KESTON SCHOOL

HUMAN BEHAVIOR · FREE SAMPLE

Take Feedback Well

Hear criticism without getting defensive and use what actually helps

CHAPTER 1 + WORKBOOK SECTION

BEFORE YOU START

How to use this book

By the last page you will know how to stay steady in the first seconds of criticism, ask questions that turn vague comments into something useful, sort feedback you should act on from feedback you can set aside, and disagree calmly when it is wrong, at work and at home.

1. Read one chapter at a time. Each one gives you a single idea and a single action.
2. Open the Take Feedback Well Workbook and complete the matching section while the chapter is fresh.
3. Do the “Try this” action within seven days. Reading changes what you know; the action changes what you do.
4. Finish with the checklist in chapter 12 and come back to it whenever you slip.

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CHAPTER 1

The Sting of Criticism

Name the defensive reflex that kicks in when someone criticizes you, and see why telling yourself not to take it personally rarely helps.

Your manager catches you after a meeting. “Quick thing. Your report was good, but the summary at the top was hard to follow. The client asked me what the main point was.” She smiles and walks off.

It takes about two seconds for your body to react. Your face gets warm. A list of reasons appears in your head: the deadline was moved up, nobody told you the client would read it, the summary was fine. By the time you sit down at your desk, you have rehearsed three replies you will never send. That evening you are still turning it over while you make dinner.

The comment lasted fifteen seconds. Your reaction lasted the rest of the day.

The reflex everyone has

If that scene feels familiar, you are in very large company. Almost everyone reacts to criticism before they think about it. The reaction is quick, physical and convincing. It feels like you are protecting yourself from something unfair, even when the comment was small, fair and kindly meant.

This book is about what happens in the space between hearing criticism and deciding what to do with it. That space is usually tiny. The goal is to make it a little wider, so that you can choose your response instead of having it chosen for you.

It helps to start by naming what you do now. Most people lean toward one of four patterns.

Explaining. You answer every point with a reason. The deadline, the missing information, the thing nobody mentioned. Each reason may be true, but together they send one message: this is not my fault.

Counterattacking. You turn the spotlight around. “Well, you never give me clear instructions.” Sometimes this is fair, but in the moment it changes the subject from your work to theirs.

Collapsing. You agree with everything and then some. “You’re right, I’m terrible at this, I always mess up summaries.” It sounds humble, but it shuts the conversation down just as fast, because now the other person has to comfort you.

Shutting down. You go quiet, nod and say “okay.” Inside, you have stopped listening. You will replay it later, but right now you just want it to end.

Most people use more than one, depending on who is speaking. You might explain to your boss, counterattack with your partner and shut down with your parents. That is normal. The point is not to judge the pattern but to recognize it when it starts.

> **Key idea:** Defensiveness is not a personality trait. It is a reflex, and reflexes can be noticed, slowed down and redirected with practice.

Why “don’t take it personally” fails

The most common advice about criticism is to not take it personally. It sounds reasonable. It almost never works.

The problem is that feedback often is personal. It is about your work, your choices or the way you treated someone. Telling yourself it is not personal asks you to pretend you do not care, and you do. The effort of pretending usually makes the reaction stronger, not weaker.

The other common advice is to have thicker skin. That one fails for a similar reason. People with very thick skin often stop hearing feedback at all. They are calm, but they do not improve, and the people around them eventually stop bothering to tell them anything.

A better aim is not to feel nothing. It is to feel the sting, notice it and still be able to listen. You can be hurt and curious at the same time. That combination is what the rest of this book teaches.

What taking feedback well looks like

Taking feedback well does not mean agreeing with every comment. It does not mean smiling through criticism that is harsh or wrong. And it definitely does not mean changing yourself every time someone has an opinion.

It means four practical things:

1. You stay steady enough in the first moments to keep listening.
2. You ask questions until you understand what the person actually means.
3. You sort what you heard, deciding what to act on and what to set aside.
4. You respond, which can include saying calmly that you see it differently.

Each of these is a skill, and each gets its own chapter. The order matters. If you skip the first step, the reflex answers for you. If you skip the second, you act on a guess. If you skip the third, you either change too much or nothing at all. None of them requires you to become a different person. They require a few new habits and some patience with yourself while you build them.

Try this

For the next seven days, keep a short feedback log. Every time someone criticizes, corrects or comments on something you did, at work or at home, write down four things within a few hours:

- **What they said**, as close to their actual words as you can remember.
- **Who said it**, and where.
- **What you felt in your body**, in a word or two. Hot face, tight chest, sinking stomach.
- **What you did next**: explained, counterattacked, collapsed or shut down.

Include small things. A partner saying the dishes were left in the sink counts. So does a colleague pointing out a typo. Small moments show your pattern more clearly than big ones, because you are not bracing for them.

Do not try to change anything yet. Just watch. At the end of the week, circle the pattern that shows up most and the person who triggers it most often. That is your starting point.

Before we work on what to do differently, it helps to understand why a fifteen-second comment can feel like a threat in the first place.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Defensiveness is a fast reflex, not a character flaw.
- Most people default to explaining, counterattacking, collapsing or shutting down.
- Noticing your own pattern for one week is the first real step.

→ Workbook, section 1

01 The Sting of Criticism

Keep a one-week feedback log. A minute or two after each comment.

FILL IN

My one-week feedback log

What they said	Who / where	What I felt	What I did

CHECKLIST

My usual pattern (tick all that fit)

- [ ] Explaining
- [ ] Counterattacking
- [ ] Collapsing
- [ ] Shutting down

RATE IT

How long do I usually replay criticism?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1 · A few minutes

10 · Several days

The pattern and the person that showed up most this week:

YOUR NEXT STEP

Want the whole book?

You just read chapter 1 of Take Feedback Well and tried the first workbook section. The full e-book has 12 chapters, a complete workbook and a final checklist. Here is everything inside:

01 The Sting of Criticism

02 Why Feedback Feels Like a Threat

03 What Defensiveness Costs

04 Information, Not a Verdict

05 Pause Before You Answer

06 Ask Until It's Clear

07 Sort, Then Decide

08 Feedback in Real Life

09 When Feedback Feels Unfair

10 Ask Before They Tell

11 The Person People Can Tell

12 Mistakes & Checklist

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