



LOWERING OUR DEFENSES

If you're human, you've been defensive... and it is likely that you've been defensive quite a bit. It's a thing. It also tends to be a thing we are skilled at identifying in other people. Defensiveness is **normal** and **universal**.

Unfortunately, it's also incompatible with listening. Even a small amount of defense evoked anxiety is enough to limit the listening part of our brains (#thankyouevolution). Once we're in defense mode, or "reactive," we are **barely** able to take in new information or hold space for another view of the topic at hand. Our brains are flight/fight/freeze mode (sympathetic nervous system in high gear).

Here are 11 steps that can help us lower our defensiveness. Use this tool when one person has a complaint, request or boundary issue to discuss with another person.

PERSON ONE:

1. Bring up one issue to share. Just one! It's hard to do this. It's also hard to hear it. So... Not a list of grievances, but a single specific issue. Share what's going on for **you** and how it makes **you feel**. Try at first to stick to some of the basic feelings: sad, mad, hurt, scared, anxious, lonely, etc. and utilize "I statements."

2. Use helpful language. Do your best to be succinct. Use complaint language instead of global criticism language. Complaint language brings up specifics ("when you leave your computer stuff out, I feel overwhelmed and anxious," "I asked you to come to the party and now you've changed your mind, and I'm feeling resentful," "when you spend both weekend nights with your friends I feel lonely and like I'm not a priority). Global criticism language is broad and blaming ("you always leave your crap around," "you never socialize with me," "you're selfish and never care about my feelings").

PERSON TWO:

3. As you listen, **name it**. Defensiveness is that immediate; a knee jerk reaction of "But, but ..." or a "Well, YOU ..." response and heightened sense of tension that may be activated when our partner says, "We have to talk." In defense mode, we automatically listen for the inaccuracies, exaggerations in a complaint so that we can refute errors, make our case, and remind the other party of their wrongdoings. **Becoming aware of our defensiveness can give us a tiny, crucial bit of distance from it.**

4. Breathe. Defensiveness starts in the body. When we feel threatened our SNS activates and fires up our brain & body for: Fight/Flight/Freeze. This makes us tense and on-guard, unable to take in much new information. So, do what you can to calm yourself. Try slowing down your breathing, exhaling to a slow, silent count of one to ten, and taking a long, deep breath between the time your partner's voice drops off and yours starts. We will always listen poorly when we're tense and on guard with an activated SNS.

5. Don't interrupt. If you can't listen without interrupting, it's a good indication that you haven't calmed down. Trying to listen when you can't does more harm than good. Tell your person that you want to have the conversation, and that you recognize its importance, **and** you need to request a time out. And no Buts! When we're defensive, we may begin a slew of sentences with "But" - rebutting what we should be trying to take in. Even if we're listening with open minds, the word "but" conveys that we are discounting or negating the other person's perspective. Watch out for this little grammatical sign of defensiveness and temporarily ban it from your vocabulary. Instead, ask "Do I have what you are saying right?" and "Is there more you haven't told me?"

6. Don't counter-criticize. There is a time to bring up your own grievances, and that time is not when another person has taken the initiative to voice their complaint. If your complaints are legitimate, all the more reason to save them for when they can be a focus of conversation and not a defense strategy.

7. Make sure you got the feelings right. **We all need and want to be heard and validated.** Simply repeat what you heard them say back to them for confirmation of accurate understanding. Aim for getting the gist of what they are feeling. You don't have to agree with what someone is saying to be able to validate and have empathy for their feelings.

8. Find something to agree with. You may only agree with 2 percent of what the other person is saying. Still find a point of commonality in that 2 percent ("I think you're right that I've been coming home stressed-out from work"). This will shift the exchange out of combat into **collaboration**.

9. Apologize for your part. There's almost always something to apologize for when we've had a difficult experience with someone. Even making a general and genuine comment like "I'm sorry for my part in all of this" indicates to them that you're capable of taking responsibility, not just evading it.

BOTH:

10. Offer up three solutions each. The person who brings the complaints offers up three solutions first. The tricky part is the solutions you offer up have to be about YOU, not your partner. What can you do differently, that will contribute to a solution and common ground? Even if you're the one lodging the complaint, you can still contribute to the solution. It's about being a creative team. Remember, if something is bothering one person, it affects all people.

11. Revisit the conversation at a set time in the future. Especially if emotions are running hot, and one or both of you need a time out. Schedule the revisit time/date. It is often helpful for the person who usually doesn't initiate this sort of thing, to arrange the time of the revisit.

Listening without defensiveness is an ongoing challenge and process. Begin with the steps; Name it, Breathe, Don't interrupt. Then treat yo' self. Because those 3 alone are a feat!