels. This makes defensiveness inherently dishonest. Dishonesty and a closed mind create barriers to true intimacy.

Second, defensiveness creates a climate of contention. It makes it impossible to have a real, two-way conversation about an issue. Defensiveness usually leaves the other person feeling unheard, misunderstood, frustrated, angry or resentful.

Third, defensiveness keeps us from taking personal responsibility for harmful actions, intentions, and choices. If our partner has legitimate complaints about our actions, defensiveness invites us to justify our behavior or make it our partner's problem.

Lastly, defensiveness stops us from putting our spouse's needs and happiness above our own. True love in marriage comes from being more concerned with your spouse's well-being than you are with your own. Defensiveness is self-focused. True love is other-focused.

## Strategies for Overcoming Defensiveness

### 1. Develop Awareness

As with overcoming most destructive habits, a good starting place for change is developing personal awareness about where your defensiveness comes from. What are you defending? Below are some possible questions to help you think about this. Use the spaces underneath each set of questions to record your thoughts.

- Are you defending an image of yourself as a good person or as a capable person? Are you feeling inadequate or not good enough? Do you get defensive so that your spouse doesn't see how you really feel inside?

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- Do you perceive that you are in competition with your partner? If so, when did this perception start? Where does it come from? Do you have beliefs about being right or being wrong that invite you to be defensive?

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- Are you taking on too much responsibility for your partner's feelings? Are you burdened with the responsibility of ensuring that your partner doesn't feel mad or bad or sad? If so, why?

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- Do you feel sensitive to being challenged, criticized or judged, even when your spouse is not necessarily trying to challenge you? If so, where does that sensitivity come from? Have you felt attacked and judged at other times in your life? Is your partner really attacking you or just stating a complaint?

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- Are you reacting to fear? What do you fear that your partner's complaints about you mean? What do you fear would happen if you were not defensive? Is this fear valid?

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## 2. Develop Facilitative Core Beliefs that Promote Responsibility

Beliefs are statements about the perceived truth of something. Core beliefs are perceived “truths” that are so much a part of our worldview that they form powerful rules for guiding our decision-making and behavior.

To give you an idea of what I mean by core beliefs, here are some examples:

- “Spouses should never have conflict or disagreements in a healthy marriage.”
- “If you really loved me you would know what I needed without having to be told.”
- “Leopards don’t change their spots.”
- “The problems in our marriage are my spouse’s fault.”
- “It is better to keep my thoughts and feelings a secret than risk getting hurt.”

Often core beliefs are so ingrained in us that we are not even aware we have them. We simply act as though they are true. Some core beliefs are hopeful and lead to solutions. Other core beliefs are limiting and lead us to do things that create further problems.

For example, a person might believe, “I am not a good enough wife or husband.” They might see themselves as inadequate or flawed. If we judge ourselves harshly, we may assume our partner judges us harshly too. Our self-criticism makes it hard to hear any kind of complaint from our partner that suggests we are not making our partner happy. It often doesn’t matter what the situation is. Feeling vulnerable because of our own feelings of inadequacy often invites defensiveness.

The good news is that we don’t have to be stuck with limiting beliefs. It takes time, effort and discipline to change a core belief. Change doesn’t happen over night. But we can consciously choose to think in more useful and helpful ways.

In the above example, a more helpful belief might be something like, “If my spouse is unhappy with something I’ve done, it doesn’t mean that I’m a bad person. It doesn’t mean that she thinks I’m a bad person. It isn’t me as a person that is offensive to my spouse. It is my behavior. I can change my behavior.”

From the previous exercise, you may have become aware of some limiting beliefs you have that invite your defensiveness. If so, try to reflect on how these beliefs make it hard for you to resolve issues with your spouse and to think about replacing these beliefs with more helpful, facilitative beliefs instead.

There are six steps to adopting a helpful, facilitative belief.

### 1. Identify the limiting belief.

Limiting beliefs usually need to be inferred by what we do and say. What limiting beliefs are implied by your actions? What beliefs are implied by what you say to yourself or to your spouse? In the space below, write down a limiting belief you have

that invites you to be defensive with your partner. (For example: "Someone always has to be right," or "Giving in means that my spouse will control me.")

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2. Reflect on how this belief limits you.

How does this limiting belief keep you stuck in self-destructive patterns of behavior? Does it keep you from trying new things? Does it prevent you from taking responsibility? What types of problems does it create?

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3. Examine the belief critically.

