

Defensiveness and Toxic Communication

We know the term defense. It crops up in a variety of everyday situations. Most men understand defense from an athletic perspective. In football or basketball, for instance, men know that a good defense is critical to a winning season. Our government has a Department of Defense. In warfare we talk about defending ourselves against the enemy. On a more personal level, young and old, men and women often pursue courses in “self-defense”, allowing us a greater feeling of safety in public situations. As our world becomes more hostile and dangerous we become progressively more aware of the need to defend ourselves. Thus, defense is considered, in many ways, to be a necessary and positive skill in contemporary culture.

When we talk about defensiveness in intimate relationships, however, we enter a very different arena. In the arena of intimate relationships defending ourselves makes us, to some degree, intimate enemies. The terms intimate and enemy are in direct contradiction. When we become enemies we have great difficulty making the transition to intimacy. The more we come to view ourselves as enemies in an intimate relationship, defending ourselves from attacks (direct or indirect) by our intimate partner, the less we are able to let down our boundaries and connect on intimate levels.

Why Do We Defend Ourselves?

We need to realize first of all that we have to defend ourselves in the external world. Otherwise, we suffer without protection from merciless attacks by others. Social environments, particularly in middle school and high school, set the stage for social self-defense. The movie “Mean Girls” dispels the myth that social self-defense is for boys only. In fact, boys often engage in harmless aggression as a pattern of play. *It is a normal expectation for boys to be aggressive and learn to defend themselves in social situations.*

Girls on the other hand, while socialized to be demur and passive, often express aggression in covert, thinly veiled ways, using words to harm each other. Such social aggression, partly because it is covert, is more painful and more difficult to defend against. *Girls learn at an early age to beware of girls as enemies, and to develop social alliances to defend themselves against attacks from other girls.* It is primarily later in life, after puberty, that girls learn to protect themselves against boys. Sadly, however, because of a growing awareness of childhood sexual abuse, parents have to teach young girls to recognize and defend themselves against grown men who would harm them.

In the process of learning to defend ourselves against the painful attacks of others, many of us develop automatic patterns of self-defense. That is, from repeated hurts in relationships (sometimes including the family in which we grew up), many of us,

without thinking, have learned to reflexively defend ourselves whenever we feel vulnerable. *Remember that intimate relationships make us vulnerable. When we are vulnerable, we are volatile. Thus, it is common in intimate relationships, even if the communication climate does not start out to be toxic, to reflexively defend ourselves as we experience feelings of vulnerability.* This we have learned to do without thinking because of the environments in which we grew up.

The moral here is that defending ourselves is necessary, normal, natural and reflexive. We all do it. Like many elements of human behavior, it is neither all good nor all bad. Defensiveness is a normal reaction to the vulnerability that comes from true intimacy. However, if we don't learn to minimize and disarm defensiveness in our love relationships, and if it occurs too much, we end up building walls instead of bridges. Ultimately we find ourselves on opposite sides of thick and high walls, and we cannot find our way to connect in satisfying ways, sexually and emotionally.

How Can We Recognize Defensiveness When It Occurs In Our Relationships?

Volumes have been written on this subject. But volumes won't do us any good when we are spontaneously acting and reacting in our relationships. When things are happening in the moment we need ideas that stick in our minds and that we can put to work in the heat of the moment. Such ideas must allow us both to recognize and disarm defensive behaviors as they occur, and to replace them with positive and workable behaviors.

The work of J.R. Gibbs provides the best set of easy to remember ideas about how to recognize and reduce defensiveness. Take a look at Gibb's pairs of defense producing and defense reducing behaviors. Then do the role-plays in Exercise One. *It is particularly important that you do the role plays, as they will help you not only commit these behaviors to memory, but allow you to recognize them when they occur in your relationship.* Unless you learn to put these ideas into operation, they will be of very little use to you.

Please don't under-estimate the importance of this section. Mastering the ability to recognize and disarm defense-producing behaviors will yield immediately discernable positive changes in your ability to establish and maintain intimacy with your partner.

J.R. Gibbs, an interpersonal communication professor, studied tapes of people interacting. Wherever he identified defensiveness he "red-flagged" the videotape. From his study of these vignettes Gibbs identified six pairs of behaviors which alternately produce and reduce defensiveness. These are as follows:

Defense ***Producing*** Behaviors

Defense ***Reducing*** Behaviors

Evaluation

vs.

