

Accountability, Shame, Empathy, and Defensiveness Worksheet

Accountability and empathy can support safety, repair, and meaningful behavioral change after betrayal or relational harm. Shame and defensiveness often interrupt this process by shifting attention away from the impact of the behavior and toward escaping emotional discomfort.

This worksheet is intended to help identify these patterns and practice more accountable, empathic responses.

Chart 1: Accountability Versus Shame

Accountability	Shame
Identifies the behavior and its impact	Defines the entire person as bad
Accepts responsibility	Collapses into self-condemnation
Makes room for the harmed person's experience	Redirects attention toward the person who caused harm
Supports corrective action	Encourages hiding, avoidance, or defensiveness
Requires consistent behavioral change	Often seeks immediate relief from discomfort

Understanding the Difference

Accountability may sound like:

- "I made a harmful choice."
- "My behavior affected your ability to feel safe."
- "I am responsible for repairing what I can."
- "I understand that change must be demonstrated consistently."
- "I can tolerate discomfort while listening to your experience."

Shame may sound like:

- “I am a terrible person.”
- “There is no point in trying because I ruin everything.”
- “I cannot handle hearing how much pain I caused.”
- “You must hate me.”
- “I need you to reassure me that I am not bad.”

Accountability focuses on the behavior, its impact, and the actions needed to reduce further harm. Shame focuses on the person’s worth and may create pressure for the harmed person to provide comfort or reassurance.

Accountability or Shame?

Read each statement and mark the response that most closely describes it.

1. “I know my choices damaged your trust, and I am committed to following our agreements.”

- ☐ Accountability
☐ Shame

2. “I am such a terrible person. You would be better off without me.”

- ☐ Accountability
☐ Shame

3. “I want to understand how my actions affected you, even though it is difficult to hear.”

- ☐ Accountability
☐ Shame

4. “Nothing I do will ever be enough, so why should I keep trying?”

- ☐ Accountability
☐ Shame

5. “I need to take responsibility without asking you to make me feel better.”

- ☐ Accountability
- ☐ Shame

6. “When you talk about the betrayal, I feel so bad that I need the conversation to stop.”

- ☐ Accountability
 - ☐ Shame
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My Accountability Reflection

What specific behavior am I taking responsibility for?

What impact did this behavior have on another person?

Have I been focusing more on my intentions or on the actual impact?

What emotions arise when I consider the harm caused?

- ☐ Guilt
- ☐ Shame
- ☐ Sadness
- ☐ Fear
- ☐ Grief
- ☐ Regret
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ Helplessness
- ☐ Other: _____

How do I usually respond to these emotions?

- ☐ Listen and remain present
- ☐ Become defensive

- ☐ Withdraw or shut down
- ☐ Seek reassurance
- ☐ Minimize the harm
- ☐ Blame another person
- ☐ Become self-critical
- ☐ Take corrective action
- ☐ Other: _____

What would an accountable response look like in this situation?

One corrective action I can take is:

Moving From Shame to Accountability

Complete the statements below.

Shame statement:

"I am _____."

Accountability statement:

"I made the choice to _____."

Impact statement:

"This affected the other person by _____."

Corrective-action statement:

"To reduce further harm, I will _____."

Behavioral-change statement:

"I will demonstrate change consistently by _____."

Chart 2: Empathy Versus Defensiveness

Empathic Response

"I understand why this affected you."

"You did not deserve to be deceived."

"I will answer this honestly."

"My behavior contributed to your lack of safety."

"I know trust must be rebuilt through action."

Defensive Response

"That is not what I meant."

"You made mistakes too."

"Why are we still discussing this?"

"You are overreacting."

"You should trust me by now."

Understanding the Difference

Empathy does not require agreement with every interpretation or emotion. It means making room for another person's experience and acknowledging the impact of what occurred.

Defensiveness often attempts to reduce blame, discomfort, or perceived criticism. It may include explaining intentions, minimizing impact, changing the subject, criticizing the harmed person, or demanding that recovery move more quickly.

