



The Four Horsemen: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling

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LET'S EDUCATE

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a metaphor depicting the end of times in the New Testament. They describe conquest, war, hunger, and death respectively. We use this metaphor to describe communication styles that, according to Gottman research, can predict the end of a relationship.

1. Criticism

The first horseman is criticism. Criticizing your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is an ad hominem attack. It is an attack on your partner at the core of their character. In effect, you are dismantling their whole being when you criticize.

The important thing is to learn the difference between expressing a complaint and criticizing:

- **Complaint:** *"I was scared when you were running late and didn't call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other."*
- **Criticism:** *"You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe you are that forgetful, you're just selfish. You never think of others! You never think of me!"*

If you find that you and your partner are critical of each other, don't assume your relationship is doomed to fail. The problem with criticism is that, when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way for the other, far deadlier horsemen to follow. It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt, and often causes the perpetrator and victim to fall into an escalating pattern where the first horseman reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity, which eventually leads to contempt.

2. Contempt

The second horseman is contempt. When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean—we treat others with disrespect, mock them with sarcasm, ridicule, call them names, and mimic or use body language such as eye-rolling or scoffing. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless.

Contempt goes far beyond criticism. While criticism attacks your partner's character, contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over them:

“You’re ‘tired?’ Cry me a river. I’ve been with the kids all day, running around like mad to keep this house going and all you do when you come home from work is flop down on that sofa like a child and play those idiotic video games. I don’t have time to deal with another kid. Could you be any more pathetic?”

Research even shows that couples that are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illness (colds, the flu, etc.) than others due to weakened immune systems! Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner—which come to a head when the perpetrator attacks the accused from a position of relative superiority.

Most importantly, *contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce.* It must be eliminated.

3. Defensiveness

The third horseman is defensiveness, and it is typically a response to criticism. We've all been defensive, and this horseman is nearly omnipresent when relationships are on the rocks. When we feel unjustly accused, we fish for excuses and play the innocent victim so that our partner will back off.

Unfortunately, this strategy is almost never successful. Our excuses just tell our partner that we don't take their concerns seriously and that we won't take responsibility for our mistakes:

- **Question:** ***“Did you call Betty and Ralph to let them know that we’re not coming tonight as you promised this morning?”***
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- **Defensive response:** ***“I was just too darn busy today. As a matter of fact, you know just how busy my schedule was. Why didn’t you just do it?”***

This partner not only responds defensively, but they reverse blame in an attempt to make it the other partner's fault. Instead, a non-defensive response can express acceptance of responsibility, admission of fault, and understanding of your partner's perspective:

“Oops, I forgot. I should have asked you this morning to do it because I knew my day would be packed. That’s my fault. Let me call them right now.”

Although it is perfectly understandable to defend yourself if you’re stressed out and feeling attacked, this approach will not have the desired effect. Defensiveness will only escalate the conflict if the critical spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner, and it won’t allow for healthy conflict management.

4. Stonewalling

The fourth horseman is stonewalling, which is usually a response to contempt. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and simply stops responding to their partner. Rather than confronting the issues with their partner, people who stonewall can make evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive or distracting behaviors.

It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable “out,” but when it does, it frequently becomes a bad habit. And unfortunately, stonewalling isn’t easy to stop. It is a result of feeling physiologically flooded, and when we stonewall, we may not even be in a physiological state where we can discuss things rationally.

If you feel like you’re stonewalling during a conflict, stop the discussion and ask your partner to take a break:

“Alright, I’m feeling too angry to keep talking about this. Can we please take a break and come back to it in a bit? It’ll be easier to work through this after I’ve calmed down.”

Then take 20 minutes to do something alone that soothes you—read a book or magazine, take a walk, go for a run, really, just do anything that helps to stop feeling flooded—and then return to the conversation once you feel ready.

The Antidotes to the Four Horsemen

Being able to identify the Four Horsemen in your conflict discussions is a necessary first step to eliminating them, but this knowledge is not enough. To drive away destructive communication and conflict patterns, you must replace them with healthy, productive ones.

The Antidote to *Criticism*: Gentle Start-Up

A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, but criticism attacks a person's very character. The antidote for criticism is to complain without blame by using a soft or gentle start-up. Avoid saying "you," which can indicate blame, and instead talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express what you need in a positive way.

To put it simply, think of these two things to formulate your soft start-up: *What do I feel? What do I need?*

Criticism: *"You always talk about yourself. Why are you always so selfish?"*

Antidote: *"I'm feeling left out of our talk tonight and I need to vent. Can we please talk about my day?"*

Notice that the antidote starts with "I feel," leads into "I need," and then respectfully asks to fulfill that need. There's no blame or criticism, which prevents the discussion from escalating into an argument.

