AVOID THE

Four Horsemen

FOR BETTER RELATIONSHIPS

Learn How to Prevent

Criticism • Defensiveness • Contempt • Stonewalling

The Gottman Institute

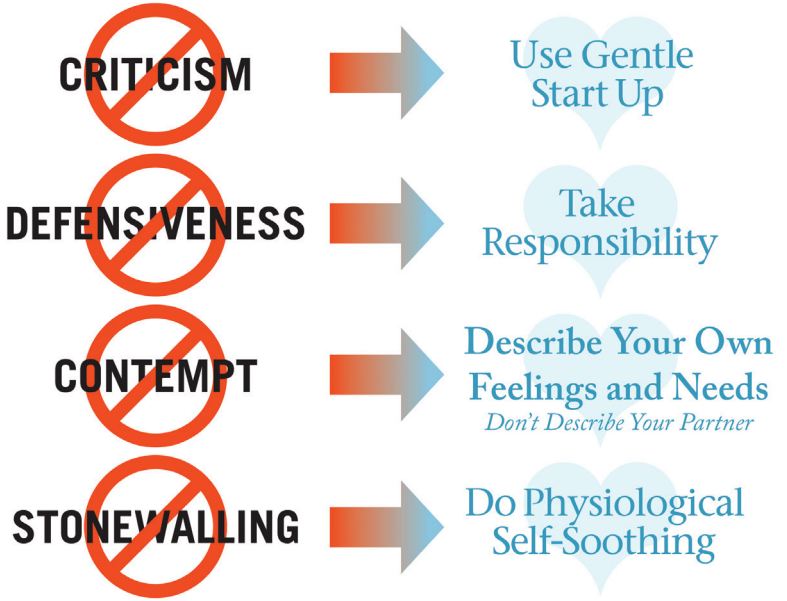
The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

How well a couple communicates not only predicts how a particular discussion will go, but also sets the tone for their entire relationship. When partners speak respectfully to each other they increase understanding, trust and positive connection. When couples speak to each other in negative ways, frustration, conflict and distance follow.

Dr. Gottman's research shows that not all negative interactions are equally corrosive. He found that certain types of negativity, if allowed to run rampant, are in fact so lethal that they lead to relationship dissolution. He named these negative ways of interacting the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

It is important to note that no one and no couple is perfect; even happy couples sometimes find the Four Horsemen clip-clopping into their relationship. The difference is that happy couples recognize the Four Horsemen and do their best to avoid them. The following pages describe each of the Four Horsemen and alternative positive ways of interacting, called "antidotes."

Stop the Four Horsemen with their Antidotes



CRITICISM

Horseman No. 1

Criticism involves bringing up an issue in a way that focuses on your partner's character or personality flaws rather than on what you would like them to do differently. Criticism implies there is something wrong with your partner, that he or she is defective. This may include blame, name-calling and a general character assassination.

Criticizing your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. Remember, a criticism is an attack.

Here is an example to help you distinguish between the two:

Criticism: *"You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe you are that forgetful, you're just selfish!"*

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."*

Antidote to Criticism:
Use a Gentle Start-up and Ask for Specific Behavior Change

The antidote to criticism is to use a gentle start up to ask your partner to change their behavior in some specific way.

Steps for a Gentle Start Up

1. **I Feel...**
   Begin statements with "I" instead of "You" to avoid blame. State how you feel.
   Example: "I feel upset . . . "

2. **About What...**
   Describe the situation and not your partner.
   Example: "I feel upset that dirty dishes are left out on the counter."

3. **I Need...**
   Let your partner know what you want (versus what you don't want.) If you could wave a magic wand and get what you need, what would things be like? Instead of hoping your partner will guess what you need, or read your mind, tell him or her specifically what you would like.
   Example: "I feel upset that dirty dishes are left out on the counter. I would appreciate it if you would please clean the kitchen each night before going to bed."

4. **Be Polite**
   Make requests politely, adding phrases such as "please" and "I would appreciate it if..."

5. **Give appreciations.**
   Notice what your partner is doing right and tell him or her. If your partner has done what you wanted in the past, state that you appreciated it and ask if he or she would be willing to do it again.

Examples of Criticism:

"You're such an idiot."

"What's wrong with you?"

"You never clean up after yourself."

"Why are you so lazy? I've told you a thousand times to clean up!"

"This house is a pigsty. You're such a slob."

Antidote: *"It felt so great to wake up to a clean kitchen last Friday and I would really appreciate it if you would please clean up the kitchen each night before going to bed."*

Your partner complains that you spend too much time on your phone.

Example of Criticism:

"You're always looking at your phone during dinner and never pay attention to me. You're so rude."