Empathy focuses on:

- The harmed person's experience
- Emotional validation
- Honest answers
- Curiosity and listening
- Responsibility for impact
- Patience with the recovery process
- Consistent action

Defensiveness focuses on:

- Proving good intentions
 - Avoiding discomfort
 - Correcting details before acknowledging pain
 - Comparing mistakes
 - Ending the conversation quickly
 - Minimizing emotional reactions
 - Demanding trust or forgiveness
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Empathy or Defensiveness?

Read each response and mark the pattern it demonstrates.

1. “I can see that this brought back the fear you felt when you first discovered the betrayal.”

- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Defensiveness

2. “You are making this into a much bigger issue than it is.”

- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Defensiveness

3. “I want to understand what part of this felt unsafe to you.”

- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Defensiveness

4. “I already apologized. I do not know what else you expect.”

- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Defensiveness

5. “I will answer your question directly, even though I feel uncomfortable.”

- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Defensiveness

6. “You were not honest about things either.”

- ☐ Empathy
- ☐ Defensiveness

Recognizing My Defensive Patterns

When I feel confronted, criticized, ashamed, or afraid, I may:

- ☐ Explain my intentions before acknowledging the impact
- ☐ Minimize what happened
- ☐ Correct small details
- ☐ Change the subject
- ☐ Bring up the other person's mistakes
- ☐ Become angry or sarcastic
- ☐ Shut down or refuse to talk
- ☐ Demand forgiveness or reassurance
- ☐ Say the other person is overreacting
- ☐ Ask why the issue is still being discussed
- ☐ Leave the conversation without agreeing to return
- ☐ Other: _____

What am I usually trying to protect myself from in these moments?

What effect might my defensiveness have on the other person?

Replacing Defensive Responses

Rewrite each defensive statement as a more empathic and accountable response.

Defensive statement:

"That is not what I meant."

More empathic response:

Defensive statement:

"You made mistakes too."

More empathic response:

Defensive statement:

“Why are we still discussing this?”

More empathic response:

Defensive statement:

“You are overreacting.”

More empathic response:

Defensive statement:

“You should trust me by now.”

More empathic response:

A Four-Step Empathic Response

Use these steps when responding to pain, questions, or concerns.

1. Pause

Notice the urge to explain, correct, blame, withdraw, or defend.

What am I feeling right now?

2. Acknowledge

Name the other person’s emotional experience.

"I can understand why you feel _____."

3. Take Responsibility

Identify your behavior and its impact.

"My behavior contributed to _____."

4. Support Repair

Offer honesty, corrective action, or reassurance grounded in behavior.

"What I can do now is _____."

Practice Scenario

Describe a recent conversation in which shame or defensiveness appeared.

What was said or asked?

What did you feel in your body?

- ☐ Tight chest
- ☐ Racing heart
- ☐ Jaw tension
- ☐ Heat or flushing
- ☐ Nausea
- ☐ Restlessness
- ☐ Feeling frozen
- ☐ Urge to leave
- ☐ Other: _____

What was your immediate response?

Was the response primarily:

- ☐ Accountable
- ☐ Shame-based
- ☐ Empathic
- ☐ Defensive
- ☐ A combination

How might the other person have experienced your response?

What could you say differently now?

Personal Commitment to Accountability and Empathy

One defensive habit I want to become more aware of is:

One shame statement I want to replace is:

A more accountable statement would be:

One empathic phrase I can practice is:

One action I can take to demonstrate meaningful change is:

How I will remain accountable when discomfort arises:

Closing Reminder

Accountability is not the same as self-punishment. Empathy is not the same as accepting unlimited blame.

Accountability means identifying harmful behavior, recognizing its impact, accepting responsibility, and following through with consistent corrective action. Empathy means staying present with another person's experience without immediately minimizing, explaining, comparing, or defending.

Repair develops through repeated patterns of honesty, emotional presence, responsibility, and behavioral change—not through perfect words or immediate relief from discomfort.