How to STOP Being DEFENSIVE

by Barbara Frazier

INTRODUCTION

Everybody gets defensive. It's human.

For some of us, it's a regular and habitual response to anything that smacks of criticism. If you think you fall into this camp, then this guide is for you!

If you're not sure, here's two scenarios to check out. Do either of them sound familiar or resonate with you? Be honest!

Scenario #1

You're washing the dishes in the evening and your partner says, "Hey, did you call our air conditioning people today and make an appointment to get our unit serviced?"

You respond with, *"I'm working as hard as I can! I have a full-time job, and of course I'M doing the dishes right now AFTER I cooked dinner, so get off my back! My plate is full!!!!"*

Your partner responds with, *"I was just asking a question. Why do you have to get so defensive over nothing?"*

You say, *"I'm not defensive!! You always say that! I'm just telling you I'm tired of being in charge of EVERYTHING!"*

Scenario #2

You're on your way to meet your partner for dinner at a restaurant. You're running late.

You end up arriving 15 minutes late, and she says *"Why are you late?!!! They were holding a table for us and I had to let it go because you weren't here on time."*

You erupt into, *"I couldn't help it! I got stuck on a phone call and couldn't get free. You always criticize me! I can't do anything right for you! I'm just a bad person!"*

Do either of these sound familiar? Even a little?

If so, keep reading.

IT'S A NATURAL RESPONSE

Let's start with understanding why we get defensive.

The short answer is that your brain is wired that way. It's a natural response, so don't beat yourself up because it happens. I'll tell you what you can do to work with it in a minute, but first let's understand how it works.

Our primitive brain was set up to scan the environment for danger. It was a necessary function for survival. We still have that tendency wired into our emotional brain so that when we get triggered emotionally, we get a signal that alerts us to danger, and that's followed by an automatic defensive reaction.

Although we aren't on the alert for lions and tigers anymore, we do respond to emotional triggers that feel like an assault on our sense of self. In other words, the danger we feel is that someone is telling us we aren't good enough, in whatever way that gets laid out.

In the first scenario above, the defensive reaction was to an unspoken accusation:

"You aren't on top of things!"

. . . which could easily translate to:

"You're not responsible, you're not capable, you're not reliable, you're not . . ."

The partner didn't say any of those things, and most likely didn't have any of those things in his mind when he asked the simple question about a phone call, but the woman washing the dishes heard all kinds of other things implied in that question, and then responded to her perceptions.

She was triggered and reacted to the trigger.

Now that you understand that becoming defensive is built into your brain, you know that there isn't something wrong with you because you get defensive sometimes, but it does mean that you need to do some work to get it under control.

Let's get to that next.

WHAT TO DO?

The key to stopping a defensive reaction is to get some space between your emotional response to what you hear, and the words that fly out of your mouth.

Defensive reactions are knee-jerk. You hear something, it triggers an emotion, and you respond without thinking it through first. It's fast.

What we want to do is slow things down so there is enough space in there to allow your thinking brain to have some time to evaluate what's heard, and come up with a rational response that isn't defensive.

The "thought" part is key here.

Defensiveness occurs on an emotional level and comes from the emotional part of the brain which is called the Amygdala. This part of the brain usually works in concert with the thinking brain which is called the Pre-Frontal Cortex.

The thinking brain is the part that analyzes, evaluates, reasons, and delays action until all the information has been gathered and processed. The Amygdala processes emotions, and when there is a signal of danger, reacts immediately without consulting the prefrontal-cortex. Under normal circumstances, the Amygdala and Pre-Frontal Cortex work together, but when there is a strong signal of impending danger, the Amygdala bypasses the Pre-Frontal Cortex and acts alone.

The problem is that the Amygdala isn't accurate much of the time, so the reaction can be very exaggerated or misplaced. You need the thinking brain to help you sort out what's accurate and real, and create a reasonable response that is effective.

To do that, it helps to start with getting a clear perception of what's coming at you.

INVESTIGATE FIRST

Become an investigator. Instead of reacting, flip your focus toward finding out very specifically what the other person is saying, intending, implying or intimating. You can do that by making your first response to what you hear a question rather than a retort.

"What specifically is bothering you? Give me some examples."

Or maybe, *"What's happened that brings you to that conclusion?"*

Or, *"You seem upset. Tell me what's going on and I'll listen. I want to understand."*

And then keep asking questions until you know exactly what the other person is saying which includes what he feels, what he thinks, and what he means.