What objective evidence is there that this belief is true? What objective evidence have you been overlooking that this belief may not be true?

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4. Identify a more helpful belief.

Some examples of helpful beliefs include the following:

- "If my partner has a complaint about something I've done or not done, it does not mean I am a bad person, spouse, or parent."
- "I am not responsible for my spouse's feelings because only he or she can choose how to react to situations. I am responsible, however, for how I treat my spouse. If the choices I make are hurting my spouse or are harmful to our relationship, then I can make different choices."
- "Mistakes are opportunities for growth and learning, not reflections of my worth, value, or character."
- "It does not diminish me to really listen to my spouse. I will not disappear if I validate my spouse's concerns."

- “It is up to me to state my needs and feelings clearly to my spouse.”
- “Not all conflict is bad. Working through conflict can be an opportunity for growth, more intimacy and greater understanding.”

In the space below, write down a more helpful belief that you can use to replace your limiting belief.

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5. Reflect on how this new belief will make a difference.

How might it help you? What possibilities does it invite?

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6. Make a commitment to adopt this new belief, little-by-little every day.

Write it down and carry it with you. Review it many times throughout the day. Try to keep it in your conscious awareness. Look for situations to apply this new belief. As you do this, it will begin to take root. Slowly your feelings will begin to change.

### 3. Adopt a No-Blocking Policy

Have you ever heard of theatre sports? In theatre sports a group of actors work together to improvise scenes on-the-spot. Often theatre sports are very funny and entertaining to watch, but it takes a lot of energy, imagination and cooperation from fellow actors to make it work.

To help ensure cooperation, one of the rules of theatre sports is that you are not allowed to “block” or contradict your fellow actors. Instead, when someone introduces a new reality then the other actors find a way to build on that reality. Let’s say a fellow actor takes on the role of a policeman and begins to relate to you as though you were a speeding motorist and pulls you over. You would be blocking if you replied, “Officer, how could I have been speeding? I’m on a bicycle!”

Instead of blocking, you yield to your fellow actor, which means that, for the moment, you are a speeding motorist. You can introduce something new as long as it builds on

that reality. This allows a story to unfold spontaneously. Blocking each other brings the story to a halt.

This is an excellent rule to live by in your marriage as well. When you aren't blocking each other, you will notice that you argue much less about "who is right" and that you focus much more on the real issues. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with everything your spouse says. It just means that you look for ways to yield to your partner's reality without blocking or fighting against it.

First, try to become aware of blocking language you are using. Blocking language includes words and phrases that signal defensiveness. Examples include:

- Yes, but ...
- What about when you ...
- No, that's not true ...
- I don't think so ...
- At least I'm not ...
- That's ridiculous ...
- I won't accept that ...
- You are one to talk ...
- I don't agree ...
- You're blowing this out of proportion ...

In the spaces below, write down other examples of blocking language that you use:

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

The more you become aware of these words and phrases in your communication with your partner, the more you will be able to recognize when you are being defensive.

Second, try to use more yielding language, meaning words and phrases that help you focus on the parts of your spouse's message that you can agree with or that emphasize how your partner's reality is valid for your partner.

Examples of yielding statements include:

1. I can see how you would feel that way because ...
2. I can see why you would think that ...
3. That isn't what I meant but I can see how you could take it that way ...
4. Yes and ...
5. I see what you're saying
6. I am listening ... tell me more ...

7. I am hearing you ...
8. I see your point
9. I agree with part of what you're saying
10. Let's find a compromise here
11. I think there may be some common ground between us in this aspect ...
12. I appreciate your feelings about this ...
13. I never thought of things that way
14. I think your point of view makes sense
15. Let's agree to include both views in a solution
16. I need to give that some more thought
17. The part I agree with is ...

Yielding to each other helps you build consensus and focus on connecting with each other. Most heated arguments could be avoided if spouses could just accept that the other person's feelings and views are valid for them, are about them, and come from their own reality. We'll talk a little more about that when we come to point number five.

## 4. Take Responsibility

Each of us is responsible for our words, our actions, our feelings, our thoughts, our intentions, and our choices. We are accountable for ourselves and to each other.

When we avoid taking responsibility for ourselves, we lose a portion of our freedom to choose. We get caught up justifying ourselves and rationalizing why it was appropriate to behave the way we did. We get stuck in repeated patterns of self-destructive behavior. We get too busy blaming other people or circumstances to see clearly our own role in situations. Taking responsibility is the first step toward stopping the self-deception and opening the door to personal freedom.

