

Blessed are the peacemakers

Meeting with defensive reaction can incense people even more than they felt when raising the issue or grievance in the first place. If the defender's head isn't bitten at the start, it will certainly feel like it by the end.

Defensiveness is such a tricky thing. It seems so innocent, so justifiable. What's wrong with defending yourself when you think you're being wrongly accused, or that the misdemeanour is so minor?

That's exactly the problem. Your partner then feels discounted. You don't pay attention to what's important to them – you think they're just plain wrong.

You raise high walls of self-justifying reasons for why you shouldn't change and leave no way open for the other to get through.

You're refusing to stay open and let your partner influence you, which is the exact opposite of what you do when you are relating successfully.

And you're saying you've been falsely accused, which throws the blame back on your partner. At least it feels like that to them.

There are two problem defences. One is the attack-back form, which is prompted by the belief that the best form of attack is defence. The criticiser is, you think, supposed to back off, or to fight on grounds where you don't feel so vulnerable or guilty.

This usually ends with the two of you polarising and retreating to your corners, and throwing whatever accusations you can come up with. This contains very little positive interaction.

The other problem defence is the innocent victim "poor me" routine; denial of fault and "poor me having to put up with nasty you". This is unlikely to produce any healthy, loving, respectful relating at the time.

The biggest problem with defensive reactions is that over time they drive your partner crazy. Your partner feels you hear nothing they say, so their criticism becomes louder and stronger. Their negativity gets higher. The "fight or flight" adrenaline response kicks in sooner – and more strongly.

Before you know it, your heart rate shoots up to unhealthy levels. You can't think straight. You lose all perspective. The two of you start to relate like hissing reptiles rather than thinking human beings.

The way to stop defensiveness ruining a relationship is to react differently when you are criticised.

Instead of immediately going on the attack, take a deep breath, check out what your partner is implying about you, and say you need time to think about it.

Try putting yourself in their shoes. Come back later and take responsibility for at least some of the problem. Say something like: "I'm prepared to do something about this, but not that". Then the critical partner feels that they have at least got through to you in some way, they have been heard, even if you don't agree with all of their criticism.

Another way is to take full responsibility for repairing the situation, even if you have to say: "Gee, it's really irritating when you go on about this, but I still love you". That way the sting is taken out of the criticism, you stop the argument from intensifying, and you have bought yourself some time to think about the criticism and whether it's justified.

If you're trying to criticise constructively and avoid getting a defensive reaction from your partner, put a positive spin on it. This lowers the negativity of the criticism and makes it easier for your partner to accept some of what you say.

If you want your relationships to work, it's worth putting in the effort to overcome defensive reactions so you can maintain your love and warmth.

It can't hurt.