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The Listening Course

LESSON 6 – What are you defending, and why are you defending it?

The most important way to slow down and ultimately stop defensiveness is becoming aware of when it's happening. Let's look at the conversation again, with the 2 defensive responses.

JENNIFER:

I heard about a car accident tonight on the road that you drive, and you got home an hour late. I was really afraid you were in a car accident.

MICHAEL:

That's not even the road I take, and I was only 45 minutes late. You really didn't need to worry.

JENNIFER:

You're so in your head. Why do you always tell me not to worry? I didn't even say I was worried.

So how do we answer the question "what are you defending, and why are you defending it?"

If past resentments have built up, one or both partners might always be waiting to attack, or be attacked verbally and emotionally by their partner. So our defensiveness is always waiting to kick in. Even if your partner comes towards you with good intentions, you might feel attacked.

The only way to interrupt this bad habit of communication is to allow for a new kind of interaction, where you listen openly to your partner, and monitor your feelings of defensiveness. Sometimes I tell clients to temporarily store these feelings in a "do not open until later" box. This is a muscle to work on. It takes time to build this muscle.

Michael will create a much more positive conversation if he responds this way, which will prevent the first defensive response from Jennifer, shown above.

MICHAEL:

I'm so sorry you had to worry about me. I'll make sure my phone is charged and I will call you if I will be home unusually late.

This statement ends the possibility of defending, and then escalating into a defensive response, and a possible argument. Michael paid attention to Jennifer's feeling, and the importance and meaning of her feeling.

Michael feels cared about, and important, and Jennifer feels recognized for her earlier stress. Now all of their history is still there, right? A whole bunch of criticism and defensiveness is still possible. But Michael managed to stay here right now, to make a connection. This single moment is a repair. This single positive communication opens up the possibility for healing the past frustrations, and making the relationship safe again to rebuild closeness.

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