

# Chapter 7

## Identifying Vulnerability



# INTRODUCTION

**Y**OU ALREADY know how important it is to express primary feelings as much as possible, and you've probably realized how vulnerable and defenseless this can leave you. But as undesirable as it sounds, defenselessness is far more constructive than defensiveness. You've already seen the hurtful effects of defensiveness in the previous chapter. In an emotional confrontation, partners can avoid this destructive trap by allowing themselves to be vulnerable and open, each trusting the other not to take advantage of his or her vulnerability. As long as this trust and willingness to be open exists, constructive communication can continue. When either individual becomes defensive, it's time to re-evaluate the situation. If one partner is feeling *defensive* and finds it too difficult to remain *vulnerable*, the interaction needs to be discontinued for the time being until both individuals are willing and able to allow themselves to be vulnerable and express their primary feelings openly.

## GOAL

We want you to be able to identify vulnerability in yourself and in your partner. In this chapter, you will be taking the first step toward that goal. You'll be given a conversation and asked to identify those statements that indicate vulnerability.

# DEFINITION

Vulnerable derives from the Latin verb, *vulnerare* – to wound.

A statement indicates vulnerability when you are:

1. Expressing primary feelings in "I" language.
2. Taking an emotional risk.
3. Avoiding defensiveness.

# ELABORATION

It is very important that you are able to identify vulnerable statements so you can demonstrate your willingness to be vulnerable, as well as recognize when others are being vulnerable. Below, we'll describe in more detail the three points in the definition.

## 1. Expressing Primary Feelings in "I" Language

Whenever you express your primary feelings, you are making yourself vulnerable by being open and honest about some of your deepest emotions. As we have said so many times before, this openness is critical in exercising self-responsibility and in effectively communicating with those you love. Using "I" language to express primary feelings contributes to your vulnerability because it means you are accepting responsibility for your feelings.

## 2. Taking an Emotional Risk

Expressing primary feelings can be emotionally risky, particularly when the person you're dealing with is *angry* or *defensive*. He or she is more likely to *hurt* you when feeling this way. The risk is often well worth taking though, because the more open you are, the more comfortable your partner will feel in expressing his or her primary feelings. Sometimes you will feel willing to take the risk because you feel it is in your best interest. Other times you may be feeling too tired, or sick, or fragile to risk being *vulnerable*. You may decide at any time during a conversation that you are no longer willing to take the risk. In any instance where you feel emotionally unprepared to be *vulnerable*, it is a good idea to consider discontinuing the conversation until you do feel prepared.

Brene Brown found in her research that mutual vulnerability tends to increase connection, trust and engagement. “Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and our experiences with people who have earned the right to hear them. Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process.”<sup>1</sup> Trust is the product of vulnerability.

It is also important to recognize when your partner is being *vulnerable* because it would be so easy for him or her to feel hurt. For instance, you may be feeling *angry* and *defensive* while your partner is trying to express his or her primary feelings. In *anger*, you may fail to recognize this *vulnerability* and respond *hurtfully*. This is to be avoided, whenever possible, because it is very destructive.

## 3. Avoiding Defensiveness.

Sometimes being *vulnerable* means that in a situation in which you feel very *defensive*, you actively choose not to express yourself *defensively*. This is a difficult position to take, as it represents an emotional risk and often takes quite a bit of emotional energy. Avoiding defensiveness from a courageous stance tends to draw people closer as each person's vulnerabilities are allowed to be present and expressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Brené (2012). *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (p. 45). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

# SAMPLE CONVERSATIONS

**O**N THE following pages are four conversations in which the individuals make statements showing vulnerability. In each conversation, these statements are indicated. In the commentary you'll find remarks for each statement. Study only as many conversations as you need to be able to identify vulnerability.

# Sample Conversation 1

In the conversation below, the statements showing vulnerability are indicated by bold italics.

