

# How to Listen Without Getting Defensive



Kyle Benson



Here's the key to listening non-defensively.



[Understanding your partner](#) requires the capacity to listen. Really listen. Couples are advised to hear each other's complaints without feeling attacked, and as great as this sounds, it's often unrealistic.

When something you said (or didn't say) hurts your partner's feelings, there's a strong impulse to interrupt with, "That wasn't my intention. You're misunderstanding me," even before your partner is done talking.

**Unfortunately, when the listener reacts to what the speaker is saying before the speaker gets the chance to fully explain themselves, both partners are left feeling misunderstood.**

This is why the "N" in Dr. Gottman's [ATTUNE model](#) stands for **Non-defensive listening**.

## The defensive reaction

For most of us, listening without getting defensive is a hard skill to master. This is especially true when our partner is talking about a trigger of ours. A [trigger](#) is an issue that is sensitive to our heart—typically something from our childhood or a previous relationship.

While the phrase "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" may have some truth, it doesn't acknowledge the fact that trauma and regrettable incidents can leave us with scars and weaker.

This could be a result of a number of things. Maybe you've been repeatedly hurt or you experienced injustice in your relationships. These moments from our [past can escalate interactions in the present](#).

Maybe you feel controlled like Braden does.

When his wife, Suzanne, tells him, "You have to make sure the kids have dinner cooked before you go to the gym," he responds with, "Stop acting like my mother!"

After a few more defensive statements, Braden shuts down.

Braden's heart races at the thought of Suzanne bringing up a complaint during their [State of the Union meeting](#). Any complaint she expresses that [includes a wish](#) for him to change some part of his schedule around, he feels controlled.

## Self-soothe to listen

While it's important for the speaker to complain without blame and state a positive need to prevent the listener from flooding or responding defensively, it's also vital for the listener to learn to self-soothe.

If you're unable to self-soothe, your emotional brain will overpower your rational brain, the part that is designed to self-regulate and communicate, and you'll ["flip your lid"](#) and say or do things you don't mean.

As [Dr. David Schnarch](#) puts it, "Emotionally committed relationships respond better when each partner controls, confronts, soothes, and mobilizes himself/herself." This is because the more partners can regulate their own emotions, the more stable the relationship becomes.

Self-soothing improves the stability of your relationship by allowing you to maintain yourself and your connection with your partner during a tough conversation.

Here is how Braden did it.

During their State of the Union Meeting, Suzanne started off as the speaker, protecting his triggers by stating her complaint without trying to control him. "When I asked about making sure the kids were taken care of and you responded by telling me I was acting like your mother," he says, "I felt hurt because it felt like our kids are not a priority for you. I want to make sure our kids are loved. I need some help."

While Suzanne is expressing [her experience using "I" statements](#), Braden is having a hard time hearing her.

He wants to defend himself and tell her how she is so bossy and demanding. However, he understands that he isn't supposed to mention any of these feelings until it's his turn to be the speaker. And when that happens, he has to be sensitive to her triggers.

Below are some tools that helped Braden self-soothe during his State of the Union meeting.

### Write down what your partner says and any defensiveness you're feeling

Dr. Gottman suggests using a notepad to write down everything your partner says, which is especially helpful when you're feeling defensive. This also helps you remember what was said when you reflect back what you hear or it's your turn to speak. Remind yourself that you're listening to your partner because you care about their pain. Lastly, it's helpful to say to yourself, *I'll get my turn to talk and express my feelings about this.*

### Be mindful of love and respect

During tough conversations it's helpful to focus on your affection and respect for your partner. Recall fond memories and remember the ways your partner has demonstrated their love. Think about how they support you and make you laugh. Consider how the joy you bring each other is more important than this conflict and working through this together will lead to more of those.

