

# Chapter 6

# Identifying Defensiveness



# INTRODUCTION

**D**EFENSIVENESS IS a very powerful and destructive secondary emotion. More often than any other, it blocks effective communication because a person who is feeling defensive is usually unable to express any primary feelings in "I" language. For this reason, it is important that you be alert for signs of defensiveness in yourself.

Monitoring your own behavior can help you avoid expressing yourself defensively. It can also aid you in determining when you're not able to curb your defensiveness. This is important to know since it is best to discontinue a conversation when you feel unable to express your primary feelings. Often your defensiveness can be a clue to deeper emotions that you haven't been aware of. Monitoring your partner's behavior can help you determine when he or she is out of control. Of course, you'll want to check this out with your partner rather than just assume he or she is out of control. It is best to state your concerns and ask if your partner wants to continue. Sometimes your partner's defensiveness can alert you to poor use or nonuse of "I" language on your part.

## GOAL

We want you to be able to readily recognize defensiveness in yourself so you'll be better able to avoid it. In this chapter, you'll be taking the first steps toward that goal. Given a conversation in which one individual is behaving defensively during at least part of the conversation, you will be asked to identify those statements that indicate defensiveness.

# DEFINITION

Defensiveness may be indicated whenever you hear yourself:

- Talking in an angry, sarcastic, or resentful tone of voice.
- Accusing or name-calling.
- Blaming or faultfinding.
- Assuming you have been blamed for or accused of something.
- Interpreting motives for behavior you observe in your partner.

# ELABORATION

When you are feeling or behaving defensively, it is usually because you are protecting rather than expressing your primary feelings. You are probably feeling hurt or afraid, and defensiveness is an attempt to avoid being hurt further. It is important to recognize when you are behaving defensively because defensiveness prevents constructive communication.

## Recognizing Defensiveness

Many times you will recognize your defensiveness simply because you feel defensive. But at other times you may find yourself speaking defensively before you are aware of your feelings. Here are some things to listen for that can warn you that you are expressing yourself defensively.

### 1. Talking in an Angry, Sarcastic, or Resentful Tone of Voice

Your tone of voice carries your message as much as the words you choose. It is often the easiest sign of defensiveness to recognize. Anytime you hear yourself speaking *angrily* or *resentfully*, check out your primary feelings. A sarcastic tone of voice may indicate that you are saying hurtful things to your partner. It is not unusual for a defensive person to try to protect himself or herself by striking out at others.

An angry tone of voice does not always indicate defensiveness, but check it out to be sure.

### 2. Accusing or Name Calling

One of the most destructive ways to protect yourself from being hurt is to take the offensive and attack the other person. Here are some typical accusations made out of defensiveness:

- You're totally insensitive and irresponsible.
- You're just like my (your) mother.
- You're seeing someone else, aren't you?
- You don't know anything about love or sex.
- As for name-calling, most people have seen, heard, or used quite a number of the names people call each other when they're angry or defensive.

### 3. Blaming or Faultfinding

Blaming or faultfinding is similar to making accusations and name-calling because it involves striking out at others to protect yourself. Here are some typical statements.

- It's all your fault.
- You have only yourself to blame.
- You're making me upset and angry.
- I'm depressed because of what you did.

#### 4. Assuming You've Been Blamed for or Accused of Something

Frequently, while on the defensive, an individual may take everything the other person says as an accusation or blame. This can occur even when the other person is making every attempt to use "I" language and express primary feelings. Below are some two-line conversations that show what we mean. The first line is in "I" language and the second line is a defensive response.

"I" Language:	I'm going to straighten this room a little bit.
Defensive Response:	You think I'm a lousy housekeeper. Is that it?
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"I" Language:	I'm really upset that I can't find those papers.
Defensive Response:	I suppose you're blaming me for losing them!
<hr/>	
"I" Language:	I'd like to try something new next time we have intercourse.
Defensive Response:	Oh, so you think I'm boring in bed.

#### 5. Interpreting Motives for Behavior You Observe in Your Partner

Feeling defensive often leads to misinterpreting the motives and intentions of people you love. This can really hurt somebody who is trying to communicate effectively and be open with their feelings. Here are some examples of what we mean:

- You're just trying to get your own way like you always do.
- You're trying to trap me.
- You're trying to get out of going to bed with me. You don't really love me, do you.

