

Avoiding Defensiveness

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**The way of a fool [is] right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel [is] wise.
–Proverbs 12:15**

My last article suggested two ways couples can more effectively work out the inevitable disagreements that occur between them by complaining (focusing on the problem, not the person) and by avoiding getting mucked up arguing about the past (see . Today we'll examine what makes a good defense.

Defensiveness is so natural. It rolls off the tongue easily. It's the product of a wounded ego which, to protect its defiled honor, rises up to repel the perceived unjust attack. Unfortunately, it rarely leads to anyone either backing down or apologizing. This makes sense when you consider the message defensiveness sends: "I am innocent of your accusation, which makes your attack absurd and you a great bully." It lobs the blame ball back into the other's court. Our partner, feeling that the original grievance has been brushed aside or minimized (and feeling the blame shift), tries harder to break through the defensive wall, by driving the point home more forcefully.

Sometimes, if we've been unavoidably nailed on something difficult to defend, we may respond by trying to level the playing field by pointing out some previous sin committed by our assailant. Dr. Jeffrey R. Holland has said, "I can't tell you the number of couples I have counseled who, when they are deeply hurt or even just deeply stressed, reach farther and farther into the past to find yet a bigger brick to throw through the window pane of their marriage. ... If something is buried in the past, leave it buried. Don't keep going back with your little sand pail and beach shovel to dig it up, wave it around, and then throw it at someone, saying, "Hey! Do you remember this?" Splat! Well, guess what? That is probably going to result in some ugly morsel being dug up out of your landfill with the reply, "Yeah, I remember it. Do you remember this?" Splat. And soon enough everyone comes out of that exchange dirty and muddy and unhappy and hurt..."

So what's the alternative? After all, wasn't our honor impugned and doesn't that require a rebuttal? Dr. David Burns suggests we do the opposite of what our ego desires—that we acknowledge our mistakes and apologize. He suggests that if our accuser has gone over the top in detailing our crimes, we sift through what was said, find the gem of truth, and concede it, without hitting back. Why? Because it takes the wind out of the other person's sails. Consider some examples.

"You're always late and I'm sick of waiting for you!"

"It's true. I was late and you have a right to be angry."

"Those pants are tight on you. You just don't have much self-control, do you?"

"You're right. I have gained about 10 pounds. I sometimes give in when I know I'll regret it later."

“You don’t ever let anything pass. Why can’t you just calm down and realize you’re not perfect either.

“I’m sure you probably feel I nit-pick at you a lot and I’m sure I did this morning. Sometimes I wish I didn’t notice every little detail and didn’t care so much. That’s hard for me.

Now go back and consider where a hotly offended ego could have taken those examples. Epictetus, 2000 years ago, suggested, “If someone criticizes you, agree with them at once. Tell them that if only they knew you well, they would not bother to criticize only that!”

But isn’t that just giving in? I shouldn’t have to agree with someone who’s being critical, unfair, and unreasonable, should I? No. You don’t have to. You just may be better off if you do. Finding the nugget of truth avoids the power struggle and polarization that frequently occurs in arguments. Non-defensiveness elicits less extreme responses and invites your antagonist to be more reasonable.

Non-defensiveness is not effective in dealing with people who verbally abuse as a means of intimidation or control. That requires a different tack completely. But, even then, you can respond to verbal assaults assertively, without being aggressive. That’s a topic for another day. Meanwhile, we’ll investigate what most arguments boil down to next time.