Of the three, what he feels is the most important. When you know that, drive down a little deeper and find out what he needs or wants.

Using our above scenario, the woman could have said, *"No, I didn't get to it today. Are you worried about it?"*

By asking a question, she gets a little space for a moment between her rising emotions and her verbal reaction. The ball is back in his court which gives her a moment to calm down before she continues. She's also asked how he feels, which gives him permission to focus on that.

He might say, *"Well, I'm concerned that we're heading into summer and something could go wrong, and I just want to head that off rather than wait until it breaks down."*

Now she knows what he's worried about, and it has nothing to do with her capabilities. Not at all.

She could respond with, *"I get you. I agree with that. The problem is I have too much on my plate right now. Would you mind making the call?"*

Or, if she would rather make the call because she wants to be in charge of the scheduling, she could tell him when she plans to do that.

Either way, she has responded in a way that isn't defensive, and she took control of her immediate emotions by flipping into an investigative mode instead of a reactive one.

When you take the time to find out what the other person is saying, and especially feeling or needing, you usually find out it's not what you were thinking.

Sometimes there is some truth in what you felt, but most often it's exaggerated.

By investigating, you open the conversation and you get on the same side with the other person so you aren't adversaries.

Once you're on the same side, the need to defend disappears.

So to review, here's the steps:

1. You hear a statement that triggers you.
2. Ask questions to clarify what the other person is saying and what they really mean.
3. Repeat back to them what it is they need or want.
4. Respond to that clearly, directly and calmly without defensiveness or counterattacks.

> *Just remember: That first question is the pivot point that turns the whole conversation around from an adversarial one to a productive one. After that one, just keep asking until there's no conflict.*

WHAT IF I'M TOO UPSET TO INVESTIGATE?

If you're at the point of no return, meaning you're unable to think enough to even ask questions and get some space, then remove yourself physically from the situation until you can get your emotions under control.

Go into another room, take a walk, get off the phone, or whatever you need to do to get some space and time alone to cool off or calm down.

It takes at least 20 minutes for the emotional brain to cool down, and get your thinking brain back on board, and sometimes longer if the issue is intense or one that has come up before.

Once you get triggered and can feel your emotions escalating, it's better to take a break rather than continuing to try and talk through a situation.

If you can't think, you won't be able to make any headway.

OK, SO WHAT ABOUT THOSE TRIGGERS?

If you find you are defensive often, or more than you would like, it would be a good idea to spend some time figuring out what your triggers are.

Here's an exercise to do that:

Step #1

Make a list of any and every type situation you can think of that might result in you feeling or reacting defensively.

I would do this in a brainstorm kind of way, which means just start writing without a lot of analysis. If it pops in your mind, write it down. You're going to go back through this list in a minute, but for this first step, write down anything that might bring on a defensive reaction.

If you're having problems getting started, think of real situations where you have reacted defensively, even if you think you were in the right.

What triggered the reaction? Was someone telling you what to do? Were you made to feel unimportant, or maybe inept? Did someone correct you? Did you hear something that felt like criticism? Is there a hot topic that always makes you feel criticized? Were you belittled in some way?

Write it all down. Every instance. Every idea that comes up in your mind.

Step #2

Now let's go through that list and start building and condensing to single statements. With each statement, include the type of reaction you have under the circumstances. Some examples might be:

- I don't like to be told what to do. It offends me and I become angry immediately.
- I'm very sensitive to any hint that I'm not capable of doing something or figuring something out. It feels like I'm being called stupid and I get angry and want to walk out.
- Raised voices overwhelm me and make me freeze. I can no longer talk.
- Anger immediately makes me angry and I fly off the handle or argue.
- Crowding my physical space triggers irritation or anger.

- Personal attacks cause me to shut down.
- When someone asks me to do something, I feel like I have to do it right then and I feel put upon. I react with irritation.
- If someone criticizes my behavior, I interpret that as not being good enough and I'm likely to cry.
- I feel like it's my role to take care of everyone, but I'm resentful, especially when someone asks me to do more than I already have.
- A condescending remark sets me off, and I come right back with something worse.

The idea of this part of the exercise is to really hone in on the specific types of situations that cause" trigger defensiveness," and to identify the type of reaction you have to each.

Step #3

The third step is to come up with alternate ways to react to the trigger that are healthy and productive.

We've already mentioned the first two.