Description

When we are evaluating our partner, we are essentially judging him/her. When we are being judged or evaluated, we automatically try to defend ourselves. Instead of evaluating our partner, we can learn to state our feelings, and simply describe the circumstances under which the feelings occur. Description leaves the cause(s) of our feelings open to interpretation, where evaluation automatically ascribes blame.

The best way to distinguish evaluation from description is to think of “**You**” vs. “**I**” messages. When we use the pronoun *you*, a judgment or evaluation often follows. For example, we might say “**You** make me so angry when *you* leave without saying goodbye.” We can change the defense producing nature of that message by substituting “**I**” and describing the situation in which the feeling occurred. For example, we might instead say “**I** started feeling angry after you left without saying goodbye.” Try to avoid the pronoun “**You**” when you are expressing a negative feeling. Instead, substitute the pronoun “**I**” by stating your feeling first, and then describing the circumstances in which your feeling occurred. If you have to use the pronoun “You”, use it only after you have taken responsibility for your feeling vs. blaming your partner.

Feelings can come both from inside and outside. Sometimes, when we are interacting with our intimate partner, a situation stirs up powerful feelings. The power of such feelings may come partly from the present and partly from the past. Often we can't figure out where all of our feelings are coming from. If we reflexively ascribe blame, before we figure where the feelings are coming from, we put our partner on the defensive. Usually, then, our partner reacts defensively and that triggers more feelings. In this manner it is easy for the discussion to spiral out of control. Defensive behavior produces defensiveness, and soon we are only communicating hurtful, negative feelings in alternating patterns of aggression and defensiveness.

Control

vs.

Problem-Oriented

Few of us enjoy being controlled by someone else. When we feel like we are being controlled, we react defensively. Control can manifest itself in many ways. We can dominate the conversation by speaking loudly and talking over the other person, thereby preventing them from expressing themselves. Name calling, or bringing up particularly sensitive matters from the past can be used as a means of inducing guilt or producing feelings that cause our partner to lose control. Thus, we can exercise control by forcing our partner to lose control. Control can be exercised covertly, by using certain nonverbal techniques, like rolling the eyes, ignoring our partner, or giving him/her a certain look that we know will “set him/her off”. Control can be exercised in so many ways, overtly and covertly, that we can't possibly enumerate even a small percentage of the ways it manifests in relationships. Try to tease out the ways you and your partner use control.

When we focus on the problem, however, we stop trying to control the outcome and start trying to figure out what is the problem. The axiom applies. “You can’t fix something until you understand the problem.” There may, in fact, not be a problem. Sometimes we’re just in a bad mood, or “got up on the wrong side of the bed”, so to speak. Try honestly, without blaming, to focus with your partner on the question: “what is the problem?”, without ascribing blame. Simply pursuing this question without using control, overtly or covertly, will connect the two of you in a constructive process and disarm defensiveness.

Strategy

vs.

Spontaneity

Most of us understand the concept of strategy. It is based on manipulating a situation to produce the desired result. Usually strategies are covert or hidden, so that our opponent is unable to read the strategy, and thereby counter it with a defense or opposing strategies. It is easy to see, then, how strategic behavior produces defensiveness on the part of the recipient, who usually becomes aware after realizing he/she has been manipulated.

The opposite of strategic behavior is spontaneity. When we are spontaneous, by definition we are not thinking about how to manipulate our partner. Spontaneity does not mean “firing from the hip”, or saying whatever you think or feel without regard to your partner’s feelings. Conversely, spontaneity here means being respectfully and diplomatically honest with your partner, not only about what you think and feel, but most importantly about what you want or need. When you are role playing spontaneous behavior, try using the basic matrix, “I feel ...” “I need ...” “Would you please ...” In other words, tell your partner how you feel, state your need, and make a request. No strategy is embedded in this straight-forward way of approaching your partner.

Neutrality

vs.