#### Not Using "I" Language or Expressing Primary Feelings

You've probably noticed in the statements we've given as examples that "I" language is not used in any of them, nor are primary feelings expressed. This might serve as one of the best additional warnings to you when you are speaking defensively.

# SAMPLE

## Conversations

**F**OLLOWING ARE four sample conversations. In each, defensiveness can be seen in the behavior of one individual. Statements that may be interpreted as defensive are indicated in the conversation. In the commentary are remarks about each statement. Read through only as many sample conversations as you feel you need to be able to recognize defensiveness.

**NOTE:**

As in previous chapters, we'll be evaluating what other people say in the examples and practice. Ideally, you evaluate your own behavior and communication. You may think your partner is becoming defensive, but it is essential that you check it out with him or her.

# SAMPLE 1

In the conversation below, defensiveness can be observed in the behavior of the woman speaking. Defensive statements are indicated by bold italics and discussed in the commentary.

## COMMENTARY

Man	Honey, I'm getting very concerned about our son's behavior. He seems undisciplined lately and sort of willful.	He states his concerns. using "I" language.
Woman	I agree, but I'm not sure what to do about it.	She responds in "I" language
Man	Well, I'm not home all day so I don't know how you relate to him, but I'd like to be firmer with him. I let him get away with all sorts of things that really bother me. He's starting to take advantage of me.	He talks about what he wants, in "I" language.
Woman	<b><i>So you think I'm not firm enough with him.</i></b>	She's assuming that he has accused her of not being firm enough. She's speaking in an irritated tone of voice.
Man	I didn't mean to imply that. Only you would know about that	He tries to clarify his meaning.
Woman	<b><i>Well, I think I'm a very good mother and that he's a pretty good boy for his age.</i></b>	She's speaking resentfully. It sounds as though she thinks she's been accused of being an unfit mother.
Man	I do, too, but I don't want him to learn that he can have his way all the time at somebody else's expense.	He talks about what he wants, in "I" language.
Woman	<b><i>Oh, I get it, you think this is all my problem; that I'm entirely too lax with him and that I let him do anything he wants.</i></b>	She's misinterpreting his motives and accusing him: She's also speaking sarcastically.
Man	I was really only talking about how I treat him.	He tries to clarify his meaning.
Woman	<b><i>Well, that's all you know isn't it! After all, you don't have to spend all day, every day, with him. I just don't have the time or energy to be the perfect mother all the time.</i></b>	She's speaking angrily and continues to think he's attacking her.

## SAMPLE 2

In the conversation below, defensiveness can be observed in the behavior of the man speaking. Defensive statements are indicated by bold italics and discussed in the commentary.

### COMMENTARY

Man	We have the money, but I don't know why you need a new dress.	He's implying that she doesn't need a new dress by using "why" and not "I" language.
Woman	I don't actually need a new dress. I want a new dress and the reason is just that it makes me feel good to have a new dress.	She talks about her desires, in "I" language
Man	I don't buy clothes because I want them; I buy them because I need them.	He uses "I" language.
Woman	I understand that. I'm glad this came up because I would like for you to understand or at least accept my feelings about having new clothes.	She talks about what she wants, in "I" language.
Man	<b><i>You make me feel like Scrooge.</i></b>	He's irritated and blaming her for making him feel like Scrooge.
Woman	That wasn't my intention. I'd just like to avoid having this same discussion about why I need new clothes next time I want to buy something.	She tries to clarify her meaning, in "I" language.
Man	<b><i>You can't change the way I am.</i></b>	He's misinterpreting her motives.
Woman	I'm not trying to change the way you are. I'm not criticizing your feelings about clothes; I just want my feelings to be respected and accepted.	She's still trying to clarify her feelings and desires.
Man	<b><i>Go and buy whatever you want. I'm not going to be the heavy and say no. I certainly wouldn't want to deprive you.</i></b>	He's speaking angrily and sarcastically.

## SAMPLE 3

In the conversation below, defensiveness can be observed in the behavior of the woman speaking. Defensive statements are indicated by bold italics and discussed in the commentary.