		Commentary
Man	Hey, your hair is different. Come closer so I can see.	No comment.
Woman	I didn't ask you before I did it, because I knew you'd say no.	She's sounding <i>defensive</i> .
Man	<b><i>It's your hair. I have my preferences, but I want you to be happy with it too.</i></b>	He's trying to assure her there's no need for her to be <i>defensive</i> .
Woman	You don 't like it, I can tell.	She's still <i>defensive</i> .
Man	<b><i>Frankly, I haven't made up my mind yet. I think I like it.</i></b>	He's taking something or a risk in admitting that he's not sure how he feels about her hair.
Woman	Well, it'll be too bad if you don 't. I can't change it now.	She's becoming even more <i>defensive</i> .
Man	You know, I' m getting kind of annoyed. I am concerned that you 've already made up your mind that I'll be mad and won 't like it. <b><i>I'm feeling hurt by that.</i></b>	He's stating his primary feelings of <i>hurt</i> and, therefore, making himself <i>vulnerable</i> .
Woman	<b><i>Well, I guess I was just so afraid you wouldn't like that I cut it.</i></b> You used to tell me so often how much you liked it the other way.	She's finally stopped being <i>defensive</i> and is expressing her primary feelings of <i>fear</i>
Man	I did, but I may very well decide I like it this way. <b><i>At any rate, I'd like to feel you were happy with it whether I liked it or not.</i></b>	He is expressing vulnerability by indicating that her <i>happiness</i> with her appearance is a priority for him.

## Sample Conversation 2

In the conversation below, the statements showing vulnerability are indicated by bold italics.

		Commentary
Woman	I' m awfully tired. I' m going to bed.	No comment
Man	I was just thinking about going to bed myself, but for a different reason. I feel like making love. Are you too tired for that?	He expresses his desires using "I" language. Also, he's stated his intentions before asking a question
Woman	Yes, I'm afraid I am.	She responds.
Man	<b><i>I'm beginning to feel really neglected. I'd like to find a way to set aside some time for us to be together intimately. How do you feel about that?</i></b>	He's expressing his primary feelings in "I" language.
Woman	You're saying I'm always tired or have some other excuse.	She's assuming that he's accused her of making excuses.
Man	No, I'm just trying to find a solution that will work for both of us. <b><i>I want to make love to you more often than we do now. I get to feeling very frustrated after a while.</i></b>	He's continuing to express his primary feelings even though she's become <i>defensive</i> . This represents somewhat of a risk for him.
Woman	You 're a typical ma n. Only interested in sex.	She's making accusations
Man	I'm interested in more than sex. <b><i>I like being close to you.</i></b>	He's still expressing his primary feelings, even though the emotional risk is greater.
Woman	I don't know why you're making me feel so guilty about this.	She's accusing him of trying to make her feel <i>guilty</i> .

## Sample Conversation 3

In the conversation below, the statements showing vulnerability are indicated by bold italics.

		Commentary
Woman	I have a real problem with your clothes in the morning. I like our bed room to be neat, and it can't be until I've picked up your clothes. Would you be interested in helping me out?	She expresses feelings and wants in "I" language
Man	You're saying I'm a slob.	He's assuming that she's accused him of being a slob.
Woman	No, I'm not. I'm asking if you'd be willing to help me solve my problem.	She tries to clarify her meaning using "I" language.
Man	You're just like my mother, only sneakier. She always tried to get me to pick up my things, only she was a lot more straightforward.	He accuses her of trying to coerce him.
Woman	You think I'm trying to coerce you?	She asks about his feelings rather than accusing him.
Man	Sure, what happens if I say "No"? Then you'll start yelling, and nagging, and trying to make me feel <i>guilty</i> .	He's speaking defensively.
Woman	Since it's my problem, if you say no, I'll just have to handle it myself. After all, I can't force you to pick up your clothes.	She talks about her feelings, using "I" language.
Man	<b><i>You mean you wouldn't try to make me feel guilty?</i></b>	He's beginning to overcome his defensiveness.
Woman	<b><i>No. I'm hurt that you think I'd do that.</i></b>	She's expressing her primary feelings in "I" language and taking a small risk in doing so.
Man	<b><i>I'd like to start this conversation over. I think I've been unnecessarily defensive.</i></b>	He has overcome his defensiveness and appears ready to express his primary feelings in "I" language.



## Sample Conversation 4

In the conversation below, the statements showing vulnerability are indicated.

		<b>Commentary</b>
Man	Yuck!	No comment.
Woman	What's the matter?	No comment.
Man	I think these tomatoes must be two months old. They're absolutely rotten.	No comment.
Woman	I must have forgotten about them.	No comment.
Man	Honey, I get really bugged when I find rotting food in the refrigerator. I get queasy.	He expresses his feelings, using "I" language.
Woman	So that makes me a lousy housekeeper, I suppose.	She's assuming that he's accused her of being a lousy housekeeper. This indicates defensiveness on her part.
Man	<i>No, but I guess it bothers me more than you. It's my problem. I'd just like to find a way to avoid it.</i>	He's making himself vulnerable by expressing his feelings in "I" language.
Woman	Don't look in the refrigerator.	She's speaking sarcastically.
Man	<i>I'm serious about finding a solution, but I'd be willing to discuss it at another time. I didn't mean to offend you.</i>	He's still being vulnerable, expressing his feelings in "I" language and a voiding defensiveness. This represents an emotional risk, since she is behaving so defensively.
Woman	<i>Well, I feel really inadequate, like I'm a bad wife not doing my duty.</i>	She finally expresses her primary feelings in "I" language, overcoming her defensiveness to do so.
Man	I'm not saying it's your duty, and I'm not saying it's your fault.	He clarifies his meaning, using "I" language. This could be a statement showing vulnerability, even though we did not indicate it as such.
Woman	<i>In that case, I feel better about discussing it.</i>	She expresses her feelings using "I" language. She's being vulnerable by choosing to take the emotional risk or starting the conversation over again.

