

Thinking It Through

Maud Huey Kenyon, MFT

As I get older, I see people more as a kaleidoscope of traits. We are all a mixture of good and bad, patient and impatient, hungry for and fed up with whatever. These are natural growth patterns for those who want to remain productive members of society, individuals who contribute rather than just complain. Personal growth is messy. How this plays out in our relationships and our families is the stuff of psychotherapy.

I got a call a few weeks ago from the husband of a client I had as part of my practice in another state. He was calling about his son who now lives in the Boulder area. His father is concerned his son is depressed. When his wife contacted me 15 years ago, their son was 5 years old, the same age his mother was when she was being molested by a neighbor. She was having flashbacks and intrusive thoughts and did the right thing coming in for therapy. Now their son is looking for a therapist. His dad is doing the right thing again by asking for help.

The phone call, and returning to being called on to be a therapist, triggered my memories of why I chose psychotherapy as a profession. I remember when I took my mother to an AA meeting. She was hesitant but said she'd try it, if I went with her. Afterwards, she marveled at the people of professional status, neighbors and friends of friends who were in the meeting.

The chaos in our home eased after my parents stopped drinking and began drawing on the wisdom of age. Without understanding alcohol's risks, even intelligent, college-educated people can become trapped by addiction. My father finally understood when he told me, "Your mother and I both drink. The difference is that I can stop when I want to; she cannot." We are beginning to recognize addiction as a disease, not a weakness. Psychotherapy helps build that understanding and offers support we can seek without fear or shame.

I am reminded of Nelson Mandela's quote:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us."

That light calls us to recognize our gifts and receive them with gratitude. My professional life focused on helping clients understand what kept them from accepting—or even discovering—their own gifts.

Mandela's words call to us to use our own light to make a difference in others' lives and our own. It is too easy to tell ourselves: I don't make a difference. Being a friend, spending time with family and being available when someone calls, all make a difference

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Young people today are better informed about the effects of addictive substances, including the potential outcome of an occasional beer or shot of whiskey.

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Mandela's words call to us to use our own light to make a difference in others' lives and our own. It is too easy to tell ourselves: I don't make a difference. Being a friend, spending time with family and being available when someone calls- all make a difference. At times, Accepting is as difficult as giving or as Nelson Mandela phrased it:

"We let our own light shine and, in the process, give others permission to do the same."

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Always on Guard? Learn What Drives Defensiveness and Get a Therapist’s “Antidote”



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- [Stephanie Baxter](#)

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The tricky thing about defensiveness is that it “feels protective in the moment,” licensed marriage and family therapist Linda Carroll told Nice News. “But over time, it quietly erodes connection.” Working with families and couples, Carroll has seen how common it is for this issue to arise in relationships — and how detrimental it can be.

We all do it: Perhaps your partner called you “too sensitive,” a parent judged your career choice, or a friend criticized your outfit, and you reacted by shooting down their comment or justifying yourself before they could hurt your feelings further.

Although pushing back defensively may seem like the appropriate response (and might feel good), it can wind up hurting all parties involved. “The very thing we do to protect ourselves ends up creating more distance,” Carroll said.

Why Do We Get Defensive?

It hurts to be criticized, and when it happens, we often throw our guard up. According to Carroll, this can be partially explained by the biological basis for defensive behavior, which renders curiosity impossible to access.

“When we feel criticized or at risk, the body moves into fight-or-flight,” she said. “In that state, curiosity is biologically unavailable. The system is organized around defending, explaining, or proving — not understanding.”

And to a certain extent, those of us born with [higher sensitivity](#) may naturally have stronger negative reactions. “Some people are simply wired to feel things more quickly and intensely. We often call that ‘thin-skinned,’ but it’s really a more sensitive nervous system,” Carroll noted. “Many personality frameworks, including the [Enneagram](#), suggest we come into the world with certain strong proclivities. That’s the nature side.”

