

How to Tell If You're Being Defensive – Playbook

Use this before or during a conversation where you've gone defensive before. It's a field guide, not a summary. Read it when you have 5 minutes, not 30.

The One Reframe to Carry In

Her complaint is almost never an attack. It's a reach.

When she raises something, her underlying message is usually: *I need to feel closer to you and I don't know another way to say it.* If you carry that reframe into the conversation, the circuit breakers below will work. Without it, they'll feel like tricks.

Step 1: Know Your Signal

Pick one body cue that fits you. This is your personal early warning:

- **Chest tightens** - a physical squeeze before you've processed what she said
- **You're already forming the counter-argument** - brain switched to transmit before she's finished
- **Jaw or shoulders clench** - body bracing for impact
- **Voice goes flat** - you call it calm; she reads it as shutdown
- **You mentally leave the moment** - replaying old arguments, composing the evidence of your good behavior

You only need one. Pick the one you feel first.

Step 2: Use Your Circuit Breaker

When you feel the signal, use one of these phrases before you say anything else:

When you catch it early:

"Hold on. I want to hear this. Give me a second."

[Pause. One breath. Then:]

"Okay. Tell me."

When you can find a grain of truth:

"You're right that I've been less present lately. I know that's been hard."

[Stop. No 'but'.]

"What's it been like for you when that happens?"

When you're self-aware enough to name it:

"I notice I'm getting defensive right now. I don't want to do that."

[Pause.]

"Can you say that again? I want to actually hear it."

When you're already flooded:

"I'm getting flooded right now and I need 20 minutes. This matters to me. I'm coming back."

[Leave. Don't replay the argument. Return as promised.]

"Okay. I'm back. I'm ready to hear you."

Step 3: What to Avoid

- **No explanations for why you got defensive.** It shifts focus back to your experience of her complaint.

- **No 'but' after the acknowledgment.** "You're right, but..." takes back everything the first half gave.
- **No scorekeeping.** Listing what you've done right turns a repair into a negotiation.

Step 4: Adapt for Your Style

Connector: Your defensiveness looks like smoothing over or agreeing too fast. Sit in the discomfort a moment longer. Use the acknowledgment script.

Defender: You're the primary audience for this guide. The counter-argument feels righteous. Use Script 1 or 3 every time you feel it forming before she's done speaking.

Escalator: De-escalate your body first - lower your voice, sit down. Then use the flood exit if needed.

Withdrawer: Staying in the room is your circuit breaker. "I hear you, I need a minute" keeps the door open.

Step 5: Adapt for Her Response

She escalates when you pause: Stay physically present. Say "I'm not going anywhere" alongside the pause.

She goes quiet or shuts down: Don't push. Say "You don't have to respond right now. I just wanted you to know I heard it."

She says 'it's fine' when it clearly isn't: "I don't think it is fine. I'd rather hear what's actually going on."

She's as defensive as you are: Whoever de-escalates first wins the conversation. Name your own defensiveness out loud.

Recovery Moves

Same conversation: "Wait, I'm doing the thing again. Can I start over?"

Same day: "I was defensive earlier and I don't want to leave it like that. What were you actually trying to tell me?"

A day or two later: "I've been thinking about what you said. I think I shut down instead of hearing you. What was going on for you?"

Success Check

You caught a body cue before responding. You used a circuit breaker instead of the counter-argument you had ready. She kept talking rather than shutting down or escalating.

That's it. That's a win.