		<b>COMMENTARY</b>
Man	You seem troubled. Is there anything wrong?	He states his concerns. using "I" language.
Woman	I'm just depressed; that's all. I suppose you want to know why.	She responds in "I" language
Man	I'm interested.	He talks about what he wants, in "I" language.
Woman	Well, I'm not going to tell you. <b><i>You'll just think it's stupid.</i></b>	She's probably speaking in a sarcastic tone of voice indicating defensiveness.
Man	Look, I don't mind if you don't tell me, but I'm not going to think you're stupid.	He expresses his feeling, in "I" language.
Woman	I'm depressed because I planned all week to lie in the sun today and it was overcast all day. <b><i>See, I told you it was dumb.</i></b>	She assumes he'll think her depression is stupid, indicating defensiveness on her part.
Man	I don't think it's dumb. It bothers me that you assume I'm not going to understand.	He tries to clarify using "I" language.
Woman	You never get depressed. <b><i>How could you understand!</i></b>	She's still assuming he thinks she's dumb.
Man	I do get depressed. I'm getting depressed right now.	He's getting frustrated but still uses "I" language.
Woman	I guess I've been too defensive. I'm always worried that you'll think I'm silly or weak.	She finally expresses her feelings in "I" language.

## SAMPLE 4

In the conversation below, defensiveness can be observed in the behavior of the woman speaking. Defensive statements are indicated by bold italics and discussed in the commentary.

		<b>COMMENTARY</b>
Man	Honey, next time we make love, I'd like to see you in that sexy nightgown I bought you.	He states his concerns. using "I" language.
Woman	<b><i>Why?</i></b>	She sounds suspicious and defensive.
Man	So I can take it off you. I think I would find it arousing.	He's continuing to use "I" language.
Woman	<b><i>You must be pretty tired of me if you've got to do a dumb thing like that to make sex interesting.</i></b>	She's assuming that he's tired of her, indicating defensiveness on her part.
Man	I'm not tired of you, but I do like to try new things.	He tries to clarify his feelings, using "I" language.
Woman	<b><i>Why don't you just try a new woman? I'm sure that would be exciting for you.</i></b>	She's still defensive and assuming that he's tired and bored with her.
Man	I get the feeling that you're upset about this. Are you?	He uses "I" language, stating his concern first and then asking her to respond.
Woman	<b><i>Me upset! No, I like to be told I'm a sexual bore.</i></b>	She's speaking sarcastically indicating that she's still feeling defensive.
Man	I am not bored by you. I'd like to discuss this later if you don't mind. I'm feeling a little upset myself.	He's become frustrated, but still expresses himself in "I" language.

# PRACTICE

**F**OLLOWING ARE four practice sets. For each, there is a conversation like the ones in the sample conversation section. You are to underline or highlight the statements in the conversation that indicate defensiveness. On the facing page, there are spaces for you to give your reasons. As in the sample conversations, only one individual is behaving defensively in each conversation. Look at the feedback on the pages following each item immediately after completing the item. If you feel you've done well on the first couple of items, go on to the next chapter. If you have trouble with the practice, go back and review the definition, the elaboration, and the sample conversations. Then try the practice items again.

## PRACTICE 1

Study the sample conversation below and determine which statements indicate defensiveness. Underline or highlight those statements. You can assume that only one of the individuals is speaking defensively.

Man: This magazine has nude men in it. I never knew you liked this garbage.

Woman: I haven't liked any magazines until this one. I find it much more tasteful and kind of classy.

Man: You don't find these men attractive, do you?

Woman: A little, but only physically.

Man: I didn't realize that you weren't physically attracted to me. I always thought I was good-looking.

Woman: You are, silly. I've always been attracted to you. In fact, that's one of the reasons I fell in love with you. But, I find these men attractive too.

Man: Well, you're no great beauty either. I find other women more attractive too.

Woman: I'm sorry you feel this way. I'm not comparing these men to you and I do find you very attractive. I'd like to talk about this more, because I'm worried that you're jealous.

Man: Well, I guess I am, a little. I've just always been afraid you'll find someone more attractive than me.

For each of the statements you indicated on the facing page, explain briefly why you think it is defensive.

1. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# FEEDBACK 1

## Part A

Below, we have indicated those statements we feel are defensive in bold italics.