Antidote: *Gentle Start-up: "I feel hurt and excluded when you're looking at your phone during dinner. I would appreciate it if you would please put your phone away and spend time talking with me. I look forward to talking and connecting with you when we eat together."*

DEFENSIVENESS

Horseman No. 2

Defensiveness is an attempt to protect yourself, to defend your innocence, to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized. Research shows that defensiveness rarely has the desired effect of improving the situation. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't me, it's you." Defensiveness just escalates the conflict, which is why it's so destructive. There are two was to be defensive: to counter-attack or to whine (playing the innocent victim). Some people can do both at the same time.

Antidote to Defensiveness:
Take Responsibility

The antidote to defensiveness is to take some responsibility for even a small part of the problem. By doing this, you can quickly reduce tension and prevent conflict from escalating. This helps your partner feel heard and understood.

Examples of Defensiveness:

Your partner complains that you lose track of time and are often late.

Criticism: *"I am really tired of you losing track of time and being late. You're always late!"*

Defensive Counter-attack:

"You're just too uptight. I've got a lot on my mind. I'm never that late. Besides, you were the one who was late last night."

Defensive Innocent Victim:

"I wasn't late on purpose. You're always picking on me. No matter when I get there, it's never early enough. I can't do anything right to please you."

Antidote: *"You're right, I'm sorry for being late tonight. I'll try harder to be more aware of the time."*

CONTEMPT

Horseman No. 3

To be contemptuous is to put your partner down or to speak with scorn. It happens when you feel and act superior. It's putting oneself on a higher plane, looking down from a position of authority with an attitude of, *"I'm better/smarter/neater/cleaner/more punctual, etc. than you."*

Contempt stems from a negative habit of mind, in which you scan the environment looking for your partner's mistakes, rather than what you can appreciate about him or her. Sarcasm and cynicism are types of contempt, and so is name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. In whatever form, contempt is the most damaging of the Four Horsemen and is poisonous to a relationship. It is virtually impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message you're disgusted with him or her. Inevitably, contempt leads to more conflict. Couples who are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illnesses (colds, flu, and so on) than other people.

Contempt is the single best predictor of relationship dissolution.

Antidote to Contempt:

Describe Your Feelings and Needs: Build a Culture of Appreciation

Underneath contempt is a desire, need, or want. Relationships become contemptuous when these needs are not met over time. The antidote to contempt is to describe your own feelings and needs by using "I" statements. (For examples, see "Steps for a Gentle Start Up" in the Criticism section "I Feel....", "About What...", "I Need...") on page 4.

Building a culture of appreciation is the all-encompassing antidote to contempt. When you feel valued and appreciated you are able to access positive feelings for your partner and are less likely to act contemptuous when you have a difference of opinion.

Building a Culture of Appreciation Includes:

1. Expressing Appreciation: *"I appreciate your warm welcoming hugs when I come home from work each day."*
2. Expressing Thanks: *"Thank you for all you do for our kids. They are really lucky to have you as their parent."*
3. Expressing Fondness & Admiration: *"I am so proud to have you as my partner. Last night at the dinner party your enthusiasm was contagious."*

Example:

Your partner criticizes that spending is out of control.

Contempt: *"There you go again. Your reckless, irresponsible spending once again maxed out our credit card limit. You're out of control! All you think about is yourself. I've made so many sacrifices for this family. I saved money this month, why couldn't you? What have you done to contribute to this household?"*

Antidote: *"I feel frustrated about our finances and the amount we spend versus how much we save each month. I would like to have an agreement about a monthly budget and how much we can save each month."*

STONEWALLING

Horseman No. 4

Stonewalling occurs when you withdraw from the interaction while staying physically present. Essentially, this means not giving cues that you're listening or paying attention; for instance, by avoiding eye contact and crossing your arms.

The pattern goes like this: The more you feel criticized, the more you turn away. The more you turn away (give cues to the speaker that you are not paying attention), the more your partner attacks. You feel your heart rate climbing and you're afraid to say anything for fear of making things worse; however, by withdrawing and turning away from your partner you perpetuate a negative spiral in your relationship and the issue remains unresolved.

In addition, research shows that stonewalling elevates your heart rate and releases stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. When this happens, it is nearly impossible to listen, think creatively and solve the problem constructively.

Antidote to Stonewalling

Self-Soothing Break; Then Re-connect

The antidote to stonewalling is to take a self-soothing break for at least 20 minutes and then re-engage with your partner when you feel calmer and are able to constructively express your views.