# PRACTICE

**F**OLLOWING ARE four practice items. Each presents a sample conversation. You are to study the conversation and then underline or highlight those statements you feel show vulnerability. Then, for each statement you indicated, explain why you thought it showed vulnerability. After completing each item, look at the feedback on the following pages. If you feel you did well on the first couple of items, go on to the next chapter. If you have trouble with any of the items, go back and review the definition, the elaboration, and the sample conversations. Then try the practice again.

# PRACTICE 1

## Part A

Study the sample conversation below, and indicate those statements you feel show vulnerability.

1. Woman: I'd like to take you to dinner tonight. What do you think about that?
2. Man: It's not my birthday. What are you up to?
3. Woman: Well, I've been complaining a lot lately that you never take me any- where, so I decided to do something instead of complain. I feel that I've been unfair.
4. Man: Sounds fishy to me.
5. Woman: I get the feeling you 're suspicious of my motives. Is that right?
6. Man: Well, yes, to tell you the truth. You have to admit this is quite a switch in your tactics.
7. Woman: I'm sorry you think that way. I'd like you to believe that I'm honestly sorry about my actions. I think it's a mistake for me to just expect you always to be the one to take me out.
8. Man: Well I was feeling kind of pressured about it. I like taking you out but when I feel you expect it, I feel taken for granted.
9. Woman: I know that. So I want to invite you out. My treat.

# PRACTICE 1

## Part B

For each statement you indicated, write why you think it shows vulnerability.

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

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

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

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

5. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
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6. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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

8. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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

# FEEDBACK 1

## Part A

Below, we have indicated those statements we believe show vulnerability in bold italics.

1. Woman: I'd like to take you to dinner tonight. What do you think about that?
2. Man: It's not my birthday. What are you up to?
3. Woman: Well, I've been complaining a lot lately that you never take me anywhere, so I decided to do something instead of complain. ***I feel that I've been unfair.***
4. Man: Sounds fishy to me.
5. Woman: I get the feeling you're suspicious of my motives. Is that right?
6. Man: Well, yes, to tell you the truth. You have to admit this is quite a switch in your tactics.
7. Woman: I'm sorry you think that way. ***I'd like you to believe that I'm honestly sorry about my actions. I feel it's a mistake for me to just expect you always to be the one to take me out.***
8. Man: ***Well, I was feeling kind of pressured about it. I like taking you out; but when I feel you expect it, I feel taken for granted.***
9. Woman: I know that. So I want to invite you out. My treat.

# FEEDBACK 1

## Part B

For each statement we indicated, we've shown why we think it shows vulnerability.

1. Woman: She states her intentions before asking for a response from him using good "I" language.
2. Man: He's sounding a little suspicious and maybe *defensive*.
3. Woman: She is taking an emotional risk by admitting to a mistake and is simply offering an apology.
4. Man: He's still a bit resistant.
5. Woman: She states her concerns and asks him to confirm or deny.
6. Man: He's still resistant and suspicious.
7. Woman: She restates her apology in more detail, making herself more vulnerable. Also, she's avoiding becoming *defensive* herself, even though he is *distrustful*.
8. Man: He is finally expressing his primary feelings non-defensively.
9. Woman: You could have underlined these statements as indicating vulnerability, even though we did not.

## PRACTICE 2

### Part A

Study the sample conversation below, and indicate those statements you feel show vulnerability.

1. Woman: I read an article the other day that said impotence was mostly a state of mind. I'd like you to read it, so we could talk about it.
2. Man: I'm not a psychosomatic! How many times do I have to tell you that?
3. Woman: I only brought it up because I'm worried about you and I want to help. I love you, you know.
4. Man: I know you're trying to help, but I get so embarrassed talking about this problem with you that I get angry.
5. Woman: Well, it is my problem too. I'd really like for our sex life to be the way it used to be.
6. Man: Well, I guess you would. Why don't you just look for someone else to sleep with?
7. Woman: I don't think that would solve the problem since I'm interested in sleeping with you. Maybe I'm the problem.
8. Man: Yeah, you bug me about it too much. Just leave me alone, okay?

