

DEFENSIVENESS

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

One of the common problems that we encounter in our office is when one or both parties are defensive. One person says something, expresses a need or some feelings or even says something critical or blaming. While we don't recommend blame or criticism, we also don't support getting defensive. Getting defensive usually results in increasing escalation. The first person does not "feel heard" and either ups the ante by getting louder or more emphatic or gets defensive themselves. Defensiveness is one of the four indicators that researcher John Gottman found could predict relationship break-down.

The conversation may begin with "why are you always wasting your time?" Now there are a number of things about this sentence that are problematic. It includes a superlative "always" which is arguable. It asks a question that the person doesn't really want to have answered. The first person doesn't really want to know "why" the second person is doing what they are doing. It would be much more clear and direct for the first person to say, "I would like some of your attention." We also teach people how to communicate clearly by speaking the unarguable truth.

However, our partners are not perfect, and don't always express themselves clearly. When that happens catching our defensiveness can be helpful.

What would be a typical defensive reaction to "why are you always wasting your time?" It could be with a logical explanation of why what the person is doing is important, or it could be "I'm NOT wasting my time, this is important!" or it could be bringing in evidence to prove that the other person is wrong for saying what they did, or it could include another kind of defensive move, such as storming out the door?

The first question we might ask of the person in our office is "Whom are you defending?" A client recently told us that if he didn't refute his partner's allegations they would become real. We asked whether refuting them ever actually got his partner to change her mind. He said "no, but at least it makes me feel better." We suggested that if he didn't already believe the allegations on some level he probably wouldn't take them seriously.

If Marlene said to Bob "you're fat" Bob probably would not have any inclination to get defensive. He doesn't believe he's fat. However, if Bob said to Marlene "you're fat" she would be much more inclined to get defensive. Being a female in a society where thin is valued, and where she has put a lot of effort into maintaining a healthy weight, makes "you're fat" a much more emotionally charged sentence for Marlene than it is for Bob. On the other hand, Bob has sometimes had a belief that he is not doing enough. Therefore if Marlene said, "you're wasting your time" he would likely have a much more defensive reaction.

It is helpful to know and understand your partner's sensitivities and not deliberately trigger them. It is not a good idea for Bob to call Marlene fat or Marlene to tell Bob he's wasting his time. However, it is not always possible, nor is it healthy to be in charge of

your partner's defensive reactions. Ultimately, people can learn to challenge their own defensive reactions.

Gay Hendricks says that any statement offered by anyone is simply a thought and a puff of air. If Marlene said to Bob "you are wasting your time" she created a thought, then expressed it with a puff of air. And if Bob said to Marlene "you're fat" he created a thought, then expressed it with a puff of air. Now this may sound like the old adage, "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me." We've all been "hurt" by words so it's easy to argue against that adage. But, reminding ourselves that something that feels hurtful is actually just a thought and a puff of air can take some of the sting out of it.

Gay continues by saying "It's our act of getting defensive that locks in the statement and makes it real. If we didn't treat it as real and true, we'd have no need to get defensive. Getting defensive is the cue that you're taking something as true and real." It is Bob's defensive reaction to the thought that he is wasting his time that makes it real. And it is Marlene's defensive reaction to the thought that she is fat that makes it real.

When you resist the statement, it solidifies it. As Carl Jung said, "What we resist, persists."

Agreeing with the person's allegations do not help. Agreeing with the other person also locks the statement into reality.

There's an entirely different alternative. What if you did neither? What if you didn't agree and you didn't get defensive? Imagine doing something very different with the statement...something brand new. Imagine reacting non-defensively. Imagine reacting to it as what it is – just a thought or a puff of air. What would that look and sound like?

In our office we coach people to practice reacting non-defensively. Some of our possibilities include breathing, moving, and generating curiosity.

Why aren't non-defended reactions more popular, and why is defensiveness so common? Why do many people have the same argument over and over for years without any resolution? Your partner says, "You're stupid." If we didn't defend ourselves – "No I'm not!" – the idea that we're stupid would become reality. We think we have to defend ourselves to keep the other person's thoughts from becoming real.

That's upside down from how it actually works. The act of defending ourselves is based on assuming the other person's version is real. If you didn't think it was real, you wouldn't feel any urge to defend yourself.

But there's something even more important we all need to know. The very best reason to drop defensiveness is that each time we lock in on a position (such as defending ourselves against a thought or utterance like "You're stupid") we clinch around it – and this clinch stops the flow of connection. Crazy as it may sound, the other person probably wouldn't say, "You're stupid" unless he or she had some desire to connect with you. The other person – that annoying entity who's telling you "you're stupid" – is

usually trying to communicate with you in some way, and that's the best (albeit flawed) way he or she knows how.

And often they aren't actually saying these words, but we imagine they are saying or thinking them and then we are reacting defensively against our imaginings. Marlene may say to Bob, "Has the basement been cleaned yet?" She may think she is asking a question without any blame or criticism. Or she may want to appreciate Bob for the task. She may even be ready to offer to take on some of the task. If Bob hears this as "why isn't the basement cleaned yet?" and gets defensive, the flow of connection that Marlene was hoping to create will be lost.

Bob may say to Marlene, "those pants look tight on you." He may be expressing concern about how comfortable the pants are, he may be offering to buy Marlene a new pair of pants, or he may even like how tight they look. If Marlene hears this as "you're fat" and gets defensive, the possibility of connection is lost.

So we recommend that you get curious before you defend against a statement. Or catch yourself in your defensiveness, acknowledge it and then get curious. Ask yourself questions like, "what do I believe is real here?" or "what is my partner trying to communicate" and "how can I be loving and creative with myself right now?" You might want to ask for a "time out" so you can self-soothe and bring your arousal down. You might want to listen generously to what your partner is really saying. You might also want to say something unarguable yourself. You could say "ouch" or "I feel scared" or "I notice my jaw got tight when I heard you say that and I imagine that you are really saying that I've done something wrong."

Defensiveness never got anyone where they want to be. Try something new!

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Psychotherapy. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. For more information call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com. Many of the ideas in this article are from Gay & Katie Hendricks, Lasting Love, Constellation, pages 213 to 225. See the articles on Marlene and Bob's website for more about Gottman's indicators of relationship breakdown (Four Horsemen of the APOCALYPSE), generous listening and how to speak the unarguable truth.