1. Take a break until you can calm down and get your thinking brain back on board.

2. Begin investigating what the other person is actually saying and feeling, and find out what it is he wants or needs from you. This shifts the attention away from you and back on the other person, while also giving you some space to neutralize your emotions. In general, asking questions brings down the emotional temperature for the other person too.

3. A third thing you can do, especially when talking to someone close to you and to whom you are more likely to react, is to explain your triggers with that person and tell them a better way to approach you.

   For example, if raised voices bring immediate fear or anger, let the other person know this and ask them to refrain from raising his or her voice, even when angry. Tell them how they could state their feelings in a way that won't arouse a defensive reaction.

   Ask them to focus on the behaviors that bother them, and refrain from any kind of personal attack or criticism.

4. The fourth thing is to figure out your own distorted thoughts and beliefs that lead to your defensive reactions.

If you grew up with a highly critical parent, you may interpret any comment about your behavior as an indictment of your whole personality, and you react as though you are under fire.

So when your husband says I wish you wouldn't pile papers on the dining room table, you interpret that as *"You're a slob! Shame on you!"*

And of course you react to that second statement rather than what was actually said!

3 BELIEFS THAT GET IN THE WAY

There are some common beliefs that get in the way, and remembering them can help lower your defensiveness. Here they are:

1. When anyone says something about me, or accuses me of something, it must be true!

No, not necessarily. Just because someone says something does not mean it's true. You can hear it, you can agree that the other person thinks it, but you don't have to accept it as truth if it isn't true. Just remembering that will allow you to hear the other person without getting so reactive.

We react because it's almost as though when someone says something about us, it's somehow real. Not so. By investigating and asking questions, you give yourself time to hear and evaluate what the other person is really getting at. You can then decide what you think is true and either make corrections or agree, or some of both. You have control over what you think.

2. When someone criticizes my behavior, they're saying I'm a bad person or not good enough.

Absolutely not. You must separate your behavior from your sense of self. And if the other person comes at you with personal attacks, you can stop them and say *"I'm willing to hear what you're upset about, but I'm not willing to listen to personal attacks. Please tell me what you think I've done that is problematic for you."*

3. I'm just no good at expressing my thoughts and feelings.

It's not that you're no good at it, but your emotions get in the way of it. You can get very good at it by following some simple rules. Let's cover those next.

BASIC RULES TO SET UP

1. Use "I" messages. Start with "I feel. . ." or "I think . . ."

Examples are:

- "I feel paralyzed when you raise your voice."
- "I get very frustrated when you interrupt me before I've finished saying what I have to say."
- "I feel unimportant when you look at your phone while I'm talking."

The wrong approach would be:

- "You're such an angry person!"
- "Why do you always interrupt me when I'm talking!"
- "You obviously have more important things to do on your phone then listen to me!"

You see the difference. The second set of statements are accusatory and inflammatory. They will likely bring on defensive reactions.

2. Avoid absolutes like "always," "never", and "every time."

These words automatically instigate defensiveness. That's because they aren't accurate.

It is rare that something happens every time or always or never, and no one likes to be categorized that way. Stick to a single, specific incident or example of a behavior.

Instead of *"You always leave the front door unlocked!"*, say *"You've left the front door unlocked three times this week when you left for work. I'm worried about our safety. Is there anything I can do to help you remember?"*

3. Be clear. Ask directly for what you want or need.

Don't hint, and don't expect the other person to read your mind. This is especially important for couples, close friends, or family members. We have somehow gotten it into our heads that mindreading reflects how well we know someone, or care about them. That's a myth. Clarity and directness lowers defensiveness.

4. No name-calling, mocking, insults, or personal attacks. Ever.

5. Agree to take a break if either person requests it.

It's fine to work through a problem over several conversations or even days if the subject is a hot topic. Taking breaks is always better than saying things that are damaging and can't be taken back.

6. Listen to understand rather than respond.

Don't interrupt, and do your best to see things through the other person's eyes, even if you disagree. Be empathetic.

7. Focus on behaviors, not personal characteristics.

Speak about what the other person does or is doing that you object to rather than making values judgments about who a person is.

These rules are good for everybody. Some families post them in their homes where everyone can see them. If you are in a relationship, it's helpful to go over these rules and add any others you think would improve your communication. By setting up rules together, you're less likely to have conversations that result in defensiveness.

HOW TO HANDLE HOT TOPICS

Hot topics or subjects with a lot of emotional impact seem to cause the most problems for everyone when it comes to curbing defensiveness.

