

How to Tell If You're Being Defensive - Checklist

A quick-scan reference for the moments before or during a conversation where defensiveness is likely.

Before You Start

- ☐ ☐ Know your personal early warning cue (chest, jaw, counter-argument forming, flat voice, mental exit)
- ☐ ☐ Carry the reframe: her complaint is a reach, not an attack
- ☐ ☐ Review your circuit breaker phrase so it's ready
- ☐ ☐ Decide in advance you'll hear her out before you respond

What To Watch For

- ☐ ☐ Chest tightening before she's finished speaking
- ☐ ☐ Counter-argument forming before you've heard the full concern
- ☐ ☐ Your voice going flat or measured
- ☐ ☐ Jaw or shoulder tension
- ☐ ☐ Mentally leaving the present moment to review your record
- ☐ ☐ Heart racing or throat tightening (flooding)

What To Say

- ☐ ☐ **Circuit breaker (early):** "Hold on. I want to hear this. Give me a second."
- ☐ ☐ **Acknowledgment:** "You're right that [grain of truth]. What's it been like for you?"
- ☐ ☐ **Name it:** "I notice I'm getting defensive. Can you say that again?"
- ☐ ☐ **Flood exit:** "I need 20 minutes. This matters. I'm coming back."
- ☐ ☐ **Repair:** "I was defensive earlier. What were you actually trying to tell me?"

What Not To Do

- ☐ ☐ Don't explain why you got defensive during the repair
- ☐ ☐ Don't add "but" after an acknowledgment
- ☐ ☐ Don't bring up what you've done right
- ☐ ☐ Don't accept "it's fine" if it clearly wasn't

- ☐ ☐ Don't leave without a committed return time

Repair Move

If the conversation ended badly:

- ☐ ☐ Return same day if possible
- ☐ ☐ Lead with the open question, not the apology: "What were you actually trying to tell me?"
- ☐ ☐ Let her answer fully before responding

Success Check

- ☐ ☐ You caught at least one body cue before responding
- ☐ ☐ You used a circuit breaker instead of the ready counter-argument
- ☐ ☐ She continued talking rather than shutting down or escalating