

Non-Defensive Communication In 3 Easy Steps

Do you want to communicate honestly without getting defensive or into power struggles – no matter how others act? When we get defensive, we make it that much harder for people around us to hear what we’re saying. It also becomes more difficult to listen to what *they* have to say.

Most everyone has a tendency to get defensive. It is a natural way to protect ourselves from criticism. This happens mostly during critical conversations with our spouse, our boss, coworker, or friend. When we get defensive, your counterpart is likely to get defensive in turn. The result is a frustrating, futile and exhausting effort where neither party gets what they want.

To navigate out of grid-lock and disarm defensiveness, follow these three easy steps:

STEP #1: STATE AN OBSERVATION

To start a conversation in a non-defense way, it is important to avoid *blaming* the other person for the problem. You will also want to be careful not to make character assassinations or make generalizations. Instead, focus on what you see or hear.

For example:

“You didn’t do the dishes!”	→	“I see that the dishes are not done”
“You always criticize me”	→	“I heard you say you thought I was being lazy”
“You never are on time”	→	“I seem to be the first one to arrive at the office”

Using “I” statements have been a staple of interpersonal psychology for a very long time. It has been found that phrases that start with *I* are usually less likely to sound critical and make your listener feel less defensive when compared to statements that start with *You*.

STEP #2: DESCRIBE YOUR FEELINGS

Next, follow-up your observation with how that behavior made you feel. This is important to relate better to the person that you are talking to and provide important context to the problem.

Expressing your feelings involves more than just giving a one-word answer when asked “how do you feel about _____?” To more effectively relate to the person you are talking to, you must properly identify your feelings and expand your definition of the feeling.

For example:

“I am upset”	→	“I am worried and frightened”
“You make me so angry!”	→	“I am frustrated and stuck”
“I have always felt alone”	→	“I have felt lonely these past few weeks”

STEP #3: MAKE A SPECIFIC BEHAVIOR REQUEST

The most critical part of any non-confrontational conversation is to make a request for how things can be done differently in the future. By doing so, you are letting the other person know that you are not interested in holding grudges or complaining. Rather, you are interested in working towards a constructive solution to the problem.

For example:

“Can you please move your papers off the kitchen table before dinner?”
“I would appreciate it if you would bring your concerns to me directly”
“I love having breakfast with you...can we do that again sometime?”

If you are diligent about following these steps you will be much more likely to make progress towards your goal. For your conversation to be successful, you should also make an effort to be “the bigger person” by being polite and respectful. It is also advised that you do not store things up. If you wait too long to bring up an issue your emotions might escalate and your conversation is not likely to be productive. And, above all, be patient with yourself. Non-defensive communication takes practice and if you are not used to this approach it may take some time before you see a positive outcome. Hang in there – it’s worth the effort!