

# THE TWO-WAY STREET OF DEFENSIVENESS

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Is it just us or does the statement, “*Don’t get so defensive!*” seem to have the same effect as when someone tells you, “*Just try to relax!*”

It makes you feel the opposite of what’s intended – more defensive, less relaxed.

Defensiveness can be a catalyst for negative communication patterns. It can make it hard to talk through issues and be open, authentic, and vulnerable with each other.

Often our defensiveness is our own doing, usually, it’s just a natural response to protect ourselves if we’re feeling attacked or exposed. And that’s why if we want to decrease defensiveness, it’s not just one person that needs to put in the effort – it’s a two-way street.

## **Lane 1: Taking a look at ourselves**

Often, we react defensively before we can even register why. It makes sense – we “*armor up*” when we feel vulnerable. Take a minute to think about the times you’ve had a strong emotional reaction to something your partner said or did. Was it related to insecurity you have? Something you feel guilty about? Ashamed? Hurt or angry? It can be liberating to simply acknowledge the fact that, I’m human and I feel insecure/guilty/angry, etc. about \_\_\_\_\_. Sharing this with your partner increases connection and gives them the insight they may not have had before. But this doesn’t mean you’re never going to react defensively – it’s still going to happen. But being aware of what triggers you allows you to pause, take a deep breath, and say, “I’m sorry I snapped at you. I feel insecure about \_\_\_\_\_.”

## **Lane 2: Making the effort for our partner**

On the other side of the road is the environment you create for your partner – is it safe and non-judgmental or do they feel like they might be attacked? Just as lowering our defenses and acknowledging our triggers takes a conscious effort, so do the steps to make our partner feel safe and respected. This might mean being very mindful of your tone or how you’re bringing up a topic with them. What you say matters, but so does *how* you say it. It might also mean resisting the urge to interrupt or reply with a counterpoint or criticism. Interestingly, our ability to do these things also requires us to feel safe and respected in our own right.

The reality is, we’re in both lanes simultaneously, which can seem like... a lot. But there is comfort in knowing that you’re both making a genuine effort for each other and your relationship. You’re not walking this street alone.