1. Man: This magazine has nude men in it. *I never knew you liked this garbage.*
2. Woman: I haven't liked any magazines till this one. I find it much more tasteful and kind of classy.
3. Man: *You don't find these men attractive, do you?*
4. Woman: A little, but only physically.
5. Man: *I didn't realize that you weren't physically attracted to me. I always thought I was good-looking.*
6. Woman: You are, silly. I've always been attracted to you. In fact, that's one of the reasons I fell in love with you. But, I find these men attractive too.
7. Man: *Well, you're no great beauty either. I find other women more attractive too.*
8. Woman: I'm sorry you feel this way. I'm not comparing these men to you and I do find you very attractive. I'd like to talk about this more, because I'm worried that you're jealous.
9. Man: Well, I guess I am, a little. I've just always been afraid you'll find some- one more attractive than me.

# FEEDBACK 1

## Part B

For each of the statements indicated in the conversation, we have explained why we feel it is defensive. Your reasons may be somewhat different.

1. Man: He's being sarcastic. Don't be concerned if you missed this one.
2. Woman: She's expressing her opinion, using "I" language.
3. Man: He's still being sarcastic.
4. Woman: No comment.
5. Man: He's assuming that she isn't attracted to him, and that that is why she's reading the magazine.
6. Woman: She's expressing herself in I" language.
7. Man: He's name-calling and being sarcastic.
8. Woman: She's still using "I" language.
9. 'Man: He finally begins to use "I" language and to express his feelings.

## PRACTICE 2

### PART A

Study the sample conversation below and determine which statements indicate defensiveness. Underline or highlight those statements. You can assume that only one of the individuals involved is speaking defensively.

1. Woman: I'd like to know why you get so upset every time we go to a party together.
2. Man: I get uncomfortable when I see you talking with other men.
3. Woman: Why are you so jealous?
4. Man: I don't know. I guess I feel a little insecure.
5. Woman: You don't trust me, do you?
6. Man: No, that's not it at all. I trust you, but I get these other feelings too.
7. Woman: Well, I guess we'd better not go to any more parties if you're always going to be so sensitive.

# PRACTICE 2

## PART B

For each of the statements you indicated on the facing page, explain briefly why you think it is defensive.

1. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## FEEDBACK 2

### PART A

Below, we have indicated those statements we feel are defensive in bold italics.

1. Woman: *I'd like to know why you get so upset every time we go to a party together.*
2. Man: I get uncomfortable when I see you talking with other men.
3. Woman: *Why are you so jealous?*
4. Man: I don't know. I guess I feel a little insecure.
5. Woman: *You don't trust me, do you?*
6. Man: No, that's not it at all. I trust you, but I get these other feelings too.
7. Woman: *Well, I guess we'd better not go to any more parties if you're always going to be so sensitive.*

# FEEDBACK 2

## PART B

For each of the statements indicated in the conversation, we have explained why we feel it is defensive. Your reasons may be somewhat different.

1. Woman: She's assuming he's upset and she sounds very defensive.
2. Man: He expresses his feelings, in "I" language.
3. Woman: She's accusing him of jealousy indicating defensiveness on her part.
4. Man: He's still expressing his feelings, in "I" language.
5. Woman: She's still making defensive accusations.
6. Man: He tries to clarify his meaning, using "I" language.
7. Woman: She's still too defensive to hear what he's saying.

## PRACTICE 3

### PART A

Study the sample conversation below and determine which statements indicate defensiveness. Underline or highlight those statements. You can assume that only one of the individuals involved is speaking defensively.

Woman: I'm going to play in the neighborhood game next weekend and I'd love to have your company.

Man: *No, I'm no good at soft ball.*

Woman: I don't think anyone else is, either. It's probably just for fun. I think I'll sign up.

Man: *Is that supposed to be a challenge?*

Woman: Challenge? No, I just think I'd have fun. I don't expect you to do it. I'd like it if you came to watch me.

Man: *Oh, sure. My wife the jock. I know you think I'm not very athletic for a man.*

Woman: Look, I know you don't like sports that much, but I'm not bothered by it. I wish you'd believe that.

Man: Well, it's something I'm very sensitive about.

Woman: I understand that, but I'd be unhappy to think you were feeling pressured by me.

Man: So, I'll come watch.

For each of the statements you indicated on the facing page, explain briefly why you think it is defensive.

1. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

J. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

S. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

B. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## FEEDBACK 3

### PART A

Below, we have indicated those statements we feel are defensive in bold italics.

Woman: I'm going to play in the neighborhood game next weekend and I'd love to have your company.