I've found it helpful to write a quote or a happy memory in the top right corner of my notepad reminding me that I love my partner and that this conflict has the potential to bring us closer. In "What Makes Love Last?," Dr. Gottman suggests saying to yourself, *In this relationship, we do not ignore one another's pain. I have to understand this hurt.* When you self-soothe, you learn to separate your relationship from the anger and hurt you're feeling over this particular issue.

### Slow down and breathe

Slowing down and taking deep breaths is a great way to self-soothe. Focus on relaxing your body. Sometimes doodling helps. When you do this, don't get lost in the activity or stop listening. If your partner notices you soothing, just say, "I am trying to stay present as I listen, and stuff is coming up for me so I am trying to calm myself so I can truly hear you." Remember to postpone your agenda and focus on understanding your partner.

### Hold on to yourself

Dr. Schnarch advises partners to create a strong relationship with themselves as individuals by learning how to self-soothe and embrace their own emotions. Oftentimes when you feel flooded, it is not because you are reacting to your partner's words or behavior. It's because you are interpreting what they are saying and assigning personal meaning to their statements. Maybe their anger makes you feel like they're going to leave you. Or maybe it makes you feel like you're not being a good enough partner.

Look inward and see what you are telling yourself about what this conflict means and how it may impact you. Holding onto yourself also means considering that your partner's complaint may have truth to it. Sometimes we hold onto a distorted self-portrait. I know I have.

### Don't take your partner's complaint personally

This sounds impossible, especially if the complaint is about something you did or didn't do. If you feel yourself getting defensive, seek to understand why. Ask yourself, *Why am I getting defensive? What am I trying to protect?* Your partner's complaint is about their needs, not yours, so soothe your defensiveness so you can be there for them.

### Ask for a reframe

If your partner is saying something that is triggering, ask them to say it in a different way. *I'm feeling defensive by what you're saying. Can you please reword your complaint so I can understand your need and explore ways we can meet it?*

### Push the pause button

If you notice you're having trouble focusing as the listener, ask your partner to take a break from the conversation. This is a proactive way to self-soothe and prevents your emotional brain from flipping its lid. You can say, *I'm trying to listen but I'm starting to take things personally. Can we take a break and restart this in 20 minutes? Your feelings are important to me and I want to make sure I understand you.* During this time, focus on the positives of your relationship and do something that is productive. I prefer to go for a walk.

Once you've learned to self-soothe, it becomes a lot easier to ask your partner to help you calm down. If you find yourself struggling, tell your partner what's on your mind. For example, "Hun, I'm feeling flooded. Can you tell me how much you love me? I need it right now." vs. "You're the one with the problems. Fix yourself!" The latter reaction comes from a place of fear and often creates a self-fulfilling prophecy. The former gives your partner a fighting chance and the possibility to create a more [secure bond](#).

Conflict is not only a catalyst for understanding, it's also a vehicle for personal growth. I like to think of relationship conflict like an oyster. Oysters don't intend to make beautiful pearls. Instead, pearls are a byproduct of the oyster reducing irritation created by grains of sand. In the same way, conflict can inadvertently create connection and closeness.

After listening to Suzanne, Braden takes a deep breath and says, "I hear you saying that my reaction to your request for help with the kids made you feel like family doesn't matter to me. I can see why you'd be so upset with me." A tear rolls down Suzanne's cheek. This is a major breakthrough for their marriage.

[Long-lasting love requires courage](#). The courage to be vulnerable and to listen non-defensively, even in the heat of conflict. Especially when we are hurt and angry.

# How to Talk to Someone Who Always Gets Defensive



Your loved one hurt your feelings or crossed a boundary. You're trying to talk to them about it. But as soon as you start expressing yourself, they cross their arms. They look away. They start playing with their phone. They say things like: *Why are you criticizing me?* and *I know you think I'm a terrible person.* They start defending

their behavior. They list a litany of reasons why you're actually in the wrong.

In other words, they get defensive. In fact, they get defensive any time you try to have a real conversation with them.

