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Get Out of Jail Free: Stop Being Defensive

By Sharon Ellison

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by: **Sharon Ellison**

When Marcus and Sally first met they immediately felt like kindred spirits. Marcus was generally warm and open. But as their relationship continued, Sally noticed that sometimes when he was upset he had trouble talking. When she asked Marcus what was bothering him, he would reply that nothing was wrong. Only when she coaxed him would he eventually tell her. As time went on, his resistance increased. The more she probed, the more reluctant he was . . . neither of them felt an ounce of kinship; they didn't even like each other. (Taking the War Out of Our Words, pp. 8–9)

Sadly, this is how many of us expect a relationship to unfold. After the "honeymoon period" and "real life" sets in, people get into ongoing conflicts that erode the bond of love between them, imprisoning them in long-term power struggles. It happens with our children and our own parents, as well as with our intimate partner or spouse.

Is this just the way things have to be? I don't think so. I believe that most of us, whatever our race or culture, have learned a way of talking to each other that is based on the "rules of war." So, for centuries, we've been using rules for talking to each other that actually create and intensify conflict!

How does it work? Well, in a war, whenever you feel threatened by someone, you get defensive. And that's just what we do in our relationships, even with the people we love most.

How long does it take you to get defensive? When I ask audience members how long it takes to get defensive when someone pushes their buttons or puts them down, the answers range from "a nano-second" to "instantly!" What about you?

In Sally's case, she got more aggressive as time went on. When Marcus would say,

"I told you, nothing is wrong!" Sally would move quickly into her own anger . . . "Look, I am not a stupid woman. I can tell when something is wrong!" (TWOW, p. 9)

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Marcus is sending a double message, glowering in his chair while saying he's not upset, and Sally is trying to force him to talk. Both are behaving in ways that are manipulative and controlling.

What can we do differently? Well, this is a big task, but one I believe is well worth the effort. The skills we need to communicate non-defensively are actually rather simple. When I teach them to third graders they learn them quickly. As adults, we have more to unlearn and we often resist change. Here are some key steps.

Number One: The non-defensive mind and heart set—Stop trying to control the other person: For example, we can give up the idea of "getting through" to the other person, making her or him listen to us or admit something. Whenever we do that, are trying to force the other person to change. Such force creates war.

Number Two: Disarming questions— Focus on curiosity: When Marcus, slumped and scowling, says he is "fine," Sally does have an important piece of information. For some reason he can't or won't talk about what is going on.

Sally had begun to work on her own defensiveness, and one day when Marcus seemed upset, she asked him gently, without conveying any coaxing, demand or accusation:

"Are you going to refuse to talk to me if I ask you what is wrong?" Sally reported that Marcus sat stone-silent for a while and then "it was as if the stone melted, and tears streamed down his face. (Taking the War Out of Our Words, p. 98)

They had the best talk they'd had in years. It can seem like a miracle when we ask a question that is simply curious, when we don't try to control the answer. Sally said she and Marcus had the best talk they'd had in years.

But what if the person doesn't open up? What do we do then?

Number Three: Giving Feedback—Be honest without blame: We can tell the person what we are witnessing without trying to prove our point.

Sally could say to Marcus,

(1) "When I hear you say that you are fine, which usually means to me that someone is in a pretty good mood, and

(2) at the same time I see you frowning and slumped in your chair, then

(3) it seems to me that you are upset, but don't want to tell me why."

In one sentence, Sally has given Marcus information about what she thinks his words are saying, what she sees his body expressing that contradicts his words, and what her conclusion is about why he is acting that way. But she has not tried in any way to force him to admit to anything or to do anything

differently.

Number Four: Express your own thoughts, feelings and beliefs—Share your own vulnerability. Once the person knows how we see the situation, we can express our own reactions without being defensive. Sally might continue her statement to Marcus by saying:

(4) "So I feel helpless, and it's hard for me not to try to make you talk, but I don't think that is good for either of us."

Number Five: Predictions (Limit Setting)—Create security by being predictable: We can tell the other person ahead of time how we will respond to certain choices he or she might make. Sally can let Marcus know what she will do if he decides either to talk or not to talk. For example, she might say,

(1) "If you decide to tell me what is going on, I would really like to talk to you about it.

(2) "If you don't want to talk, then I'm going to go work in the yard so I don't get tempted to try to drag it out of you."

The Outcome: We simply gather information, give information, and provide security by letting the person know how we are going to respond to certain choices he or she might make. Never do we try to control the other person's responses.

Even if the other person stays defensive, we can be more peaceful and we can communicate with integrity and clarity. We can set boundaries that keep us out of power struggle and strengthen our own self-esteem. The miracle is how often the other person will drop her or his defenses and open up. After a decade of fighting when Marcus withdrew in silence, Sally's single question dissolved his defenses and he was able to tell her about the war going on inside of him that kept him from talking when he was upset.

This article is based on the book

by Sharon Ellison, available

through your local bookstore or favorite online bookseller. Sharon Ellison, M.S. is an award winning speaker and international consultant.

Defensive Driving

By Graeme Ramsey

There are many different aspects that are taught during defensive driving training.

They range from simple techniques, such as slowing down when approaching a stationary school bus, to more advanced techniques that teach the driver to control a vehicle that has started to lose control in

slippery road conditions.

Defensive driving is not just for those people who have had a court order to attend a course after receiving a traffic offence. Defensive driving will benefit almost anyone who operates a motor vehicle.

Many defensive driving courses are held at local race tracks where the students are safe in the knowledge that there aren't any other road users to contend with.

The courses involve car handling skills, by driving through cones placed at varying spaces whilst approaching at various speeds.

Other tests involve sudden braking on slippery surfaces and cornering on equally slippery surfaces.

Drivers are also taught how to react when unusual events occur, such as a child running out onto the road to chase a ball.

Many defensive driving courses have specially modified vehicles that are designed to allow the occupants to experience the effects of lost driver control through a skid.

It is through this knowledge of how a car can lose control, and the specialist advice that they are taught that the driver learns to handle the situation if it occurs.

Defensive driving courses teach, first and foremost, how to avoid certain circumstances, and then secondly, if these circumstances are unavoidable, they teach the driver the best solution to handle the vehicle safely.

Good driving habits are also a priority in the courses with drivers taught to allow sufficient room between themselves and the cars they are following to stop safely in an emergency braking situation.

For anyone who is considering attending a defensive driving course, it is wise to check first with the local authorities for advice on which providers offer the best services.

Graeme Ramsey offers defensive driving advice

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