



Wait—Are You Implying I Need to Read This Article?

by Martha Beck



Illustration: Brett Ryder

"I want your honest opinion," said my friend Joanna, handing me her unpublished manuscript. "Don't whitewash; tell the truth. Promise!"

So I promised—apprehensively. Joanna's very talented, but I know she also takes criticism hard. To my relief, I loved her book, and I fired off an e-mail saying that the only way she could possibly improve it would be to make it a little more personal. "You're so amazing," I told her. "Putting more of *you* in the book would take it from great to sublime."

Joanna didn't write back for nearly a month. When she did, it was to tell me that my "attack" had left her "inconsolable."

Oy.

I'd made a crucial mistake when I agreed to be Joanna's critic: I ignored my knowledge that she is a highly defensive person. People like her (let's call them HDPs for short) can be found in almost every family, workplace, or crowd. Dealing with them requires a special set of skills, a defense against defensiveness. I recommend keeping these techniques handy for dealing with the HDPs in your life—or for minimizing your own defensiveness, should it ever raise its touchy little head.

The Dark Side of Sensitivity

Joanna describes herself as sensitive, and she is. But her reaction to my comments wasn't sensitivity; it was defensiveness. The two may feel identical to the person experiencing them, but actually they're worlds apart. Sensitivity is born of careful attention. It involves looking closely, understanding deeply, and therefore not causing harm. Defensiveness, on the other hand, is the bastard child of shame. For people who have survived harshly judgmental environments, shame—the sick sense that they're basically inadequate—dominates the psychological landscape. They're sensitive the way a truckload of TNT is sensitive. Virtually any bump or jostle causes them to explode, often harming others.

Knowing an HDP's destructive behavior comes from shame doesn't excuse it. But at least it helps me understand why one of my clients dumped her boyfriend for "implying she was ugly" because he closed his eyes when they kissed, or why I once saw a party guest respond to the question, "Would you like some wine?" by snapping, "Why, do I look like an alcoholic?" From the outside, defensive behavior is disproportionate, bizarre, often appalling. But from the perspective of the HDPs, these actions are justifiable—no, necessary!—self-protection. I've spent a long time thinking about the best way to deal effectively with such people.

How to Have a Functional, Trusting, Relaxed, Mutually Satisfying Human Relationship

Short answer: You can't.

Long answer: You really can't. Don't even try.

The reason one can't look to defensive people for top-quality relationships is that such relationships require two human beings. But defensive people don't think like humans. They think like reptiles. I mean this literally. Beneath the elaborate neural structures that mediate our subtle social interactions, we all possess what scientists call a reptilian brain. This ancient biological structure, which evolved in reptiles, isn't capable of nuanced emotion or logical thought. Its primary driving force is fear. Two fears, to be specific.

The first worry of all reptile brains (including yours and mine) is "I don't have enough!" Not enough love, money, food, credit, glory—the subject of our deprivation obsessions varies, but the theme "not enough" pounds away like a monotonous drumbeat. The only thing as loud to the reptile ear is its other major concern: "Someone's out to get me!" An HDP perceives threat coming from lots of sources; one day the Enemy may be a coworker, the next a relative, the next an entire nation. But to the reptile brain, someone, somewhere, is always about to attack.

This makes evolutionary sense. Lizards live longer if they obsessively acquire more food, shelter, and mates, and if they expect predators to jump them at any moment. Sadly, however, reptiles are blind to nondefensive emotions; to the glow of love, the tickle of amusement. The only thing playing on their mental screens, all day every day, is *The Lack and Attack Show*. The same is true of HDPs. When humans are gripped by primal fear, they become their inner lizards—and HDPs are virtually always gripped by primal fear.

So the best relationship you can hope to sustain with a defensive person is the sort you might have with a reptile. As a doctor here in Arizona once explained to a man who was bitten on the lip while kissing his pet rattlesnake (it made the newspapers), you simply cannot expect a loving connection from a reptile, even if you raised it from the egg. Remembering that these people are basically giant talking lizards will keep you from futilely trying to please them, persuade them or explain yourself to them. That's a key step. But a solid defense against defensiveness requires you to go further—to manage the fear that may put *you* in HDP mode.

