

Creating Peace by Releasing Defense

By Peter Kane

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Attack of all kinds still persists on our earth and in our personal relationships. For over 25 years breathworkers have taught that the key to world peace is personal peace. My practice is full of clients needing help with letting go of attack and defense patterns in their quest for harmonious relationships. Learning to take responsibility for our own actions is a daunting task. Most of us can take responsibility in some areas but still occasionally feel like a victim of others wrong doings.

In relationship conflicts both people usually feel that the other started the problem or has done more to exacerbate it. A key to taking responsibility for our side of a relationship upset is to let go of the notion of how it started and instead take responsibility for how our own reactivity helped to escalate it. Each point of reactivity is in a sense a beginning point. Most people will underestimate how their actions start problems and will instead focus on the other person's reactions; viewing those as the beginning of the problem. If we take responsibility for our own reactions and respond less defensively we can interrupt an escalation and move the relationship in a peaceful direction.

Defense as attack

When we feel attacked or criticized we tend to defend ourselves. This defensiveness results in our reacting to, or attacking, the other. When we are putting up defenses we are actually sending out energy that is critical or attacking. We may think we are defending ourselves from the others attack but to them it feels like we are sending negative energy. If they are unaware of how they had put us on the defensive they will feel as if we started the problem. Things escalate and both parties usually feel as if the other person started the conflict. We think we are justly reacting to another's attack or criticism but the vary nature of reaction is aggression.

John Gotman, a University of Washington researcher, calls Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Withdrawal the four horseman of the apocalypse. His model expresses how these energies kill relationships. In rebirthing/breathwork based relationship work we have often sought to resolve similar issues. We address how criticism and contempt are part of the Parental Disapproval Syndrome and are based on unresolved anger. Often those who victimize others feel that they are simply protecting themselves and not allowing them-

selves to continue to be oppressed as they were in their past. Even abusers are scared. Everyone needs to become better at comforting his or her fears and letting go of the aggressive defensive energy that comes with thinking we are protecting ourselves.

Criticism and contempt are simply not okay. I feel very critical of these energies. Learning to see these energies as emotional abuse and learning to say no to them by walking away is a key aspect of how to create peace. I would not want anyone to stay in relationship with someone who continues to exhibit criticism and contempt in a verbally dominant way. Most of my words in this article are not as applicable to an abuse model. My intent here is to address more equal relationships or at least those where both parties want to learn how to resolve conflicts that they feel to be somewhat mutual.

The first step toward breaking these cycles of conflict is for us to become aware of how our own fears result in our expressing ourselves aggressively. Both abusers and those who are simply just learning to have boundaries need to understand how our fear results in attack. We may feel that we are simply learning to have and set boundaries, but others may feel that we are perpetuating attack by defending ourselves aggressively. We all need to understand that our words and actions can be felt more harshly than we feel them. This is because we primarily feel our fear and tend to be less aware of the aggressive energy that we use to protect ourselves when afraid. Other people will not notice that we are afraid, and will feel the harshness of our defense as an attack.

Giving up defensiveness

Letting go of defensiveness requires much personal work. It requires true security. To be defenseless we need to have self-esteem and innocence, and we need to know that there is nothing wrong with us. We need to be at peace with ourselves. As the Course in Miracles says "Peace needs no defense." If we are insecure we will tend to hear others concerns as criticisms. When we are secure we can instead listen to and entertain the validity of others concerns or criticism. When we listen they will feel heard and the issue will evolve in a more positive way. If we defend ourselves it pushes them to react further and the conflict will continue to escalate.

To be defenseless we need to listen and focus on how what the other person said is valid and may be accurate. While breathing and saying thank- you are valuable ways to begin to let go of defensiveness, if we say them with rigid aggressive energy people will not feel heard. When

people feel unheard they will continue to hold on and try to convince us of the validity of their words. If they do this we will feel their energy as aggressive and it will become even harder to accept the validity of what they are saying.

A key to breaking this kind of defensive communication escalation is to practice active listening. Active listening means to repeat what we've heard in our own words and without defense. Being defenseless is easier said than done. It is not just what we say that counts. The energy underneath our words is part of what others are reacting to. If we go through these motions and things remain tense or continue to escalate it is because we have not shifted our energy. We need to continue to work with it, be patient and realize that our results will be dictated by our overall clarity and ability to own our issues without defense. I think of all of our personal growth as a collateral reservoir for peaceful communication. If we have the inner strength to accept and truly feel the validity of other people and their words we will not only be able to deescalate conflicts but we will be escalating intimacy.

Withdrawal as defense

Withdrawal also needs to be addressed. Withdrawal may look like the absence of conflict but it is not peace. It may be better to withdraw than express contempt, but withdrawal is a form of rejection that expresses negativity. Some people will feel that withdrawal is a hostile act. If we withdraw we also tend to force the other person to chase us. As they chase us it leads to further conflicts.

If we get stuck in withdrawal we kill relationships in the same way as if we get stuck in contempt, criticism and defensiveness. If we completely withdraw we have given up on the relationship. If this is our only way to get peace

the relationship probably had too many conflicts.

The roots of withdrawal are also embedded in fear and defensiveness. The withdrawn person usually needs to resolve their fear of loss and their fear of criticism, contempt, or disapproval. The healing here is communication. The withdrawn person needs to come out of hiding and learn to deal with the conflict. Withdrawing can be viewed as a false boundary. It is better to learn to set real boundaries by expressing yourself with words.

Origins of shame and defense

What is it that we are defending? Simply put, our core issues. We are actually having an internal fight with the part us that believe our core belief or personal lie is true. We are trying to explain to others that "We are good enough," "We are perfect the way we are," "We are wanted," "A contribution," "An asset," "We bring only good to people," etc. In breathwork we have very deep insight into the shame underneath defensiveness. The work we do helps us and our clients discover that we do not need to be defended. Connecting core personal work with relationship counseling and communication light a path to peace. Our essence and our partners, friends, and neighbor's essence are okay the way they are.

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