

Why people become defensive and how to address it

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Defensive behaviors are common responses when people feel personally attacked but can undermine our ability to identify problems and find solutions.

Addressing why defensiveness manifests will help relationships, [conflict management](#) and decision making to reduce defensiveness meet people's psychological need for belonging, according to a study.

Research published in the *British Journal of Social Psychology* has shown that defensiveness in response to wrongdoing is exacerbated by making the wrong doer feel like they're an outcast.

Psychological defensiveness includes the many ways that we let ourselves off the hook when we do wrong: misrepresenting or misremembering what occurred, not paying attention to information that is critical deflecting blame to others, minimizing any harm caused, denying responsibility or disengaging entirely from the situation.

The research conducted at Flinders University by

Professor Michael Wenzel, Associate Professor Lydia Woodyatt, and Dr. Ben McLean, from the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work, is focused on understanding and reducing defensive responses.

"This research shows that defensiveness is strengthened by negative social responses, but is reduced when people feel secure in their group identity, respected and valued," says Associate Professor Woodyatt.

"Based on our research over the past several years, our recommendations for reducing defensiveness when dealing with someone who may have done something wrong is to emphasize respect and value for the person, even if you disagree with their views or actions. Also provide opportunity for the person to express their values prior to talking about the specific problem."

The researchers outline why defensive responses to transgressions undermine our ability to identify a problem correctly and act to solve it, negatively impacting on decision-making within government and organizations, in relationships, and even in relation to our own individual wellbeing.

"Of course these responses do not always feel natural or easy—especially when faced with someone who we think has done wrong to us. Our instinct is also self-protective. As a result when people are caught doing something wrong in our society we often stigmatize, reject or punish them, but this is likely only strengthening those defensive responses over time, not just of that person but of other people in similar situations."

Psychological defensiveness is an evolved self-protective response, and in some mild forms may have some benefits such as helping us to bounce back after failures and helping us to maintain optimism and self-esteem- but defensiveness also has costs.

"Defensiveness creates blind spots in decision-making. When individual and groups respond defensively problems go unrecognized, victims go unacknowledged, and relationships deteriorate."

The researchers examined defensiveness in response to interpersonal transgressions and perceived ethical violations. In these contexts, defensiveness (denying responsibility, deflecting blame, minimizing harm, and moral justifications) increased when people felt stigmatized or rejected.

"Humans have a primary psychological need to be valued and included by others, to feel that they are good and appropriate group members or relationship partners," says Associate Professor Woodyatt.

"When people do something wrong this primary psychological need is threatened, driving a defensive [response](#). But addressing that psychological need to belong can reduce their defensiveness."

Alternatively, people were less defensive when they were secure in their own [group identity](#)- achieved through reinforcing their own values prior to discussing the underlying event.

"While it is beyond this research, we suggest that Restorative practices and Acceptance Commitment Therapy are both readily available frameworks that can help an individual or group when working through wrongdoing and will likely reduce defensiveness because both approaches provide strategies in line with these recommendations."

More information: Michael Wenzel et al, The effects of moral/social identity threats and affirmations on psychological defensiveness following wrongdoing, *British Journal of Social Psychology* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/bjso.12378](https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12378)

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