

Defence is destructive

In looking at what can become destructive elements in a relationship, defensiveness looms large.

This third “Horseman of the Apocalypse” is a reflex action to a perceived attack. Often the defensive partner can feel unappreciated and always wrong, or indignant and self-righteous. Both mindsets are defensive, but how do we identify when we or our partners are acting defensively?

If you deny responsibility for what is happening, make excuses or respond to a partner’s complaint by snapping back that they always do the same, you are guilty of defensiveness.

If you respond with a “yes, but” answer, just keep repeating the one statement to stop your partner from expressing a view or whinge in a babyish behaviour, you are also acting defensively.

Defensiveness is insidious because it tends to escalate conflicts between the couple and stops real communication.

When hit with defensiveness your partner feels isolated and frustrated, and you become distant from each other. In the longer term, your bids to connect with each other diminish and this is a danger area for any relationship.

So if any of this is striking a chord, it’s time to do something about it. Instead of blaming the other partner and waiting for them to make the first move in solving a conflict, do something heroic by reaching out to your partner with a spirit of generosity.

Rather than viewing your partner’s words as an attack, see them as strong expressions of feeling about the topic being discussed. Stick to one issue: don’t drag up a history of misdemeanours but start more sentences with “I feel” rather than “You always” or “You never”.

Try saying that though you don’t see things that way, you can understand they may see the situation differently. This legitimises both points of view. Try acknowledging that you’re not perfect, because this then gives your partner emotional room to do the same.

It’s also important to look for the good points in your partner and praise them – this goes a long way towards building up some good will in the relationship.

Finally, take the relationship into consideration when working through issues and work as a team rather than as two individuals focused solely on their own personal needs.

Survival tips

- **Realise that always being defensive in an argument can quickly erode a relationship**
- **Talk about complaints as they come up; don’t stockpile them**
- **Be prepared to go first in being open, accountable and receptive to change. Your partner may model your behaviour but even if they don’t, you’ll know that you were acting maturely.**