

How To Find Your Center Instead of Defending

LaShelle Lowe-Charde

It seems to you that no matter what you say or do, all too often your loved one thinks you are judging them or misinterprets your intentions. If they are grounded enough to ask for clarity about what you were thinking, you have an opportunity to be heard and this hopefully helps with connection. But if you share what you're thinking and they still don't appear to trust your explanation, you will likely start to feel frustrated and defensive. It's painful not to be seen for your good intentions. In between exchanges, you might feel like you're walking on eggshells, unsure how your actions and words will be received. Or perhaps you find yourself becoming more judgmental and impatient towards them, in which case, the accusations become self-fulfilling prophecies. How can you break the cycle of defending yourself and stand firmly in the truth of your good intentions?

Perhaps the simplest relief from defending comes from recognizing that you don't have to do it. A student of mine, let's call her Nancy, recently said that when her partner asked her if she was judging him she would explain just what she was thinking and doing and how she wasn't judging and then start to feel resentful for "having to prove herself." I offered that she could simply answer with: "No, not judging you." If her partner wants more information, he can do the work of deciding what specific information would meet his needs for clarity and reassurance. In this way, he takes responsibility for his interpretations, rather than his partner taking responsibility by trying to prove her good intentions.

At a more subtle level, the more connected you are to your own sense of goodness, the less reactive you tend to be when others project bad motives onto you. The more confident you are in your goodness and good intentions the less desperate you are for others to see and confirm this about you. Connected to your own goodness, it is easier to hear others' doubts as about them and their needs rather than as about you. Remember that everything we do and say is motivated by our own universal needs and values. So when a loved one interprets that you are judging them, they are probably motivated by needs for acceptance, reassurance or emotional security, for example.

From this consciousness, Nancy might first engage in self-empathy and affirm for herself her own good intention and lack of judgment. Then she could possibly answer her partner with empathy. He asks: "Are you judging me?" She responds: "Wanting some reassurance that I accept you?"

If this empathy guess is too vulnerable for her partner to receive, he might express his own judgment and say something like, "Well, you should be more accepting." If this happens Nancy has the challenge of remembering that behind any "should" statement is a whole world of observations, thoughts, feelings, needs and requests. Remembering this helps her not take the comment as criticism. She doesn't believe it at face value, but rather just gets curious about what's triggering her partner's insecurity. She might respond with honest expression by saying: "Hearing you say that, I feel disconnected and want to understand where you are coming from. Could you tell me what's going on for you underneath that?"

If she's feeling really grounded, she might also look inside with curiosity and compassion to see if there was any discomfort in her that might have shown up as judgment in her body language or tone of voice. When we are tense, worried or uncomfortable, and don't name it, that energy can often be misinterpreted by others as judgment or blame. Becoming aware of

that and then naming it could help build transparency and authenticity in the connection as well as offer reassurance to her partner.

Having your intentions misinterpreted and being asked repeatedly if you are judging can be tiresome and a strain on any relationship. If this is a recurrent situation with one of your loved ones, you may wish to start by practicing self-empathy or receiving empathy before you can try responding differently to the situation. Once you feel more grounded and ready to try something new, you could keep these options in mind for the next time you feel yourself starting to defend:

1. Breathe in and connect with your heart
2. Take a moment to connect with the truth of your own goodness and good intentions.
3. Then take a moment to imagine the goodness of their intention behind their question or remark. Perhaps it isn't an accusation? Remember that although it might feel personal, it's really not about you.
4. Try a new kind of response
5. Answer the question at face value and let the other person do the work of asking further questions if they want more clarity.
6. Respond with empathy, guessing at their possible feelings and needs.
7. Express honestly about what goes on for you when you hear their question or remark and make a request to gain clarity or understanding.
8. Look inside with curiosity and compassion and identify whether an inner reaction of yours may have gone unnoticed and unnamed and been received as judgment, then share it openly with the other person.

Practice

This week, notice when you start to defend. Notice how your body gets tight and you start to feel desperate for the other to understand you or your intentions. Notice how you start to explain your behavior and give all the good reasons why you did what you did. Notice how you emotionally jump up and down trying to convince the other of your good intentions. Ask yourself: "Is this what I want to be doing right now? Is this really helping?" Then choose one of the options above to practice and observe what happens.