And this defensiveness feels a lot like they don't care. You feel like your feelings don't matter to them. You feel like you don't matter. According to marriage and family therapist Jennine Estes, defensiveness is actually "rarely intentional." Rather it's a knee-jerk reaction that shields the person from guilt and self-doubt, she said.

"People who are defensive have difficulty taking responsibility for their actions and often feel uncomfortable being 'wrong.' [That's] because accepting responsibility would make them feel as if they have failed."

Defensive behavior might stem from a tough childhood or traumatic past, which can make a person more likely to "react through a negative lens," said Lisa Brookes Kift, MFT, a psychotherapist and founder of [Love and Life Toolbox](#). Kids often develop this behavior as a way to cope with difficult

situations, said Estes, who owns a group practice called [Estes Therapy](#) in San Diego. Then it “becomes a bad habit as an adult.” Individuals also might grow up with a sinking self-esteem and a deep belief that they’re not good enough.

Defensiveness is like a spotlight, Estes said. “When you share pain with your loved one, that bright spotlight shifts from you to them. The defensiveness is a way to shift the spotlight back on to you, instead of keeping it on what really matters—the initial issue.”

We can’t control others’ reactions or actions. But we can increase the chances that they’ll listen to us by communicating in a constructive way. As Estes, said, “Relationships are like baby mobiles: If you tug on one side, the whole structure moves. If you shift your response, even just a little bit, the other person will automatically have to change their behavior.” Here’s how.

**Avoid using “blame” language.** Don’t start a sentence with “you,” as in “You didn’t hear me, again!” or “You just don’t care about how I feel!” said Estes, the author of [Relationships in the Raw](#). Also, avoid using “always” and “never.” “These words give no wiggle room, and can be very critical, causing a person to defend their position.”

**Start on a positive note.** According to Kift, tell the other person what they mean to you, such as: “You’re a great friend and I’m telling you this because I care about you...” Also, show appreciation for what the person *has* done, Estes said. “If they don’t feel like their good efforts are acknowledged and only hear about how they messed up again, they will feel defeated.”

She shared this example: “I appreciate how you tried to handle our kid’s tantrum in the store. I know it wasn’t easy and I am glad I am not alone in this. You did your best. Can we talk about how we can both handle these public tantrums in the future?”

**Start with some vulnerability and responsibility.** Be vulnerable with the person, and take some responsibility for the situation. Estes shared this example: "I always felt as if I didn't matter as a child. I was never seen. Now, when I talk and the TV is on, I feel like I am invisible again. You probably don't mean to send me that message at all. I know how much you like your show. But it actually hurts and brings me back to that place of being a kid again."

**Focus on your feelings.** "Beginning with an expression of how you feel is a good way to disarm defensive behavior," Kift said. She suggested using this sentence structure: Say how you felt (your emotion) when they did what they did (their behavior). She shared this example: "I felt unimportant to you when you said we would go to dinner last night and then you canceled on me at the last minute."

**Ask meaningful questions.** Estes suggested asking the other person how they're feeling. "Be sincerely curious around their response. Deep down, it might be the little kid feeling as if they are not good enough and they need your compassion."

For instance, according to Estes, you might say: "It seems like my question upset you. Is there something I said that makes you feel like you need to protect yourself?" or "It seems like my comment upset you. Did my comment make you feel attacked or hurt in any way?"

**Don't lose your temper.** Of course, this isn't easy to do when someone isn't listening to you, or is listing off 20 reasons why they're right. But losing your cool just adds fuel to the fire, Estes said. "Put down that pitchfork and stay focused on the feelings of hurt underneath it all." Slow down, and take several deep breaths. And if you can't calm down, tell the person you need to take a break.

Sometimes, you can do all the right things to have a constructive conversation

—watch your words, be vulnerable—and the other person still gets defensive. In these cases, you can apologize and say it's not your intention, Kift said. Remember that defensive behavior can stem from deeper issues, which have more to do with the person, than with your approach.