

# Reducing Defensiveness

## Objective

To reduce the likelihood that you will react defensively during difficult conversations or when receiving negative feedback or criticism.

## What to Know

Do you get defensive when others point out something you do not like or agree with? Perhaps you received upsetting feedback, or you were criticized. You might respond by protecting your character or distancing yourself from a mistake. Maybe you tend to blame outside forces or judge others to make yourself feel better. But if you frequently get defensive, you will push people away, and over time your overreactions and counterattacks can undermine relationships.

It is normal to feel defensive, because the amygdala (the part of your brain that scans the environment for threats) cannot tell the difference between a psychological and a physical threat. You become defensive because you do not feel safe. But sometimes it is not appropriate to *respond* defensively.

If you find yourself reacting defensively, here are some tips to help you.

- 1. Remember your values, beliefs, and passions.** You can do this without a direct confrontation. For example, if you received a poor annual review at your job, avoid beating yourself up. Instead, focus on areas where you feel confident, such as your religious faith or your passion for learning. Focusing on your values, beliefs, and passions can increase your self-esteem and reduce the need to become defensive.
- 2. View criticism as a sign of others' belief in your abilities.** Perhaps the people in your life are hoping to offer guidance or feedback that will help you. For example, if you recognize your boss is offering feedback to support you in achieving success, you might be more likely to receive the information without becoming defensive.
- 3. Cultivate a growth mindset.** Having a growth mindset involves being curious and seeking learning opportunities to improve yourself—even if it means failing. If feedback is meant to help you—or it is neutral and objective—focus on self-improvement. Take a step back, reflect, and adopt a growth mindset. View mistakes and failures as inevitable. Your abilities can improve over time with effort. Ask questions like, “What can I do differently next time?”
- 4. Buy some time.** If you are having a conversation and feel yourself getting defensive, pause and gather your thoughts. Use filler words and let the other person continue speaking. You might say, “Go on...,” or “Say more about that.” Take a few slow breaths and consider how you will respond. Use silence. To break the silence, the other person will probably start talking again.

**5. Use “I” statements.** “I” statements are essential to reducing defensiveness and defusing tension because you own your feelings and directly communicate what is on your mind. You might say, “I’m not comfortable with this,” or, “I hear what you’re saying.”

**6. Know your triggers.** Understanding your triggers allows you to prepare responses if you do become defensive. For example, you might plan to take a few deep breaths to stay calm and remain present when you are engaged in a difficult conversation.

**7. Name your sensations and feelings.** If you become defensive, notice bodily sensations (e.g., tension in your shoulders, sweating, and so on). When you notice physical responses, you can pause and choose a thoughtful response instead of reacting automatically. You can also name the emotion you are feeling, prompting reflection and better self-management. You might even share what you are feeling with the other person.

**8. Assume good intentions.** Some people have a hard time delivering feedback, so give them the benefit of the doubt. Imagine they have your best interests at heart and want you to be successful. View them as a caring collaborator and not as an adversary to help defuse any tension you feel.

**9. Avoid taking things personally.** Feedback or criticism can feel threatening when you take it personally. Instead, frame it as a helpful conversation that highlights behaviors that can be changed or improved. Personalizing feedback makes you less resilient than when you acknowledge that external factors may have contributed to the situation.

**10. Offer yourself compassion and forgiveness.** Show yourself the same kindness, care, and concern you would show a loved one and recognize that everyone is imperfect and makes mistakes. Self-compassion helps you be in a more open, receptive state, allowing you to better manage your reactions. Forgiving yourself can also stop unproductive cycles of rumination that can follow negative feedback.

**11. Own your behavior and take responsibility.** Just admit your mistakes and apologize, if needed. You are 100% responsible for your behavior—no matter what the other person says or does.

A defensive communication style is destructive to relationships, and while it is normal to sometimes feel defensive, you do not have to respond defensively. This worksheet will help you use the above strategies to manage your emotions effectively, cope with difficult conversations, and learn from feedback and criticism.

## **What to Do**

Practice using the above strategies and over time you will find you are less likely to react defensively. Over the next week, keep track of how you communicate with others. After each statement, note if the statement usually is true for you and whether you consistently practiced the skill during the week.

Week of: _____	Is this typically true for me?	Did I consistently practice within the past week?
I'm respectful when I communicate.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I focus on my values, beliefs, and passions.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I recognize that others believe in my abilities and wish for my success.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I use clear and direct "I" statements.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I allow myself to make mistakes and fail.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I cultivate a growth mindset.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I request time to "think about it." I pause before I react.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I understand my triggers and I am prepared with a response.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I clearly ask for what I want and need.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I am responsible for my behaviors and choices.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I actively listen and thoughtfully respond.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I strive to be in integrity with myself and others.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I acknowledge and name my feelings and body sensations during challenging conversations.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I view negative feedback as a learning opportunity, and I get curious about it—even if I don't agree with it.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I take a problem-solving approach to conflict, rather than becoming reactive.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
My communication is honest and direct.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I assume that other people have good intentions, and they have my best interests at heart.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I don't take things personally.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I show myself compassion and kindness, and I forgive myself when I make mistakes.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I admit mistakes and apologize, when needed.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
I learn from feedback and criticism.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

Think of a situation this week when you had a difficult conversation or received negative feedback or criticism. What happened? How did you feel after this experience?

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In general, did you find you were less likely to react defensively? Why or why not?

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What can you do to further work on these skills?

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### **Reflections on This Exercise**

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_  
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

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