

Transcript: Strategies for Defusing Defensiveness

When put on the defensive, we don't always immediately identify that that is the emotion we are feeling. It can take practice to quickly in the moment, make that determination. Once you understand that you are defending yourself, it is important to ask, "Is there some truth in what is being said?" Often we get defensive when someone has found out something that we know to be true, but wish to keep from others. How do you typically respond in when attacked? Do you attack back or retreat? Does the conversation spiral downward, or are you able to defuse the situation and continue the conversation in a productive manner?

There are several ways to defuse an attack and prevent your defensive response. One is to seek more information. This can be done by asking for more specific information about the situation. "Can you tell me what I do that seems unfair to you?" If they don't know how to answer the question, you can take some guesses about the specifics. Remember, you may know what it is that they are upset about. By offering some specifics they can either confirm your hunch or suggest an alternative. "Is it because I ask you to write lesson plans and I don't ask that of everyone?" Another way to seek more information is to paraphrase the speaker's ideas. They may not be able to convey their thoughts clearly, but you can reword their thoughts to help them express it or by hearing their words you provide some clarity or insight about their perception of the situation. The last suggestion is to ask about the consequences of your behavior. Your actions may have unintentionally caused them a problem or inconvenience. It is important for both of you to understand the consequences of both party's behavior.

Another direction is to agree with the critic. This is not to say that you have to agree with something they have accused you of when you feel it is unjust. However, there is probably some truth in their statement. Agree with the part that is true. "You always get defensive when we talk about grading." "You're right, I do get defensive." Once you acknowledge some truth, then often both parties are open to determining the points of view that differ. It is important to only agree with the facts in which you can sincerely agree. Honest, not manipulative, communication is critical. If there isn't something being said that you can agree with, you can agree with the critic's perception. "I can see how you might think that I don't trust your skills as a clinician, when I ask for the lesson plans." This avoids trying to determine who is right and who is wrong.

In all of these situations it is important to monitor your tone of voice and body language. Messages and intent needs to be sincere.

Of course it is good to prevent a defensive discussion. We often make assumptions based on our histories and perceive things as fact which can lead to a miscommunication. For example, we can make some assumptions about a student who is repeatedly late to clinic and develop an attitude that isn't favorable toward that student. Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor (2007) suggest an easy way is to check out ones' inferences or perceptions. First, describe the observed behavior without

judgment – “I have noticed that you have arrived to clinic at the very last minute the last three sessions.” Second, provide two alternatives for the behavior. “Is it that you don’t feel the need to come early to prepare, or do you have a commitment that causes you to be late?” Third, listen to the response - “No, I’m very committed to the clinic. My sister is in the hospital and I’m charged with taking her children to school.” “I hate being late.” This procedure will lead to an opportunity for you to respond in a way that leads to problem solving. “It helps to know your situation.” “What are some options to allow you to be here on time and prepared for the session?”

When you feel you have put someone on the defensive you can ask yourself the same question. “What have I learned that they are afraid to reveal?” Remember the caution words proposed by Satir (1976) that can trigger a defensive response – *you, they, should, why*. Also, reflect on the roadblocks Bolton (1979) outlines that can stop communication as well as maintaining a supportive climate in the conversation described by Gibb (1961). The tough part is doing this in the moment when emotions are high. One way to learn how to change your immediate reactions is to reflect on the interaction after the event and attempt to apply the points discussed here. Take time to rewrite the script. If you had responded differently, what do you think the outcome would have been? With a reflective review, you may be better equipped the next time a similar situation presents itself.