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But there’s also a *nurture* element. [Research](#) from Australia’s Flinders University suggests that negative social reactions can make someone feel like an outcast and strengthen their future defensiveness. And [certain situations](#) or life experiences — like being bullied as a kid or observing defensive parents — can cause us to put our guard up too. While humans aren’t the only animals to activate the aforementioned fight-or-flight response when sensing a threat, we may be the only ones that may continue to [feel triggered](#) by *perceived* danger after the original threat has passed.

Carroll underscored the idea that your childhood can impact your defense mechanisms. “If you’re raised in an environment where you’re often blamed, criticized, or not fully seen, you learn to defend first. Over time, that outer defensiveness is often paired with something more private: a very harsh inner critic,” she said, adding, “In fact, many defensive people aren’t just protecting themselves from others. They’re already living with the toughest critic there is: themselves.”



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How to Let Your Walls Down

Simple curiosity, Carroll explained, is the “antidote to defensiveness and the doorway to intimacy.” When we seek to understand someone else and allow ourselves to be vulnerable to constructive criticism, we create space to build bridges, not burn them. This doesn’t require you to agree with the other person’s assessment — it just means you’re open to learning more about where they’re coming from.

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The complex part, though, is how to shift out of fight-or-flight mode to enter this state of curiosity, which can only happen when our bodies feel safe enough. Per Carroll, “the work isn’t to push for curiosity. It’s to create the conditions where curiosity can return.”

So how can we accomplish this? “That often starts very simply: slowing things down,” she said. “Naming what’s happening (‘I’m getting defensive right now’) can already begin to shift the nervous system. Tone matters enormously. Even something as small as ‘I’m not against you’ or ‘Let’s slow this down’ can soften the edge.”

Here's how this can play out between partners, she explained: If Jen says, "Why are you always criticizing what I buy when I do the shopping? Nothing I do seems to satisfy you," Matt could respond defensively by saying, "It's not always. 'Always' is what *you* do, pointing out how my clothes look baggy and uncared for."

Instead, he could slow down, regulate his emotions, and choose curiosity by saying, "Jen, that sounds hard, feeling like I'm always criticizing you. Can you tell me more about what I said that landed that way?" Once the door to a calm conversation has been opened, it opens a path toward solution-oriented actions like taking responsibility, apologizing for any wrongdoing, or even just repeating back what the other person is saying, the latter of which can help resolve any miscommunications.

If both parties are worked up, however, try introducing structure to the conversation. "One person speaks. The other reflects back what they heard — without interrupting, correcting, or defending," Carroll advised. "It's not natural at first, but it rebuilds the bridge to curiosity."

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Even when you're not actively participating in an interaction that triggers defensiveness, you can take steps to become a less reactive person. Practice exercises that boost your self-awareness, such as writing down scenarios in which you're likely to become guarded and alternative things you can say or do. You can also jot down signs of your own defensiveness to pay attention to,

Growing up in a house of chaos I was curious how people could love each other and argue that much. Getting away at age 18 was a relief and a door opened. Defining relationships has to come from me. When I am conscious and acting with determination, I can get along in a relationship. But the key is/was finding a mate who could handle my approach.

The Four Horsemen of Drs. John and Julie Gottman refer to Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Stonewalling. Their work with couples revealed patterns of behavior that perpetuate doubt of oneself and inability to be available to others:

Criticism attack a partner's character rather than addressing a specific behavior.

Antidote: Gentle Start Up

- use "I" statements
- Describe specific behavior
- State a clear need

The formula for this antidote is: I feel___ about___and I need_____.

Contempt Manifests as Superiority, sarcasm, eye-rolling, mockery or name-calling.

Antidote: Build Appreciation and Respect

- Express gratitude daily
- Replace sarcasm with direct requests
- Name what you value in your partner

Defensiveness denies responsibility, counterattacking or playing the Victim

Antidote: Take Responsibility

- Acknowledge part of the truth
- Validate your partner's perspective

Stonewalling is Emotional shutdown or withdrawal during conflict.

Antidote: Physiological Self-Soothing

- Take a 20-30 minute break
- Calm the nervous system
- Return and re-engage intentionally

Key Principle: Healthy relationships are not conflict-free; they are repair-rich