

How to Stop Being Defensive in Your Marriage - Checklist

Use this before, during, or after any conversation where you know defensiveness might show up.

Before You Start

- ☐ ☐ Am I in a calm enough state to actually hear her? If no, wait.
- ☐ ☐ Is this a decent time for her? Not rushed, not depleted?
- ☐ ☐ Have I set aside at least 20 uninterrupted minutes?
- ☐ ☐ Am I clear that the goal is connection, not winning?

What To Watch For

- ☐ ☐ Notice the physical signal: jaw tightening, chest tightening, heart rate rising
- ☐ ☐ Notice the mental signal: you're already forming your rebuttal before she finishes
- ☐ ☐ Notice the urge to correct a generalization ("you never" / "you always")
- ☐ ☐ Notice if you're about to say "but" after an acknowledgment

What To Say

- ☐ ☐ Pause before responding (even 3 seconds changes what comes out)
- ☐ ☐ Reflect back what you heard: "So what you're saying is..."
- ☐ ☐ Find one true piece and name it: "You're right that I've been less present this week."
- ☐ ☐ Ask instead of explain: "What would help?" or "Tell me more."
- ☐ ☐ If flooded: "I need 20 minutes. I want to hear you -- I just need to calm down first."

What Not To Do

- ☐ ☐ Don't correct the generalization before acknowledging the feeling
- ☐ ☐ Don't say "I hear you, but..." -- the "but" cancels the acknowledgment
- ☐ ☐ Don't defend your sincerity if she's skeptical -- let behavior do that work
- ☐ ☐ Don't push through flooding -- it makes the conversation worse, not better
- ☐ ☐ Don't skip the repair after a conversation that went sideways

Repair Move

If the conversation already went defensive:

- ☐ ☐ Wait until things have cooled before attempting repair
- ☐ ☐ Name specifically what you did: "I got defensive and I shut you down"
- ☐ ☐ Return the control to her: "I'm ready to hear it now, if you want to try again"

Success Check

- ☐ ☐ Did I say one thing I actually meant without immediately adding a counter?
- ☐ ☐ Did I ask at least one question instead of explaining my side?
- ☐ ☐ Did the conversation end with less distance than it started with?