

Defensiveness: An Exclusive Interview With Drs. John & Julie Gottman

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In the Defensiveness blog post, we made you a promise. Today, we keep it! Below we share an exclusive interview about defensiveness with Drs. John and Julie Gottman.

When asked about how partners should think about defensiveness and its antidote, taking responsibility, Dr. John Gottman says this:

"Down-regulating one's own defensiveness is the "work" in Making Relationships Work. It is always the challenge. It is important to note that [people in] all unhappy relationships have left a partner in pain and just gone on with life.

Instead, couples who make relationships work well adopt the motto that, "If you're hurting baby, the world stops, and I listen. I'm with you." To summarize: Seeing our partner's pain and getting in touch with our love is the way to down-regulate defensiveness and think that we might have some (even a smidgen) of responsibility!

Dr. Julie Gottman adds the following:

Self care includes providing ourselves with opportunities to grow. When we take responsibility for words or actions that have caused distress, we are opening the door to changes we need to make in order to be our best selves. Defensiveness keeps the door slammed shut. Defensiveness is another way of saying, "I'm perfect as I am, therefore I don't need to grow or change in any way."

This attitude leads to personal stagnation. It also leads to loneliness, as most others don't consider themselves to be perfect, and therefore, can't relate to you or connect with you. When we take responsibility, there is an audible sigh from those around us, as if they are saying, "Oh good, it's okay that we are not perfect too... [now] we can all relax together in our own human imperfection!"

How do you cope with defensiveness in your own relationship? Do you have strategies to help down-regulate when either you or your partner become defensive?