# PRACTICE 2

## Part .B.

For each statement you indicated, write why you thinking it shows vulnerability.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



# FEEDBACK 2

## Part A

Below, we have indicated those statements we feel show vulnerability in bold italics.

1. Woman: I read an article the other day that said impotence was mostly a state of mind. I'd like you to read it so we could talk about it.
2. Man: I'm not a psychosomatic! How many times do I have to tell you that?
3. Woman: *I only brought it up because I'm worried about you and I want to help you. I love you, you know.*
4. Man: *I know you 're trying to help, but I get so embarrassed talking about this problem with you that I get angry.*
5. Woman: *Well, it is my problem too. I'd really like/or our sex life to be the way it used to be.*
5. Man: Well, I guess you would. Why don't you just look for someone else to sleep with?
6. Woman: *I don't think that would solve the problem since I'm interested in sleeping with you. Maybe I'm the problem.*
7. Man: Yeah, you bug me about it too much. Just leave me alone, okay?

## FEEDBACK 2

### Part B.

For each statement we indicated, we've shown why we think it shows vulnerability.

1. Woman: She states her wishes, using "I" language.
2. Man: He's speaking defensively.
3. Woman: She's taking a risk by expressing her primary feelings. She's avoiding defensiveness.
4. Man: He's trying to overcome his defensiveness and is taking the risk of expressing his primary feelings.
5. woman: You may or may not have underlined these statements. She's expressing primary feelings.
6. Man: He's speaking sarcastically and defensively.
7. woman: She continues to resist becoming defensive and expresses her primary feelings in "I" language.
8. Man: He's still defensive.

# PRACTICE 3

## Part A

Study the sample conversation below, and indicate those statements you feel show vulnerability.

1. Woman: I called your office today and your secretary said you were out all afternoon. I was wondering where you were.
2. Man: I had a business appointment with Ellen Taylor
3. Woman: You mean the designer, Ellen Taylor?
4. Man: Yes, I get the feeling that upsets you.
5. Woman: Well, she's so beautiful.
6. Man: Yes, she's very beautiful and very charming. I enjoy doing business with her agency because she's so cooperative.
7. Woman: Well, too bad we weren't all born with her good looks.
8. Man: You think I find her more appealing than you. Is that it?
9. Woman: It crossed my mind.
10. Man: Well, I'm feeling *hurt* that you don't have more faith in me.
11. Woman: You can't deny that she's more beautiful and you just now raved about her charm. I'm not blind, you know. I can see how much you are attracted to her.
12. Man: Hold it. I'd be lying if I said I didn't find her attractive. But we have nothing more than a friendly business relationship. I'm not looking for anything more than that. I'd like you to believe that so you could feel comfortable about my meetings with her. I'd be unhappy if you felt threatened.
13. Woman: Actually I do trust you. I guess maybe I just envy her beauty. I'd like to be that beautiful. I suppose I'm afraid because she's so much more beautiful than I am.

# PRACTICE 3

## Part B.

For each statement you indicated, write why you thinking it shows vulnerability.

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

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

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

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

5. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
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6. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
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7. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
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8. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
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9. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
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10. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
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11. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

12. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

13. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# FEEDBACK 3

## Part A

Below, we have indicated those statements we feel show vulnerability.

1. Woman: I called your office today and your secretary said you were out all afternoon. I was wondering where you were.
2. Man: I had a business appointment with Ellen Taylor.
3. Woman: You mean the designer, Ellen Taylor?
4. Man: Yes, I get the feeling that upsets you.
5. Woman: Well, she's so beautiful.
6. Man: Yes, she's very beautiful and very charming. I enjoy doing business with her agency because she's so cooperative.
7. Woman: Well, too bad we weren't all born with her good looks.
8. Man: You think I find her more appealing than you. Is that it?
9. Woman: It crossed my mind.
10. Man: ***Well, I'm feel hurt that you don't have more faith in me.***
11. Woman: You can't deny that she's more beautiful and you just now raved about her charm. I'm not blind, you know. I can see how much you are attracted to her.
12. Man: Hold it. I'd be lying if I said I didn't find her attractive, but we have nothing more than a friendly business relationship. I'm not looking for anything more than that. ***I'd like you to believe that so you could feel comfortable about my meetings with her. I'd be unhappy if you felt threatened.***
13. Woman: ***Actually, I do trust you. I guess maybe I just envy her beauty. I'd like to be that beautiful. I suppose I'm afraid because she's so much more beautiful than I am.***

## FEEDBACK 3

### Part B

For each statement we indicated, we've shown why we think it shows vulnerability.