Here's two things you can do to help with that.

1. Use Writing

If the subject is difficult to talk through, you could start with writing back and forth until you make enough headway that you can continue face to face.

If you try this, I would stick to email. Texting is not a good idea. You can't really be thoughtful or clearly express what you need to say through texts. And, because you can respond in real time, you don't get the added emotional space that writing things out can provide.

With email, there is some built in space which allows each person to let things sink in a bit before responding, as well as have the time to formulate in words how they think

and feel. Writing puts the emotional space in for you.

This technique works well for people who get overwhelmed and paralyzed during heated discussions, or those who become excessively angry. The space allows you to continue to access your thinking brain in spite of your emotions.

If you use writing as an aid, remember that the point is to get on the same side and find resolutions.

Writing is not to be used to argue, attack, take revenge, or be right. It's only useful if used to promote understanding and respect.

Eventually, you should get to a point where you can have face to face discussions without defensiveness.

2. Solve An Issue Over Time

Another myth is that everything needs to be resolved on the spot. According to this myth, you should be able to talk through any problem in one sitting and be done with it, and if you won't do that, then you're avoiding.

Nope. That's true sometimes, and the better you know someone and the more trust you build, the less amount of time you need to resolve difficult issues.

Still, there are no rules that say a problem has to be solved all at once or with one conversation, and rushing can make things worse.

It's fine if your first discussion is simply to find out what you both think and feel about an issue without trying to come up with a resolution. The goal is simply to get on the same page meaning we know what each of us thinks, feels, needs or wants.

It may take another or several more conversations to make some headway toward solving the issue, and that's fine! In fact, it may help.

A little time between each conversation let's things settle, and you're more likely to be able to empathize with the other person and understand what they need from you.

Again, you are putting in emotional space through the use of time, and that helps keep defensiveness down and cooperation at a high level.

You sleep on problems, right? And sometimes find solutions the next day when you've had some time away from them? Same goes with hot topic conversations. Take time outs, and watch things resolve as new ideas and solutions surface.

SOME SELF-ANALYSIS HELPS

So far, I've covered some methods to deal with defensiveness, and given you an exercise to help you identify your triggers.

Now I'm going to take you a little deeper. This part requires some self-analysis and honest observation, because that's what it takes to really get to the bottom of a problem. This is just for your eyes, so read it through and then think about it.

There are two types of defensiveness. They are:

1. **Blaming others**
2. **Blaming yourself**

Here's how they both work

BLAMING OTHERS

Blaming others is usually a refusal to own behaviors, reactions, internal conflicts, self-image issues, thoughts and feelings. We get threatened by something someone says or does, and quickly go into defense mode.

Here are three ways we use blaming others to defend.

1. Blame for Feelings

You have some sort of feeling in reaction to what someone else says or does, and you ascribe your feeling to that person's behavior. *"You make me so mad!" "If you listened to me when I talk, I wouldn't be so sad." "It's your fault I'm so anxious!"*

It may very well be true that your emotional reaction or feelings were stimulated by what someone else said or did, but ultimately you are responsible for your feelings and how you want to express or handle them.

Here's a formula that comes from Marshall Rosenberg in his book *Nonviolent Communication* that's quite handy when you want to express how you feel. It goes like this:

When you did a, I felt b. I need c. I would like d.

"When you interrupt me while I'm trying to tell you something, I feel unimportant and dismissed. I need to know you're interested in what I have to say, and I'd like you to hear me all the way out. Then I'd like to know what you think."

When you approach it this way, you are taking responsibility for your feelings, but you're also letting the other person know what you need and what to do to make that happen.

This makes it a lot easier for the other person to respond to what you really want rather than defend against being blamed for how you feel. It connects you as opposed to polarizing you and making you adversaries.

2. Blame for Behavior

You behave in a way that is negative or counterproductive, and you blame that behavior on the other person. *"You made me say those things!" You made me withdraw." "You made me fly off the handle!"*

All those behaviors belong to you. You could choose alternative responses including taking a break if you feel too overwhelmed to continue with the conversation. Remember to fall back on our formula to combat your intense emotions, and shift the direction of the conversation:

When a happened, I felt b, I need c, I would like d.

3. Blame for Future Actions or Behaviors

"If you keep this up, you are going to force me to leave you!"

This is an ultimatum and it clearly places blame on the other person. There is no room for discussion or problem-solving. It's a closed door.

