

Vulnerable vs. Defensive Feelings

Intimate relationships involve much more than enjoying each other's company, sharing common interests or hobbies, and having similar values, beliefs, or goals. What makes intimate relationships special is also more than physical intimacy – it includes an increased level of *emotional intimacy*. In healthy relationships we allow ourselves to be seen for who we are without fear of criticism or judgment. Above all, we are able to be vulnerable with that other person and can comfortably share our emotional pain and hurt, our fears and worries, and our sadness. In healthy relationships the other person is able to respond with empathy, care and concern. The other person feels *felt* by their partner, which validates their emotions and simultaneously allows them to feel closer or more connected to them. For various reasons, the above process can get derailed, but as a general overview it is important to note that one of the key factors in this emotional connection is the ability to experience and express vulnerability.

Feelings of Vulnerability



If you express your concerns to your partner in terms of reasoning, logic, factual events, or some desired course of action, you will likely “pull” a reciprocal response from them. This can often lead into debates or arguments about one's reasoning, disputes about the ‘facts,’ or disagreements about potential courses of action. Emotions are very different. Since feelings are ‘subjective,’ they cannot be argued, debated, or ‘problem-solved’ in the same way. When one expresses emotional vulnerability in the presence of someone who cares about them, it should reflexively cause that other person to feel some of our emotional

pain out of their concern for us. This is a normal and healthy ‘attachment response,’ that moves the other person to provide comfort, care, and understanding. Even if they do not agree with the reasons *why* you feel the way you do, the other person cares because they know *that* you feel the way you do.

The expression of vulnerable feelings is important, since your partner's ‘job’ is to be an emotional support. If you do not take risks in expressing that vulnerability, you are not allowing that other person to do their job.

Defensive Feelings

Defensive feelings work in the opposite way as those feelings of vulnerability. Whereas vulnerable feelings draw someone closer and offer an opportunity for emotional connection, defensive feelings effectively keep other people at an emotional distance. Defensive feelings can include anger, passive aggressiveness, or emotionally withdrawing (e.g. ‘bottling things up’).

Anger is a good example of what is often a ‘secondary emotion.’ Aggressiveness causes others to back-off, to keep away, and to get defensive themselves. But underneath anger are usually feelings of hurt, disappointment, criticism, abandonment, disrespect, and so on. People who have ‘anger problems’ are usually those who have not had much practice being vulnerable or are unable to experience those more

vulnerable feelings – all they feel is the anger. These kinds of patterns can develop for various reasons, including emotional reflexes that we might have picked up in our families of origin or resulting from repetitious cycles of interaction where emotional needs have gone unmet. But defensive feelings are seldom helpful – they only trigger defensiveness, resentment, and reciprocal anger in the other person.



The best way to ensure that one is heard is to recognize defensive reactions and work to ‘uncover’ what one is ‘really’ feeling – while taking a risk in expressing those emotions in the presence of a caring and empathic partner. As long as that other person is able to respond appropriately, there is an opportunity to have those feelings validated while simultaneously building emotional intimacy and connectedness in your relationship.