1. Woman: No comment.
2. Man: No comment.
3. Woman: She sounds as though she might be feeling defensive.
4. Man: He talks about how he feels, using "I" language.
5. Woman: No comment.
6. Man: He expresses his feelings in "I" language.
7. Woman: She's speaking sarcastically, indicating defensiveness.
8. Man: He states his interpretation of her feelings and asks her to confirm or deny - good "I" language.
9. Woman: She's still speaking defensively.
10. Man: He's expressing his primary feelings of hurt in "I" language. Because of her defensiveness, he is taking an emotional risk in doing so.
11. Woman: She's making accusations and speaking defensively.
12. Man: He's expressing his primary feelings using "I" language. He's also avoiding defensiveness.
13. woman: She's now taking the risk of expressing her primary feelings of fear, using "I" language.

# PRACTICE 4

## Part A

Study the sample conversation below, and indicate those statements you feel show vulnerability.

1. Man: How are the kids today?
2. Woman: Well, they're fine, but I'd like to discuss them with you. Something's been bothering me.
3. Man: What's that? Anybody in trouble?
4. Woman: No, they've been asking a lot about you lately, since you've been away so much. They miss you, and they ask me why Daddy doesn't play with them anymore.
5. Man: Daddy doesn't play with them because Daddy's out earning their meals and the roof over their heads. Not to mention all the toys and goodies I buy them. Don't they appreciate anything?
6. Woman: Well, I do explain to them how busy you are, but they still miss playing with you. They like you better than toys.
7. Man: Are you telling me I neglect my children? After I work 50 to 60 hours a week.
8. Woman: No, I'm not trying to tell you that. I wanted you to be aware of how they were feeling, because I assumed you'd want to know.
9. Man: I'm sorry. I do want to know. It's just that sometimes I feel really guilty about not spending more time with our children. I'm so busy and so tired.
10. Woman: I understand that, and I'm willing to help you find a way to solve the problem.
11. Woman: Well, I'd like them to feel sure that I love them.

# PRACTICE 4

## Part B

For each statement you indicated, write why you think it shows vulnerability.

1. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. Woman: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. Man: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



# FEEDBACK 4

## Part A

Below, we have indicated those statements we feel show vulnerability.

1. Man: How are the kids today.!
2. Woman: ***Well, they're fine, but I'd like to discuss them with you. Something's been bothering me.***
3. Man: What's that? Anybody in trouble?
4. Woman: No, they've been asking a lot about you lately, since you 've been away so much. They miss you, and they ask me why Daddy doesn't play with them anymore.
5. Man: Daddy doesn't play with them because Daddy's out earning their meals and the roof over their heads. Not to mention all the toys and goodies I buy them. Don't they appreciate anything?
6. Woman: Well, I do explain to them how busy you are, but they still miss playing with you. They like you better than toys.
7. Man: Are you telling me I neglect my children? After I work 50 to 60 hours a week.
8. Woman: ***No, I'm not trying to tell you that. I wanted you to be aware of how, they were feeling, because I assumed you'd want to know.***
9. Man: ***I'm sorry. I do want to know. It's just sometimes I feel really guilty about not spending more time with our children. I'm so busy and so tired.***
10. Woman: ***I understand that, and I'm willing to help you find a way to solve the problem.***
11. Man: ***Well, I'd like them to know that I love them.***

# FEEDBACK 4

## Part B

For each statement we indicated, we've shown why we think it shows vulnerability.

1. Man: No comment.
  2. Woman: You could have underlined these statements if you assumed she was bringing up a touchy subject and, therefore, taking an emotional risk.
  3. Man: No comment.
  4. Woman: She uses "I" language to state the problem.
  5. Man: He's beginning to sound defensive.
  6. Woman: She tries to clarify her meaning, using "I" language.
  7. Man: He's speaking defensively.
  8. Woman: She is taking an emotional risk and avoiding defensiveness herself.
- Man: He is overcoming his defensiveness to risk expressing his primary feelings in "I" language.
- Woman: You may or may not have underlined this statement. She's expressing primary feelings in "I" language.
- Man: He is expressing primary feelings in "I" language. Given his earlier sensitivity, this probably represents an emotional risk for him.