

The Defender – Deep Dive

Understanding Why You Defend and How to Stop

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Your Pattern At A Glance

When conflict arises, **your default is to explain, justify, and defend** your position. You focus on logic, facts, and proving you're not the bad guy. You genuinely want to be understood, but defensiveness blocks real listening. Your partner feels like you're dismissing their feelings when you jump to **"yes, but..."**

What triggers you: **Feeling blamed, accused, or misunderstood**. When your partner criticizes you, your first instinct is to protect yourself with explanations.

Your mantra: **"I don't have to defend myself to be loved."**

Why You Do This

Defenders aren't trying to be difficult—you're trying to be heard and protect yourself from feeling like the "bad guy." Here's what's usually happening underneath:

Core fear:

Being seen as wrong, inadequate, or at fault

What you're protecting:

Your sense of being a good person who tries hard

The pattern:

- Partner brings up a concern → You hear "You're bad/wrong/failing"
- You immediately explain or provide context → They feel unheard
- They get more upset → You defend harder → Cycle escalates

Where it comes from:

- Growing up in environments where mistakes meant harsh criticism
- Learning that explaining yourself was the only way to be heard
- Believing that being understood = proving you're right
- Fear that if you don't defend yourself, you'll be seen as the problem

What Your Partner Experiences

When you go into Defender mode, here's what your partner likely feels:

"You're not hearing me"

- They share hurt → You explain why it happened
- They want validation → You give justification
- They feel dismissed, like their feelings don't matter

"You always have an excuse"

- Every criticism is met with "yes, but..."
- They stop bringing things up because nothing changes
- Resentment builds silently

"I can't get through to you"

- Conversations feel like debates they can't win
- They feel alone even when you're talking
- Eventually they either explode or withdraw completely

The Cost of Staying In This Pattern

In intimacy:

- **Your partner stops initiating conversations** about sex, needs, or desires
- **They feel unsafe being vulnerable** because they anticipate your defense
- Rejection or sexual issues never get addressed—they just fester

In conflict:

- Small issues become big fights because nothing feels resolved
- **Your partner gives up trying to talk to you**
- You feel misunderstood and alone, even though you're "just trying to explain"

Long-term:

- **Emotional distance becomes the norm**
- Your partner stops trusting that you care about their feelings
- The relationship becomes transactional rather than connected

How To Shift: Specific Strategies for Defenders

Strategies:

1) Pause Before You Explain

When your partner says something that feels like criticism, **count to 3 before responding**.

Instead of: “Yes, but I only did that because...”

Try: “Let me make sure I understand what you’re saying first.”

Why it works: It gives you time to hear them instead of immediately protecting yourself.

2) Validate BEFORE You Explain Context

Practice this formula: **Acknowledge → Validate → Then (maybe) add context**

Example:

Partner: “You always check your phone during dinner.”

OLD response: “I was just checking work! It was important!”

NEW response: “You’re right, I was on my phone. That must feel like I’m not present with you. I’m sorry.”

Then pause. See if they need anything else before you explain why you were checking.

3) Ask "What Did That Feel Like for You?"

This is your most powerful tool. It shifts you from defending to connecting.

Examples:

- “When I did that, **what did it feel like for you?**”
- “Help me understand what that was like on your end.”
- “What do you need from me right now?”

Why it works: It forces you to prioritize their experience over your explanation.

4) Practice Saying "You're Right" Even When It's Hard

You don't have to agree with everything. But you can acknowledge the part that's true.

Partner: “You never initiate anymore.”

Instead of: “That's not true! I initiated last Tuesday!”

Try: “**You're right**, I haven't been initiating much. I can see how that would hurt.”

The magic: Once they feel heard, they often soften—and THEN you can have a real conversation about what's getting in your way.

5) Catch Yourself Mid-Defense

When you notice yourself saying “**yes, but...**” or “that’s not what I meant,” **STOP.**

Say this out loud:

“Wait, I’m doing it again. Let me back up.” “I just went into explaining mode. What were you trying to tell me?”

Why it works: It shows your partner you’re self-aware and trying. That alone rebuilds trust.

Scripts For Defenders

When your partner brings up a problem:

- “I want to understand. Can you tell me more?”
- “That makes sense. I didn’t realize it felt that way to you.”
- **“You’re right—I did do that. I’m sorry.”**

When you feel blamed:

- **“I’m feeling defensive right now. Can we pause so I can actually hear you?”**
- “I don’t want to defend myself. What do you need from me?”

When you’ve hurt them unintentionally:

- **“I didn’t mean to hurt you, but I can see that I did. I’m sorry.”**
- “My intention doesn’t erase your experience. What can I do to make this better?”

When initiating a hard conversation:

“I want to talk about [topic], and I’m going to try not to get defensive. Will you tell me if I do?”

What To Do When You Mess Up

You will slip back into Defender mode. It's a reflex. Here's how to repair:

As soon as you notice:

- “**I just defended myself instead of listening. I'm sorry.** Can we start over?”
- “I got stuck on being right instead of hearing you. What were you trying to tell me?”

Later (same day or next day):

“I've been thinking about what you said earlier. You were right about [specific thing]. I'm working on not jumping to explanations.”

Why repair matters:

Defenders often think the conversation is over once they stop talking. But your partner needs to know you actually heard them. **Repair proves it.**

Tools & Resources For Defenders

On this site:

- Communication Style Quiz – Retake to see if you’re shifting
- “Say This, Not That” Cards – Quick scripts for hard moments
- Conflict De-escalation Guide – How to stop fights before they spiral
- Rejection Repair Cheat Sheet – Specific to sex and intimacy

Books (Affiliate Links):

- “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work” by John Gottman, PhD – Learn how defensiveness damages relationships and how to break the pattern
- “Hold Me Tight” by Dr. Sue Johnson – Understanding the attachment fears underneath defensive responses

Next steps:

- Practice ONE strategy this week (start with “You’re right” or “What did that feel like?”)
- Ask your partner: “When I get defensive, what do you need me to do differently?”
- Journal: What am I actually afraid will happen if I don’t defend myself?

Related Content

If you're also struggling with:

Rejection (yours or theirs) - see the DESIRE pillar

Avoiding sex conversations entirely → “I Can’t Approach My Partner About Sex” see the TALK pillar

Feeling criticized all the time → “We Keep Having the Same Fight” (TALK)

Final Thought

You're not a bad partner for being a Defender. You're someone who cares deeply about being understood and doing things right. The shift isn't about never explaining yourself—it's about **making sure your partner feels heard first**. That's the hardest, most loving work you can do.