Man: No, I'm no good at softball.

Woman: I don't think anyone else is, either. It's probably just for fun. I think I'll sign up.

Man: ***Is that supposed to be a challenge!***

Woman: Challenge? No, I just think I'd have fun. I don't expect you to do it. I'd like it if you came to watch me.

Man: ***Oh, sure. My wife the jock. I know you think I'm not very athletic for a man.***

Woman: Look, I know you don't like sports that much, but I'm not bothered by it. I wish you could believe that.

Man: Well, it's something I'm very sensitive about.

Woman: I understand that, but I'd be unhappy to think you were feeling pressured by me.

Man: So, I'll come watch.

# FEEDBACK 3

## PART B

For each of the statements indicated in the conversation, we have explained why we feel it is defensive. Your reasons may be somewhat different.

Woman: She states her desires clearly -good "I" language.

Man: No comment.

Woman: No comment.

Man: He's assumed that she's challenged him and is speaking defensively.

Woman: She tries to clarify her meaning.

Man: He's speaking sarcastically and defensively. He's assuming that she thinks badly of him for not being athletic.

Woman: She tries again to clarify her meaning, using language.

Man: He finally uses language to express his feelings.

Woman: She's using "I" language.

Man: Apparently he's overcome his defensiveness.

## PRACTICE 4

Study the sample conversation below and determine which statements indicate defensiveness. Underline or highlight those statements. You can assume that only one of the individuals involved is speaking defensively.

1. Man: I'm very upset about something concerning our debit account. I'd like to discuss it with you.
2. Woman: Okay, what is it?
3. Man: Well, I looked at our transactions on-line just now and there are transactions I don't recognize or remember.
4. Woman: Naturally, you think I'm responsible.
5. Man: Well, I don't remember making the transactions myself, but I was going to ask you about it, not accuse you.
6. Woman: Oh sure. Even if I said "No," you wouldn't believe me for a minute.
7. Man: I'm hurt that you think that.
8. Woman: You're just saying that to make me confess. Well, I won't talk.
9. Man: I'm not trying to weasel a confession out of you. I'm more interested in figuring out what the amounts are so I know where our account stands. Identity theft is a real concern.
10. Woman: You mean you just wanted to know if I did it in case I remembered the amount?
11. Man: That's it.
12. Woman: I'm sorry I misunderstood you. Actually, I remember making some recent purchases. Maybe I can figure out what the transactions were.

For each of the statements you indicated on the previous page, explain briefly why you think it is defensive.

1. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

12. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# FEEDBACK 4

## PART A

Below, we have indicated those statements we feel are defensive in bold italics.

1. Man: I'm very upset about something concerning our debit account. I'd like to discuss it with you.
2. Woman: Okay, what is it?
3. Man: Well, I looked at our transactions on-line just now and there are transactions I don't recognize or remember.
4. Woman: *Naturally, you think I'm responsible.*
5. Man: Well, I don't remember making the transactions myself, but I was going to ask you about it, not accuse you.
6. Woman: *Oh sure. Even if I said "No," you wouldn't believe me for a minute.*
7. Man: I'm hurt that you think that.
8. Woman: *You're just saying that to make me confess. Well, I won't talk.*
9. Man: I'm not trying to weasel a confession out of you. I'm more interested in figuring out what the amounts are so I know where our account stands. Identity theft is a real concern.
10. Woman: You mean you just wanted to know if I did it in case I remembered the amount?
11. Man: That's it.
12. Woman: I'm sorry I misunderstood you. Actually, I remember making some recent purchases. Maybe I can figure out what the transactions were.

# FEEDBACK 4

## PART B

For each of the statements indicated in the conversation, we have explained why we feel it is defensive. Your reasons may be somewhat different.

1. Man: He uses “I” language to express his concerns and desires.
2. Woman: No comment.
3. Man: No comment.
4. Woman: She's assuming that he has blamed her.
5. Man: He tries to clarify his intentions, using “I” language.
6. Woman: She's assuming that he won't believe her. She's misinterpreting his motives.
7. Man: He expresses his feelings, in “I” language.
8. Woman: She's sarcastically accusing him of trying to make her confess.
9. Man: He tries again to clarify his intentions, using “I” language.
10. Woman: She begins to hear what he's saying.
11. Man: No comment.
12. Woman: She uses “I” language.