What can you take responsibility for today? What part have you played in your relationship problems? Almost always there is something you could have said or done, or something you can say or do now to improve the situation, to communicate more love, to show more respect, to apologize, to be more true to yourself and your partner, to be more supportive, to include your spouse more, to be less harsh and critical, to be less selfish, to be more understanding, and so on.

The following questions are designed to help you take more personal responsibility for your part in your relationship struggles. Write your answers in the space provided.

1. What is my part in our relationship difficulties overall?

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2. What makes it hard for me to admit when I have injured my partner, even unintentionally?

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3. What are some of my favorite ways of becoming defensive and, thus, evading responsibility?

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4. What happens in our relationship when I insist on being defensive with my partner?

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5. What is one thing I can do differently to start improving my relationship today?

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Consider that it takes a great deal of effort to continually deflect perceived attacks, particularly when your perceptions have little basis in your partner's real intentions. The more you defend and deflect, the more frustrated your partner becomes, and vice versa. Eventually one or both of you gives up in discouragement. Either way, you've lost an opportunity for building intimacy and understanding.

In the end, it takes much less time and energy to admit your role in the conflict, to acknowledge your partner's feelings, and then move on toward solutions.

## 5. Listen without Judgment

Listening without judgment means to hear and understand the *intended* message as completely and accurately as possible.

Often when we listen we hear only part of the message before we begin formulating our next response. Or we try to interpret what the other person really meant. Or we think only of reasons why the other person's statements are false. Or we create stories in our mind that explain the other person's behavior, and then hang on to these stories tenaciously.

This is typically because we take the other person's issues far too personally. When we take things personally, nine times of out ten the stories we create in our mind about the other person's motives and intentions have little basis in reality.

Listening without judgment means that we do our best to enter our partner's world so that we can more clearly see things from our partner's point of view. For example, how would you feel if the roles were reversed? Can you relate to your spouse's feelings?

Here are some specific suggestions to help you be more in tune with each other in your listening:

**Remember, it is not About You.** Listening without judgment is about drawing out information from your spouse so that you can more completely understand your spouse's underlying issues that lie beneath the surface. This is difficult to do when you interpret your spouse's dissatisfactions and hurts as a personal reflection of your own worth, value, competence, goodness or character.

One basic need that we all have is the need to feel competent, worthwhile and of value to others. We want to see ourselves as smart, capable, intelligent, savvy, considerate, lovable, and basically good at heart.

When someone offers corrective feedback or points out our mistakes, sometimes we think our self-concept is at stake. We start listening defensively. It's easier to listen to someone and be curious when they are telling you about something positive like a recent vacation or when they are complaining about *someone else*.

But when the person they are complaining about is *you*, listening without judgment and not being defensive can be like trying to perform a balance beam routine in gymnastics with one hand tied behind your back the day after you've just recovered from the flu.

If Joe believes that smart, capable, good people do not make mistakes or do not cause hurt to others, then when Jane tells him she feels disappointed by something he did, he will have a problem. He will have to prove why his mistake was justified or why it was actually Jane's fault. If not, he has to admit that he is not actually a smart, capable, and good person. If this was your choice, which would you choose?

The antidote is to let go of black-and-white thinking. Remind yourself that you can make mistakes and still be an intelligent, loving, capable, good person. Adopt the mindset that your spouse's issues stem from real unmet needs your spouse has, come from your spouse's reality, are valid for him or her, and are not meant as an attack on the kind of person you are. If your spouse's feelings were hurt by something you did or said it does not mean you are a bad person. It just means you made a mistake or that you were working with a different set of goals. Thinking this way can free you up to listen without judgment.

Listening defensively is usually listening reactively. The way we react to situations usually stems from our experiences and from the way we learn to cope with life's challenges. For example, we may have developed strategies to create distance between us and the people we love because the people we loved in the past always seemed to leave us or hurt us or made us feel bad. Or we learned in youth that if we yelled and screamed we often got what we wanted. Or we watched our parents fighting all of the time and we learned how to keep the tension at bay by never bringing up issues or by focusing too much on pleasing everyone.

Thus, while part of how we react to our spouse's behavior stems from the patterns we develop over time as a couple, another part arises from our own sensitivities, past experiences, ways of perceiving things, paradigms, vulnerabilities, habits, and beliefs that have little to do with our spouse. Our spouse's behavior is often just the trigger for our personal vulnerabilities. When you get defensive, you are allowing your own personal stuff to get mixed up with your spouse's valid issue, and vice versa.

