

Overcoming Defensiveness (Pt. 2 of 2)

By Harold & Bette Gillogly

In our last Seeds For Growth, we began discussing **defensiveness** — our instinctive reaction of **self-protection**. We seem to go through life feeling we must protect ourselves at any cost. When our mate says something that pushes one of our hot buttons, we lash out in retaliation. Defensive-ness is a killer. It will brutalize our marriage relationship unless we take action. In other words, we must learn to protect ourselves **from** protecting ourselves.

In Part 1, we looked at the reasons *why* we are defensive and *where* our defensiveness starts. It starts in our minds — in our THOT-TALK. And from there, the process snowballs into retaliation. Last time, we only had room to mention two THOT-TALK processes we tend to practice. We'd like to describe two more before we get to solutions. As we said before, some of us (1) **personalize**, some of us (2) **magnify and minimize**, while others may use one of these.

3. The THOT-TALK pattern of **either-or thinking** is deadly — you will quickly see why. When we think that we, our mates or our children are EITHER a **total** success OR a **total** failure, we tend to blame our **total** selves or **total** marriage. We begin to abandon hope and soon quit trying altogether. We block out all potential for change and sink into the mire of despair.

Mary and Kurt are having a “discussion” that is quickly degenerating into a battle. Exasperation is obvious in Mary's voice. “If you don't back me up with the kids, they're never going to respect me!” Kurt reacts in kind: “You don't

think I back you up? Since when do you give me a chance?”

Mary throws up her hands, “I can't believe you! You always take offense at everything I say. You're hopeless. If you don't want to work on this marriage, then just forget the whole thing!”

Both Kurt and Mary are being defensive and blaming one another for their problem. But Mary has taken the argument one dangerous step farther. Her **either-or thinking** has affected her emotions — she has become defensive. It has also affected her attitude and communication with Kurt. Notice the downward spiral formed by her own words: “always,” “everything,” “hopeless,” and finally, “forget the whole thing.” **Either-or thinking** makes us throw away any successes we may have achieved in our relationship. It makes us see life as “**totals**” not as **specific behaviors or problems** we can change. And so we just give up.

There is a solution to **either-or THOT-TALK**. It's the same solution as for the first two patterns: challenge the negative thoughts and substitute positive, truthful ones just as we are commanded in 2 Cor. 10:5 — *...take captive every thought and make it obedient to Christ*. You can use the same verbal challenge as before — “No, I do not want to think that. It is not true.”

Mary's new THOT-TALK could continue like this: “He doesn't *always* take offense. In fact, he's a lot better about that than he used to be. We both need to keep working on our communication together. I'll bet we can learn something valuable here if we talk about it rationally.”

4. The last THOT-TALK pattern we want to describe is **jumping to**

conclusions and mind reading.

This thinking process revs our defensive motor before the race even gets started. We think we can read our mate's mind based on past experience. We feel sure we know **what** they are going to say and **how** they are going to act, and our emotions react to those conclusions before anything even happens.

Carl picks up a bouquet of flowers on his way home from work. But as he battles rush hour traffic, he begins to think. “Why am I taking Bev these flowers? The last time, she made snide remarks about my covering up something. She doesn't appreciate all the things I do for her. Why bother? Well, if she says anything this time...even *one* word, I'm going to let her have it!”

What a picture! There's Carl... love gift in hand...ready for a fight. His **mind reading** affected his emotions — he is upset and angry at Bev before he even sees her. It affected his attitude — he is ready for an argument at the slightest provocation. It affected his behavior and communication with his wife. It doesn't take a great imagination to know what kind of evening Carl and Bev are going to have. Not because of a **real** situation — but because of a fictitious scenario Carl painted in his mind. His **mind reading** sabotaged his and Bev's communication and, therefore, their relationship.

You know what Carl has to do, don't you? Before he makes it home, he has to challenge his **mind reading** THOT-TALK and substitute the good stuff — the truth. “No, I don't want to think that. It is not true. I don't really

know how she's going to react to these flowers. If I give her a chance, she may surprise me. And even if she doesn't, it's not the end of the world. Next time I can do something different to show her I love her."

No doubt about it — defensiveness **starts** with our THOT-TALK. So it makes sense that if we can get a handle on our THOT-TALK, we can get a handle on our defensive reactions. Here are some other steps we can pursue to overcome our defensiveness.

1. We need to analyze our defensiveness. Understanding the **roots** of our defensive behavior is absolutely essential if we are to overcome this stubborn barrier in our relationship. Ask yourself questions like "What was I feeling when I responded defensively? What did I think my spouse was trying to say to me? What did my reaction communicate to my mate?"

We must also analyze our defensive behavior by understanding how our **past relates** to our present. Ponder such questions as "What happened in my childhood family that could be influencing my defensive response?" "Are there particular words or scenarios that are triggering my reactions?"

Finally, we need to analyze our defensiveness by **focusing on our relationship** as a whole. A few good questions to ask yourself

would be "Do I feel my mate has failed me in some areas?" "Do I feel loved and appreciated by my mate?" "Does my mate feel like I love and appreciate him/her?"

2. We need to talk about our defensiveness. This should be treated as an extremely important discussion. Choose a time when the two of you can talk **without distractions**. Really **listen** to each other. Make it your goal to **understand** your mate's feelings — not to judge them. And decide beforehand that you will *speak the truth [only] in love* (Eph. 4:15).

3. We need to R and R our defensiveness. As you **Review** and **Rehearse** a particular situation where your defensiveness reared its head, we suggest these three simple guidelines. You might call these R and R Rules:

a. Avoid statements that **sound judgmental**. As you **Review** what happened, stay away from "You should...." "You never...." "If you would only...." Instead, use "I" messages: "I think...." "I feel...."

b. State your opinion as **only your opinion**. As you **Rehearse** ways to handle your defensive reactions in the future, *suggest* ways that *might* help. If you state your opinion as "the only way," you will certainly trigger your **mate's** defenses. And your R and R will become "Rant and Rave" instead of "Review and Rehearse."

c. **Ask** your mate for changes, don't demand them. "Next time, don't treat me like a baby!" probably won't work. But "I think if you let me know I can make my own choice, perhaps I won't feel like you are trying to parent me" might work. We all respond better to suggestions than to demands, don't we?

Say....did you notice something? These **R and R Rules** could well be **Life Rules**, couldn't they? If these guidelines governed your behavior toward your mate, would some defensive episodes in your relationship be eliminated? Look at them closely again. What if you spoke in "I" messages instead of judgmental "You" messages in *all* your communication with your mate? What if you stated your opinions as simply your own opinions rather than "hard and fast rules"? What if you did not make demands of your spouse, but only requests? Would your relationship look different?

Remember, the best way to root defensiveness out of your marriage, is to begin giving your mate every reason **not** to be defensive. Let them know you are **with them**, that you **believe in them**, that you **value them**. As their defenses come tumbling down, you will find that they, in turn, will show you they are **with you**, that they **believe in you**, and that they **value you**.

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