The correct statement is:

"I'm feeling defeated about our inability to resolve this problem. I am concerned about how this is affecting our relationship. I would like to figure out how we can get ourselves on the same page. How are you feeling about this?"

There is no blame here. You are taking equal responsibility, but you are voicing your real concerns and fears, and asking for input. The tone is cooperative while also making clear that there could be negative consequences if the problems aren't addressed.

Even if you are at the point of issuing an ultimatum, you can still do that by owning

your reactions. You could say *"I am finding it impossible to continue dealing with your (whatever the behavior is). It is too painful for me."*

BLAMING YOURSELF

1. Excessive Guilt

There is a real difference between having remorse for hurting or creating distress for someone, and personally attacking yourself.

When you feel real remorse, you want to correct and amend.

You feel real guilt which means you are sorry for causing pain to someone, but you do not see yourself as a "bad" person.

You've made a mistake or have been misunderstood, whether willfully or inadvertently, and you want to make amends out of empathy for the other person.

When you move your focus from making amends to heaping guilt upon yourself, you're unable to truly empathize with the other person. You've moved the attention to your pain and away from the other person's pain. This makes it difficult to continue working with the situation, or to make amends.

The guilt is excessive meaning it's exaggerated.

Real remorse is about making reparations. Exaggerated self-persecution is about you.

The best thing to do is own your own behavior in the situation, feel true remorse, and begin working on how you can make amends.

No one is above making mistakes, or causing someone else pain at some time or other. When this happens, focus your attention on listening and empathizing. Then you can repair.

2. Avoidance of Responsibility

A second way self-blame can get in the way is to use it as a shield.

This is usually done with self-deprecating statements, which are sometimes delivered angrily.

"I'm just a screw up. I can't do anything right!" "Everything I say is wrong!"

These kinds of statements deflect attention away from the main issues, and infer that the conversation cannot continue.

This is a very common defense tactic. The displeasure expressed for a particular behavior becomes generalized to apply to the whole person. So instead of someone being displeased with the way you handle the budget, they probably dislike everything about you. You're either all good or all bad. And, you resent it!

This is similar to the excessive guilt we talked about above, but it is different in one very significant way.

The intent in this case is to blame the other person by insinuating that you are being persecuted.

Feeling persecuted is usually a cover for other self-related beliefs that are distorted such as:

- I'm not good enough.
- Everything I do is wrong. No one really appreciates me.
- I'm not actually lovable, and sooner or later he'll leave me.

It can also be related to emotional triggers that are part of your history.

These are things like growing up with a highly critical parent who expected you to be perfect. So when your partner intimates that you have made an error, you respond as though you're still that little girl who can't get her mother's approval no matter what she does.

To work on this type of defensiveness, it is helpful to:

- Identify your emotional triggers.
- Work on correcting your distorted thoughts that are related to these triggers.
- Focus on developing a growth mindset.

The growth mindset comes from Carol Dweck's book called *Mindset*. I would suggest reading it if you are prone to perfectionism.

It is based on the idea that making mistakes is normal and okay, because it gives us opportunities to learn and grow. We are not our mistakes, but rather we are already good enough. Our focus should be on efforts to make improvements, not be perfect.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Anyone can overcome being defensive, but it's harder for those who are:

- Highly sensitive and easily get their feelings hurt
- Feel crushed by criticism
- Anger easily
- Tend to speak before thinking
- Like to argue

If any of these descriptions fit you, you can still become less defensive, but it may take more time, and that's fine! The idea is to practice and work at it, and the more success you have, the easier it will become.

Habits are habits, and if you're in the habit of defending easily, then you'll need to give yourself time to create a different habit of response. The important thing is to not give up, and especially to not get discouraged if it doesn't come easily.

I would suggest starting with conversations that aren't highly emotionally charged. Practice listening to someone with whom you may not agree about an issue, but you don't have a lot of emotional stake in being right. The four things to focus on are:

1. Practice being an investigator until it feels natural and you automatically flip into that mode
2. Use the rules, especially "I" statements
3. Focus on behavior instead of personal characteristics
4. Own your feelings, thoughts and reactions

If you can work on those four areas, you'll succeed.

If you're in a relationship, or have difficulty with a particular person, you could try letting them read this guide, and then work together to both reduce defensiveness. That helps a lot! Especially in close relationships where you're most likely to get defensive.

One of the best things about getting on top of defensiveness is that it gives you control over your emotions in difficult conversations, and you're more likely to be heard and understood.

Now it's time to get started!