

Defensiveness

Defensiveness is a psychological and behavioral reaction triggered by perceived criticism, blame, or threat. In clinical settings like neurosurgery, it often emerges during feedback, evaluation, or high-pressure situations, and can hinder learning, teamwork, and safety.

□ Definition

Defensiveness involves:

- Rejecting or minimizing feedback
- Justifying one's actions instead of listening
- Shifting blame or becoming argumentative
- Emotional withdrawal or visible discomfort

“Defensiveness is the instinct to protect the ego, even when the intellect knows better.”

□ Examples in Neurosurgical Context

- A resident interrupts feedback with:

“But that’s not how I usually do it...”

- A scrub nurse responds to a suggestion with:

“I didn’t make a mistake—the instruments were miscounted.”

- A consultant becomes visibly irritated when a junior questions a surgical plan.

□ Root Causes

- Fear of failure or shame
- High-pressure or judgmental environments
- Poor past experiences with feedback
- Lack of psychological safety
- Cultural or hierarchical barriers

□ Consequences

- Obstructed feedback loops
- Breakdown of team communication
- Lost opportunities for reflection and improvement
- Erosion of trust

▢ Strategies to Reduce Defensiveness

▢ As Feedback Giver

- Use the [SBI Model \(Situation-Behavior-Impact\)](#)
- Focus on actions, not personality
- Offer support alongside critique
- Create a respectful, non-punitive tone

▢ As Feedback Receiver

- Pause before responding
- Ask clarifying questions: “Can you help me understand how that impacted the team?”
- Reflect before reacting
- Acknowledge the feedback: “I see your point—I’ll work on that.”

▢ Quote

“Defensiveness blocks feedback. Openness transforms it into growth.”

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