The Antidote to *Contempt*: Build a Culture of Appreciation and Respect

Contempt shows up in statements that come from a position of moral superiority. Some examples of contempt include sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. Contempt is destructive and defeating. It is the greatest predictor of divorce, and it must be avoided at all costs.

The antidote to contempt is to build a culture of appreciation and respect in your relationship, and there are a few ways to do that. One of our mottos is Small Things Often: if you regularly express appreciation, gratitude, affection, and respect for your partner, you'll create a positive perspective in your relationship that acts as a buffer for negative feelings. The more positive you feel, the less likely that you'll feel or express contempt!

Another way that we explain this is our discovery of the 5:1 "magic ratio" of positive to negative interactions that a relationship must have to succeed. If you have five or more positive interactions for every one negative interaction, then you're making regular deposits into your emotional bank account, which keeps your relationship in the green.

Contempt: *"You forgot to load the dishwasher again? Ugh. You are so incredibly lazy."* (Rolls eyes.)

Antidote: *“I understand that you’ve been busy lately, but could you please remember to load the dishwasher when I work late? I’d appreciate it.”*

The antidote here works so well because it expresses understanding right off the bat. This partner shows how they know that the lack of cleanliness isn’t out of laziness or malice, and so they do not make a contemptuous statement about their partner or take any position of moral superiority.

Instead, this antidote is a respectful request, and it ends with a statement of appreciation.

The Antidote to **Defensiveness**: Take Responsibility

Defensiveness is defined as self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that being defensive never helps to solve the problem at hand.

Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You’re saying that the problem isn’t me, it’s you. As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.

Defensiveness: *“It’s not my fault that we’re going to be late. It’s your fault since you always get dressed at the last second.”*

Antidote: *“I don’t like being late, but you’re right. We don’t always have to leave so early. I can be a little more flexible.”*

By taking responsibility for part of the conflict (trying to leave too early), even while asserting that they don’t like to be late, this partner prevents the conflict from escalating by admitting their role in the conflict. From here, this couple can work towards a compromise.

The Antidote to Stonewalling: Physiological Self-Soothing

Stonewalling is when someone completely withdraws from a conflict discussion and no longer responds to their partner. It usually happens when you’re feeling flooded or emotionally overwhelmed, so your reaction is to shut down, stop talking, and disengage. And when couples stonewall, they’re under a lot of emotional pressure, which increases heart rates, releases stress hormones into the bloodstream, and can even trigger a fight-or-flight response.

In one of our longitudinal research studies, we interrupted couples after fifteen minutes of an argument and told them we needed to adjust the equipment. We asked them not to talk about their issue, but just to read magazines for half an hour. When they started talking again, their heart rates were significantly lower and their interaction was more positive and productive.

What happened during that half hour? Each partner, without even knowing it, physiologically soothed themselves by reading and avoiding discussion. They calmed down, and once they felt calm, they were able to return to the discussion in a respectful and rational way.

Therefore, the antidote to stonewalling is to practice physiological self-soothing, and the first step of self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion and call a timeout:

“Look, we’ve been through this over and over again. I’m tired of reminding you—”

“Honey, I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I’m feeling overwhelmed and I need to take a break. Can you give me twenty minutes and then we can talk?”

If you don’t take a break, you’ll find yourself either stonewalling and bottling up your emotions, or you’ll end up exploding at your partner, or both, and neither will get you anywhere good.

So, when you take a break, it should last at least twenty minutes because it will take that long before your body physiologically calms down. It’s crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation (“I don’t have to take this anymore”) and innocent victimhood (“Why is he always picking on me?”). Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting, like listening to music, reading, or exercising. It doesn’t really matter what you do, as long as it helps you to calm down.

You’ve got the skills. Use them!

Now that you know what the Four Horsemen are and how to counteract them with their proven antidotes, you’ve got the essential tools to manage conflict in a healthy way. As soon as you see criticism or contempt galloping in, remember their antidotes. Be vigilant. The more you can keep the Four Horsemen at bay, the more likely you are to have a stable and happy relationship.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN

AND HOW TO STOP THEM WITH THEIR ANTIDOTES

CRITICISM

Verbally attacking personality or character.



GENTLE START UP

Talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express a positive need.



CONTEMPT

Attacking sense of self with an intent to insult or abuse.



BUILD CULTURE OF APPRECIATION

Remind yourself of your partner's positive qualities and find gratitude for positive actions.



DEFENSIVENESS

Victimizing yourself to ward off a perceived attack and reverse the blame.



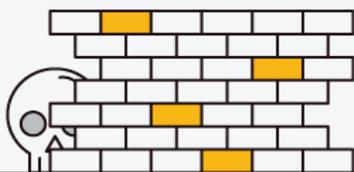
TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Accept your partner's perspective and offer an apology for any wrongdoing.



STONEWALLING

Withdrawing to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance, and separation.



PHYSIOLOGICAL SELF-SOOTHING

Take a break and spend that time doing something soothing and distracting.



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