Empathy

Empathy means “walking a mile in the other person’s moccasins”. When we are truly empathic, we essentially wipe all of our own preconceived notions, ideas, and feelings out of our mind for the moment and truly enter and dwell in the reality of another person. We try on their reality with the intention of knowing how they think and feel. Have you ever done this? If so, it has probably taken a great deal of effort. True empathy involves a very concentrated, intentional effort to enter another person’s world and dwell there long enough so that you and they know you have connected with them in a pure form, without judgment or criticism. Practice entering this space with your intimate partner. Get feedback about how well you accomplish the task. If you practice entering empathy as an exercise, you will be more likely to be empathic when it counts the most in your relationship.

Neutrality is the opposite of empathy in that the person who comes across as neutral in an interaction essentially is indifferent to how the other person thinks and feels. The neutral person conveys the message, through their neutrality, that the other person’s thoughts and feelings do not really matter. Neutrality is essentially a very matter of fact

way of relating to someone, much like the character of Dr. Spock on Startrek. Of course, Dr. Spock is likeable as a character because we aren't trying to talk to him about our deepest thoughts and feelings. In fact, we aren't trying to talk to him at all when we watch Startrek. Try talking to your partner about something that really matters to you while they react with complete neutrality. See how that feels. Chances are you won't like it very much.

Superiority

vs.

Equality

While it may seem obvious that an attitude of superiority causes defensiveness, you may be surprised at how often you come across as superior when you are on the defensive. Many of us automatically “cop an attitude” of superiority when we are confronted about something in our behavior that our partner doesn't like.

Equality, on the other hand, reflects the assumption and attitude we are both equal even though we may differ in our feelings and/or opinions. Superiority or equality may be communicated verbally, but often we communicate these attitudes subjectively through our facial expressions and posture. Try being honest with yourself and your partner by seriously asking the question, during a disagreement, am I coming across as your equal, or am I acting as if I am superior to you?

Certainty

vs.

Provisionalism

“Don't confuse me with facts.” “My mind is already made up.” This saying reflects the attitude of certainty. The person who is certain has a closed mind. They are not open to new information, or ways of seeing things because new information might require a revised opinion. Of course, we all like to think we are right. Being right about things gives us a sense of confidence in our own mind and point of view.

The truth, however, about our relationships is that they are very complicated and subjective. We seldom completely understand any transaction. Because we see reality from different perspectives, and interpret behavior differently, there usually are several legitimate ways of interpreting our interactions. An attitude of provisionalism means that we operate from this point of view: “I see things this way, but I am listening to how you see things, and reserving my final opinion until I have taken your point of view into account. In other words, provisionalism means that we don't hasten to conclusions until we have gathered as much information as possible. See if you find yourself or your partner using certainty or provisionalism when you have a difficult interaction.

Do Exercise One. The point of this exercise is essentially to give you the opportunity to try on these pairs of behaviors in your relationship. ***Basically, this exercise is designed first to give you a chance to see what it feels like to be on the defense producing and defense reducing ends of these pairs of behaviors. Secondly, this exercise is designed to help you begin to recognize these behaviors when they count the most, as they occur in your intimate interactions.*** Adopt the assumption that both of you lapse into one or more of these defense producing behaviors without knowing

it as you interact. Thus, don't be accusatory, or use the recognition of the negative behaviors as a weapon against each other. *Assume, instead, that both of you use them unknowingly, and that you can help each other recognize and root out the defense producing behaviors as a way of producing better communication patterns.*

Exercise One: Acting Out the Pairs

1. Pick a topic to discuss. Make it a topic that is controversial between the two of you.
2. Alternate the role of acting out a pair of Gibb's behaviors while you are discussing the controversial topic.
3. Once the designated person has acted out a pair of behaviors, let the other person guess which pair of behaviors were being acted out.
4. Alternate roles, acting out and guessing which pair of behaviors have been acted out, until you have each had the opportunity to act out each of the six pairs of behaviors. This will take some time, but stay with the process until you have completed it.
5. When you have each acted out each pair of behaviors, have a discussion in which you disclose to each other how it felt to be the recipient of the defense producing behaviors.
6. Finally, carry this work into the discussions you spontaneously have with each other. Try to be aware when you are feeling defensive and why. Let your partner know when you are feeling defensive, and try to figure out if either of you are acting out any of these defense producing behaviors. Rooting the defense producing behaviors out of your relationship and substituting defense reducing behaviors will take you a very long way toward a healthy intimate relationship.