How to Avoid Becoming a Highly Defensive Person

Defensiveness is extremely contagious. When Joanna "forgave" me for what I thought was glowingly positive feedback, I felt a jolt of angry defensiveness myself. If I'd followed my own inner lizard, with its worries of being insufficiently loved and excessively criticized, I'd have accused Joanna of being paranoid—which would've sent *her* inner lizard into all-out combat mode, triggering still more defensiveness in me, resulting in a relationship catastrophe I call War of the Dinosaurs (*dinosaur* means "fearfully great lizard").

It's easy to say that we should stay out of reptile mode, but that's hard advice to follow when some HDP launches an attack—especially if the person has any power over you. When your highly defensive parent, boss, head nurse, or gang leader launches a dinosaur attack, you may not be able to stop yourself from getting upset in return. But if you can't help slithering into reptile mode, there's still one option left: Don't go lizard. Go turtle.

The Shell Game

One reason the Roman Empire conquered most of ancient Europe was a military maneuver called the turtle. In battles a regiment would clump together, the soldiers in the center holding their shields above their heads, while those on the periphery shielded the unit's front, back, and sides. They'd march along that way, pretty much an indestructible human tortoise. You, too, need such tactics for engaging with HDPs who loom above you in the social-power landscape.

"Going turtle" means putting up an emotional shell. This isn't easy, because mirror neurons in your brain fire in resonance with the feelings of people around you. If you and I were talking, part of your brain would organize itself to match part of mine, and vice versa. When you're with a loving person, this is wonderful; with an HDP, it creates wars straight out of the Mesozoic era. To avoid conflagration, you must pull your sensitive social neurons back into a shell.

It isn't all that hard. Try this: Think about an occasion when an HDP blew up at you. Remember the shock, the anger, the urge to lash back. Got it? Good. Now picture your living room painted kumquat orange. Then figure out whether 713 is a prime number. Do you notice how your mind lets go of emotional reactivity as it attacks visual or analytical problems? Artists and scientists are notoriously eccentric because their mental work diverts brainpower from social connection. When I'm listening to an HDP's rant, I am also, almost always, thinking about painting. Desert landscapes, usually. They help my inner turtle feel safe, so that I don't mirror the aggression of the HDP.

Next Step: The High Road

Pulling into an emotional shell is better than engaging in dinosaur warfare, and can allow you to converse with HDPs without being destroyed. An even higher goal than turtling, however, is to remain fearlessly human in the face of hostility. My idol, in this regard, is dear departed Steve Irwin, the crocodile hunter, who loved reptiles unabashedly and unilaterally, even as he grappled and sidestepped to avoid their violent

attacks. There are many HDPs in my life I really enjoy, the way Steve Irwin enjoyed his crocs. Joanna, for example, is a good friend and wonderful writer, especially for a lizard.

You can learn a lot about handling HDPs by studying the way Irwin treated his beloved reptiles: firmly but lovingly. "You're all right, sweetheart," he'd croon as a sea snake tried desperately to envenomate him. "Aren't you gorgeous!" he'd exult to a charging one-eyed alligator. And you could tell he meant it. I think HDPs all over the world must have felt strangely happy watching Steve lovingly disarm reptiles like themselves.

If you're feeling brave enough, try the crocodile hunter's techniques on a highly defensive person. See something beautiful in them, and steadfastly mirror that instead of their antagonism. I've used the above Irwinisms—"You're all right, sweetheart" and "Aren't you gorgeous!"—and found them very effective, even in business negotiations. But my favorite reptile-wrangling skill, the one I used with Joanna, consists of three ridiculously simple words: "All is well."

Try saying this, warmly, the next time an HDP lashes out at you. "You attacked my writing!" *All is well.* "You're implying I'm ugly!" *All is well.* "Do I look like an alcoholic to you?" *All is well.* It may sound off-point, but since extreme defensiveness is itself off-point, this actually works better than following your HDP's arguments. When I assured Joanna, "All is well," she instantly relaxed. Keeping "All is well" on the tip of your tongue can disarm bullies, mend marriages, stop fistfights. It's a three-word de-defensivizer.

Say it now, to feel it in your mouth and mind. Repeat the whole classic mantra: "All is well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." Feel how this soothes your inner lizard. It works so well I don't even care if it's true—though I suspect it may be, in some mystical realm that mortal eyes see only through a glass, darkly. But one thing's for sure, even in the workaday world, where friends may turn into dinosaurs and you're stuck with an exploding coworker: If you have a few reptile-wrangling tricks under your belt, all will be a heck of a lot better.

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