If you accept that you may be having defensive reactions to your spouse's issues and that those reactions stem from sensitivities that may pre-date the relationship, then you may be wondering how you can identify these vulnerabilities and learn to overcome them. This is an excellent question. The first part of this report began to address that question, but going deeper is beyond the scope of this report. For now, focus on becoming more aware of how you are personalizing your spouse's issues and realize that those issues are not about your own worth, character or goodness. Rather they are about your spouse's valid needs.

Instead of listening defensively, tell yourself, "This is not about me. This is not about justifying my actions or judging anyone. I don't have to defend myself just because my spouse is expressing a complaint. This is about listening and understanding where my spouse is coming from. Just because my spouse has a certain perspective that is different from mine doesn't make her right and me wrong. It doesn't make me bad or inadequate. It doesn't mean I have to defend myself or justify why I did what I did. I just need to listen." Thinking this way can begin to free you up to listen without judgment.

**Ask Open-Ended Questions.** Instead of assuming what your spouse meant, ask more open-ended questions to seek clarification. "What did you mean when you said ...?" or "What bothered you about that?" Open-ended questions are questions that can't

be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” They leave the speaker free to respond in the way of their choosing. Ask for more and then stay quiet and keep listening.

**Hold Your Tongue.** When you feel like interrupting, stop. Close your mouth and count to ten if you need to. Just stay quiet and listen. Refrain from offering advice or evaluating your spouse’s views unless you are specifically asked for suggestions.

**Invite More Information.** Use short, succinct phrases that invite your spouse to continue speaking. For example, “tell me more about that,” or “go on,” or “is there more?”

**Listen to Your Spouse’s Words.** This sounds obvious, but it means listen to what your spouse is *saying* not what you are *hearing*. Try not to interpret what your spouse says, make up stories about your spouse’s “real” motives or intentions, or put your own spin on your spouse’s words. Interpretations are usually wrong. Here are some examples of “stories” that people make up in their heads about what their spouse really means.

#### *Example 1*

James: “I just don’t know if I’m ready to have children. We have a good lifestyle and all of that is going to change. I’m not sure if I can be a good father. I don’t want any children to go through what I had to go through in my family.”

Wendy’s Interpretation: “Oh, so what you’re saying is that you just want to keep doing whatever you want to do and not ever have to go outside yourself and make sacrifices or do something for someone else.”

Vs.

Wendy Listening without Judgment: “So you worry about whether you can be a good father or whether you can give children a good life. Is that right?”

#### *Example 2*

Lisa: “You say that you want me to come with you and you do invite me out with your friends but it’s not the same as going out with *other couples* together or going out on a date with each other. I feel uncomfortable around your friends because most of them are single. And it seems like they are just out to pick up other women. I worry about the influence they have on you. And I don’t really feel like I have your full attention when we are with your friends.”

Bob’s Interpretation: “What I hear you saying is that you don’t want me to have any friends or a social life and that you are only happy if you have me to yourself.”

Vs.

Bob Listening without judgment: “Sounds like you want more of my attention when we go out together. You want to feel more like we are a couple when we are together. Is that right?”

Interpretations such as these are self-serving because they allow the listener to justify his or her own accusing attitudes. They often leave the other person feeling defensive and unheard. Rather than trying to control, predict, or direct your partner’s thoughts and feelings, focus on trying to understand what your spouse is actually saying.

Practice listening with less emotionally loaded issues at first. This will make it much easier to learn and master. Remind yourself that it is not about you, ask clarifying questions, hold your tongue, invite more information, and listen to what your spouse is actually saying.

### **Conclusion**

Defensiveness is a common communication problem among most couples. As I said earlier, a little bit of defensiveness from time to time is not going to cause harm in the long run. But a pattern of defensiveness is another matter. If your spouse feels that he or she can no longer raise issues, express feelings, request changes or talk about future plans with you for fear of touching off an argument or activating your defenses, this is a serious blow to your ability to communicate with each other and stay connected.

Hopefully, this article has offered some beginning ideas to help you get a handle on your own defensiveness. As you (1) develop personal awareness of where your own defensiveness comes from, (2) work on creating more facilitative beliefs that promote responsibility, (3) adopt a no-blocking policy, (4) take more responsibility for your actions, and (5) learn to listen without judgment you will find that you feel less and less defensive over time and that your disagreements turn into opportunities for connection and understanding rather than escalating arguments and gridlock.