

What to do When Someone is Defensive

By Monica Kreiner, Chartered Mediator

You make a suggestion and the response you receive is brusque. “I think we shouldn’t go out for dinner so much.” “Well then **you** can cook every night.” You react. The argument begins.

We’ve all been in these situations and berated ourselves afterwards for letting it happen again. We’ve all pondered how to break old habits that seem to escalate arguments instead of build understanding and mutual direction.

“The limiting factor of all communication is not the riskiness of the message you want to share, but how safe you can help others feel hearing that message” says Kerry Patterson, co-author of *Crucial Conversations*[®].

If someone is acting defensive, they feel they have something to defend. When you are trying to communicate something and are met with defensiveness, your job is to create safety for the other person. Creating that safety starts with you.

Begin by looking at your own intentions. If you’re communicating with someone, you’re looking to interact *with* them. Are your intentions to create mutual benefit? Or are you asking them to give up something that is precious to them; something they want to defend. The respondent in this example is defending the time and energy they would need to cook frequently. They have no idea why you’ve made the suggestion to eat out less but they fear what it might mean for them. They have made an assumption about your intention based on your comment. Intentions are invisible unless we clearly express them. They are like a blank that people fill in based on the context – sometimes accurately but more often not.

To be clear about your intentions, look at what you *don’t* and *do* want. When you made the suggestion, was it your intention to create more work for your partner? That is doubtful. Clearly that is one of your partner’s fears. Their reaction tells you what they are defending and you have an opportunity to reassure them to increase their sense of safety. A “Don’t Statement” might be as simple as “I don’t want to create more work for you.”

In contrast, you need to also add your intention in a “Do Statement.” “I do want to figure out how to decrease our spending now so that we can save for a trip in the future.” You have just reframed the conversation.

Solutions often lie in what is the reason behind the position. Not eating out as much is a position that has an underlying intention of wanting to decrease spending. Peel off another layer and it’s about saving for a trip. Maybe another layer is that the trip is to decrease stress all around.

When you get a defensive reaction, ask yourself how you can create safety for the other party. Express your intentions in a “Don’t Statement” and a “Do Statement.”