Don’t be so Defensive!

Defensiveness is defined as “being overly sensitive to or reacting very strongly to perceived criticism.” It’s something we experience almost every day—in ourselves and others. Why are we defensive in the first place? When we feel threatened physically, we instinctually defend ourselves (put up our arms up, run, or hit back). When we feel threatened socially or emotionally, the same defense mechanisms kick in, although our reactions look different. Typical social and emotional defensive behaviors include:

- **Denial:** Refusing to see our responsibility or that a problem exists at all.
- **Projection:** Attributing our own thoughts and feelings to another person (“I’m not angry, you’re angry”).
- **Acting out:** Demonstrating our anger through toxic gossip or even defiance of rules and boundaries (“I’ll show them”).
- **Rationalization:** Bending the truth or revising history to justify our behavior (“I remember last month you told me to do it that way”).
- **Displacement:** Taking out our frustration on someone not involved (“don’t talk to me right now! I had a bad day”).

How often is being defensive really necessary? Not often. When we feel attacked, criticized or judged, we’re probably just getting some constructive feedback. Our character, talent and capabilities aren’t being attacked, but it sure does feel that way. So we respond in a defensive manner rather than hearing and absorbing the important feedback. That pattern is a no win – especially in the workplace where constructive feedback on performance is a must for everyone at every level.

Recognizing defensiveness in **yourself** is an important skill. When you feel yourself reacting in a negative way (getting angry, feeling attacked, like you can’t do anything right) try the following:

- **Communicate.** If you’re feeling attacked or wrongly accused, then it’s time for a clarifying conversation. Sit down with your “accuser” and get a good understanding of what they’re really saying. You most likely heard a message that was not meant to be critical, (although it may have sounded that way).
- **Remind yourself of your competencies.** Although you may have not done one task perfectly, that does not mean you are a failure. Remind yourself that there are A LOT of things that you are great at.
- **Adopt a growth mindset.** We all know that our mistakes are usually our most important leaning opportunities. If you’re receiving some critical feedback, be glad that you’re being provided an opportunity to improve.

What do you do when you recognize **someone else** being defensive? Use the following tools to have a conversation that produces growth and understanding:

- **Start with some vulnerability and responsibility.** Be vulnerable with the person and take some responsibility for the situation. “I’ve been in your seat and have had to hear a lot of critical feedback in my career.” Or “Here are some things I should have done differently in this situation.” Demonstrating that no one is perfect and we’re all on a journey of improvement is a key message.
- **Avoid using “blame” language.** Don’t start a sentence with “you,” as in “You didn’t hear what I was saying!” or “You just don’t seem to be committed to this!” Also avoid using “always” and “never.” These words are rarely accurate and reinforce feelings of failure.
- **Focus the conversation on solutions, not blame.** If something has gone wrong, it’s rarely useful to spend time figuring out “who screwed up”. Yes, you want to figure out who could benefit from retraining or relearning, but deciding who is to blame is simply not useful. Most of the conversation should be forward thinking and revolve around how to solve the problem.

If you are struggling with someone who is overly defensive (and that person could be you), give Family Services EAP a call for free, confidential counseling ...978-327-6666 or info@FamilyServicesEAP.org.