

# SEVEN STEPS

## TO INFIDELITY RECOVERY SUCCESS

### HORSEMAN THREE: DEFENSIVENESS

Defensiveness is defined as self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in an attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that its perceived effect is blame. Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't me, it's you." As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.

**Defensiveness:** "It's not my fault that we're always late, it's your fault."

**Antidote:** "Well, you're right. Part of this is my problem - I need to do a better job managing my time."

We've all been defensive. This horseman is nearly omnipresent when relationships are on the rocks. When we feel accused unjustly, we fish for excuses so that our partner will back off. Unfortunately, this strategy is almost never successful. Our excuses just tell our partner that we don't take them seriously, or are trying to get them to buy something that they don't believe, or are blowing them off.

**She:** "Did you call Betty and Ralph to let them know that we're not coming tonight as you promised this morning?"

**He:** "I was just too darn busy today. As a matter of fact you know just how busy my schedule was. Why didn't you just do it?"

He not only responds defensively, but turns the tables and makes it her fault. A non-defensive response would have been:



"Oops, I forgot. I should have asked you this morning to do it because I knew my day would be packed. Let me call them right now."

Although it is perfectly understandable for the male to defend himself in the example given above, this approach doesn't have the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. He fails to solve the problem, and ends up introducing the second horsemen, his defensiveness adding kindling to the flame.

In healthy relationships, partners don't get defensive when discussing an area of conflict. According to Dr. Gottman, they instead take responsibility for their role in the issue and express an interest in their partner's feelings. They say, "You're right, I could have been more aware of how exhausted you were. What you are saying makes some sense, tell me more." Having acknowledged that you have some role in the problem, you are accepting responsibility for a part of it. When you do this, you will find that you can have real dialogue with your partner – you become a team working through the problem together.

Let's take the example from Dr. Gottman's interview with Anderson Cooper

*She: You're always watching TV!*

*He: What do you mean "I'm always watching TV?" I'm working! Can I watch the news?! You're always watching TV, and the kids!*

His defensive response to her criticism does nothing to help the situation. Instead, feeling attacked, he turns the tables and accuses *her*, to which she responds in kind – defensively! Off they go!

What is another way that they could have handled this exchange? The antidote to Defensiveness is Accepting Responsibility.

Here's an example:

### **Accepting Responsibility:**

*She: You're always watching TV!*

*He: I know you're frustrated. I'm so tired when I get back from work that I just*



want to rest for a while. If it bothers you, let's find another relaxing activity that we can do together. What do you think?

She: Okay. I'm sorry, it just feels overwhelming when I'm trying to take care of the kids and you're just sitting there.

He: How about if I help you and then we both go for a walk later tonight? We've both got to relax.

She: Sounds good! Thanks for understanding.

Here's another example:

### **Defensiveness:**

He: You always work so late.

She: I have a project to do for work, we've got a deadline.

He: You ALWAYS have a project to do for work. There is ALWAYS a deadline.

She: That's not true.

He: Why don't you just move into the office?!

### **Accepting Responsibility:**

He: You always work so late.

She: I know. I'm sorry. I've got so much to do. What's the matter?

He: You haven't noticed that we never spend any time together anymore?

She: I know it's been hard. I miss you. I'll try to talk to my boss about these deadlines.

He: I would really appreciate that.

She: I'll try to take Friday off – maybe we can go to a show or something.

He: Sounds great!

Think about perpetual problems in your relationship, those problems that come up often and never seem to go away. Do you feel that the TV is on too much? Do you feel that your partner is away all the time? Do you feel overburdened with housework? Do you feel like you spend too much time arguing about little things?

Imagine the conversations/arguments/fights you have about conflict areas going differently. If these discussions crop up all the time, you'll be sure to benefit greatly from handling them in a healthier way. Think about a



particular problem: What is your goal? What is the real problem underlying the conflict? In the first example, she wants more help and he wants them both to have a chance to relax. In the second example, he misses her, and she is stressed out at the office.

When you have time, make a list of the subjects you want or need to address - the ones that never seem to get resolved. Write down your desired way for the conversation to go.

Using the examples above, try to replace defensiveness with taking responsibility the next time the subject comes up.

You will be happily surprised with the results!

## **ROLEPLAY**

Now it is your turn. With the same rules as last lesson, role-play defensiveness.

