

Defensiveness Takes Its Toll on Relationships. How to Stop

Defensiveness helped you as a child but is destructive as an adult.

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Key points

- Defensiveness is about arguing over facts, blaming, and making excuses—all ways of coping as a child.
- Defensiveness is destructive to relationships because problems aren't solved, and emotional wounds are created.
- The keys are knowing when the argument is getting heated, stopping the pattern, and not triggering each other.

You're being defensive!

No, you are!

You always do this; start gaslighting me.

You're the one who starts the name-calling!

But you....

The fact that Allie and Jack are arguing over who is being defensive means they both are. What started as a discussion about the kids' bedtimes has devolved in minutes; the topic is out the window and has been replaced by an emotional and fact-driven slugfest.

Defensiveness is exactly what it sounds like—defending yourself from what seems like a threat or attack. It's easy to fall into, especially in couple relationships, but it stirs frustration and resentment that can, over time, wear down the relationship. And when arguments reach their crescendo, problem-solving is derailed, and emotional and even physical injury can result, fueling the next argument.

The Faces of Defensiveness

- **Arguing over facts.** It was Tuesday, no, it was Wednesday. I've got the text, my mother said. Here, you both get into the weeds over whose reality is right. Your emotional brain has taken over and tells you that if you can get the other person to get the facts right, they will calm

down. It never works because the other person's rational brain, like yours, is offline and can't process anything you're saying.

- **Making excuses, blaming the other person.** Like lying, excuses are learned ways of avoiding responsibility and, hopefully, the other's anger. Blaming the other person for your actions shifts the focus from defense to offense—I only get angry because you interrupt me—again sidestepping responsibility.
- **Interrupting each other, bringing up the past, gaslighting.** Emotions are running the show; you both are pushing hard to make your point, using the past to fuel your argument, and gaslighting to dismiss everything the other person is saying.
- **Shutting down, leaving.** If either of you gets too overwhelmed, it's easy to shut down and tune out or physically leave.

What these all have in common is the amount of emotional energy driving this. Everyone is getting ramped up, pushing their points, saying the same thing over and over, and pulling up more and more evidence to make their case.

The Source

How do you learn to do this? If you were emotionally or physically abused or had volatile parents, you have few ways of coping as a child. Some just walk on eggshells and become the good kids who avoid conflict. Others resort to lying or excuses, blaming, or passive aggressiveness. And others go into fight mode and push back.

It's all about protecting yourself from emotional or physical injury and it helped you survive your childhood. But now, when those childhood wounds and threats trigger you, you go on autopilot and do what you did when you were a child. But this no longer works in the bigger adult world and creates a pattern that keeps you feeling like a wounded child.

Here's how to stop the pattern:

Stay Aware of Your Emotional State

A key is becoming aware of when your and your partner's emotional brains are shutting down your rational brain, ramping up the emotions, and pushing you into defensiveness. You can use the symptoms of defensiveness to let you know you're going off track—the stacking up on facts, bringing up the past—and simply getting louder, interrupting, blaming. But if this ability to tune into your emotions is difficult for you, practice this in calmer times throughout the day—check in with yourself and simply ask how you're feeling. By tracking yourself in less emotional situations, you learn to detect subtle emotions that can help you avoid going 0-60.

Have Tools to Calm Down

If you find yourself getting frustrated, angry, and anxious, it's time for emotional first aid. Take a few deep breaths, try and get your rational brain back online by focusing back on the topic, and if need be, say you need to take a break.

Take Responsibility

Again, much defensiveness is a little-kid way to avoid responsibility and not get in trouble. Upgrade your adult software by taking responsibility rather than making excuses or blaming, even if it takes time to get the courage to do it. In the heat of the moment, this lowers the emotional temperature; by acting like an adult, you, over time, repair those childhood wounds.

Know Each Other's Triggers

If Jack's anger flares when Allie interrupts him, Allie needs to know this. If Allie feels scolded when Jack starts waving his finger at her or brings up stuff from the past, Jack needs to know what to do instead to not cause Allie to feel unsafe. They make a pact to do their best not to trigger the other.

Have a Time-Out Signal

As soon as one of you can tell defensiveness has taken over, your rational brain has come back online; it helps to come up with some signal—a word—Idaho—or action—throw the kitchen towel up in the air—as a way of calling a time-out. And even if you try this and the other person stays ramped up, you work your side of the pattern and take a break. It's always better to do this sooner than later.

Circle Back When Things Have Calmed Down

Eventually, the argument ends. Now is the time when both of you are calm to circle back. This means not just grunting a make-up apology the next day or sweeping the topic and argument under the rug, but going back and having an adult conversation and solution to the problem, and also deconstructing the defensiveness itself. The challenge is to not slip back into another argument but instead talk about lessons learned about triggers and communication.

Seek Outside Help

Even a brief stint of individual or couple therapy can help you both become more aware of when conversations are becoming derailed and teach you skills to regulate your emotions and heal old wounds.

Defensiveness is destructive. Time to upgrade your emotional software?