

Lower Your Defensiveness: A 12-Step Program

**Rule #27 from “Marriage Rules”
by Harriet Lerner, PhD. © 2012**

1. *Name it.* Defensiveness is that immediate, knee-jerk “But, but ...But ...” response and heightened sense of tension that may be activated when our partner says, “We have to talk.” In defensive mode, we *automatically* listen for the inaccuracies, exaggerations, and distortions in our partner’s complaint so that we can refute errors, make our case, and remind the other party of *their* wrongdoings. Becoming aware of our defensiveness can give us a tiny, crucial bit of distance from it.

2. *Breathe.* Defensiveness starts in the body. When we feel threatened, our central nervous system overheats and makes us tense and on guard, unable to take in much new information. So, do what you can to calm yourself. Try slowing down your breathing, exhaling to a slow, silent count of one to ten, and taking a long, deep breath between the time your partner’s voice drops off and yours starts. We will always listen poorly when we’re tense and on guard with an overheated central nervous system.

3. *Don’t interrupt.* If you can’t listen without interrupting, it’s a good indication that you haven’t calmed down. Trying to listen when you can’t does more harm than good. Tell your partner that you want to have the conversation, and that you recognize its importance, but that you can’t have it right now.

4. *Ask for specifics.* This will help clarify your partner’s point and show that you care about understanding her. (“Can you give me another example where you felt I was putting you down?”) Note: Asking for specifics is not the same thing as nitpicking – the key is to be curious, not to cross-examine. Don’t act like a lawyer even if you are one.

5. *Find something to agree with.* You may only agree with 2 percent of what your partner is saying but still find a point of commonality in that 2 percent (“I think you’re right that I’ve been coming home stressed-out from work”). This will shift the exchange out of combat into collaboration.

6. *Apologize for your part.* There’s almost always something to apologize for when we’ve had a difficult experience with a partner. Even making a general and genuine comment like “I’m sorry for my part in all of this” can indicate to your partner that you’re capable of taking responsibility, not just evading it.

7. *No buts.* When we’re defensive, we may begin a slew of sentences with “But” – *rebutting* what we should be trying to take in. Even if we’re listening with open minds, the word “*but*” conveys the impression that we are discounting or negating the other person’s perspective. Watch out for this little grammatical sign of defensiveness and

temporarily ban it from your vocabulary. Instead, ask “Do I have what you’re saying right?” and “Is there more you haven’t told me?”

8. *Don’t counter-criticize.* There is a time to bring up your own grievances, but that time is not when your partner has taken the initiative to voice his complaints. If your complaints are legitimate, all the more reason to save them for a time when they can be a focus of conversation and not a defense strategy.

9. *Let your partner know he or she has been heard.* Even if nothing has been resolved, tell your partner that she’s reached you: “It’s not easy to hear what you’re telling me, but I want you to know that I’m going to give it a lot of thought.” Take a day to genuinely consider her point of view.

10. *Sit with your response.* When we’re feeling defensive, we try to do everything in one conversation, as if it’s the last one we’re ever going to have. Tell yourself early on that you’re going to take a day to think about your partner’s point of view and that you don’t have to make all your points now. If you decide on this in advance, it will free you to listen better and help your partner feel heard.

11. *Try thanking your partner for initiating the talk.* Even if you don’t like what your partner is saying, you can thank him for initiating a difficult conversation. Relationships require that we take such initiative and express gratitude when our partner might expect mere defensiveness. In this way we can calm things down and signal our commitment to open communication.

12. *Bring the conversation up in the next forty-eight hours.* Show your partner that you are continuing to think about her point of view and that you are willing to revisit the issue. Try saying something like “I’ve been thinking about our conversation, and I’m really glad that we had that talk.”

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Listening without defensiveness is the challenge of a lifetime. Begin with the first three steps and give yourself a medal if you can get this far!

1. Name it
2. Breathe
3. Don’t Interrupt