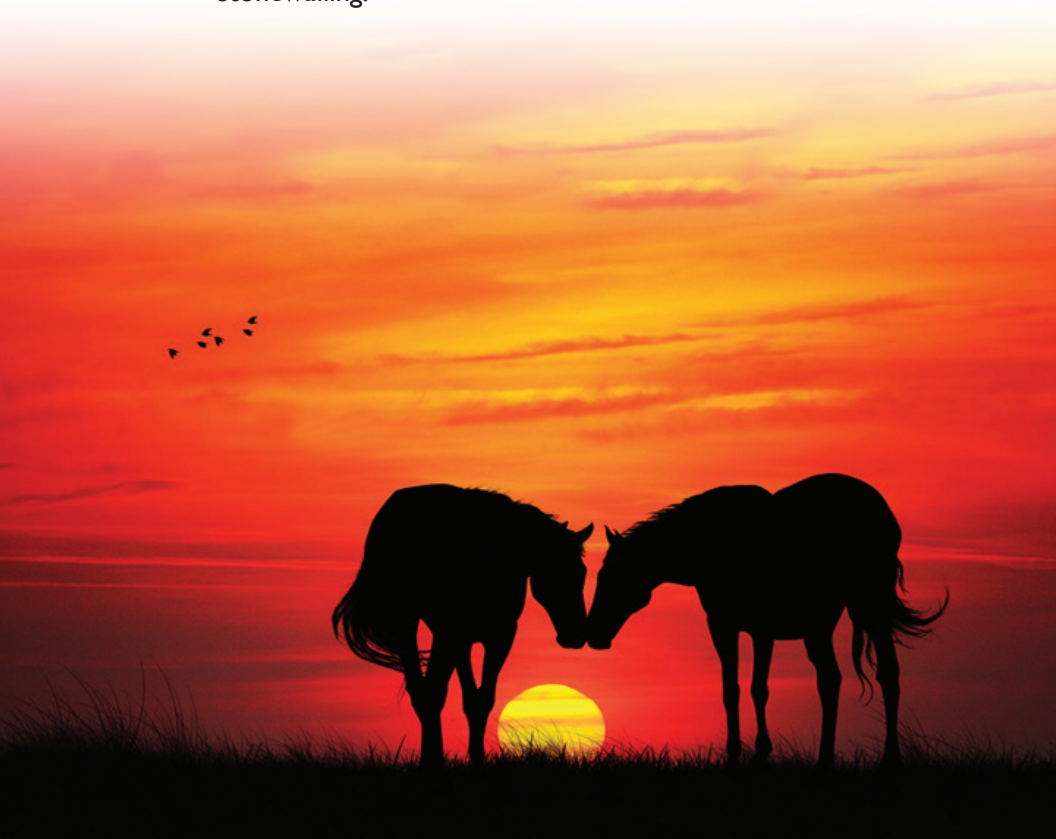
Example:

Stonewalling: *Imagine coming home from work and being met with a barrage of critical statements and demands such as, "You're late again" and, "You forgot to bring home groceries." You think to yourself, "This is never going to end. I don't need this. If I tell her what I think, she'll really explode. It's not worth it. If I say anything it will just make it worse. Just keep your mouth shut."*

Antidote: *Self-soothe. You recognize that you can't think clearly, are getting stressed, and you need to calm down. You tell your partner that you need a break and will be back in a half an hour to discuss the issue. After taking a break in which you avoid negative thoughts and do something stress-reducing, like taking a walk or playing your favorite music, return and listen to your partner's concerns. This time, your partner is careful to bring up the topic in a gentle way and you engage in a constructive discussion.*

Additional Resources:

1. Gottman Blog series on the Four Horsemen. http://www.gottman.com
2. Relaxation Guide. Provides clear instructions on how to relax when taking a self-soothing break as an antidote to Stonewalling.



Avoid the Four Horsemen

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How to be a Great Listener

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Brené Brown's Atlas of the Heart: Defensiveness and Flooding

Brené Brown
Brené Brown

From her latest book, Brené discusses these core Gottman Method concepts

DEFENSIVENESS

At its core, defensiveness is a way to protect our ego and a fragile self-esteem. Our research team member Ellen Alley explains that our self-esteem is considered fragile when our failures, mistakes, and imperfections decrease our self-worth. In our work, the opposite of a fragile self-esteem is *grounded confidence*. With grounded confidence, we accept our imperfections and they don't diminish our self-worth. It makes sense that defensive-ness occurs in areas of our lives where we have fragile self-esteem, or across several areas of our lives if the fragility is more general. Any perceived call-out of our weakness is experienced as an attack on our worth, so we fight hard to defend ourselves against it.

In order to try to limit our exposure to information that differs from how we think of ourselves, we get defensive and overjustify, make excuses, minimize, blame, discredit, discount, refute, and reinterpret. Defensiveness blocks us from hearing feedback and evaluating if we want to make meaningful changes in our thinking or behavior based on input from others.

In our Dare to Lead training, we work with participants to figure out what defensiveness looks like for them, what it feels like, and whether there are some situations that are more likely to trigger it than others. To increase self-awareness, we ask folks to think back to a time when they received difficult feedback and try to remember what their bodies were doing, what thoughts were coming up, and what emotions they were feeling. The vast majority of people struggle to remember the exact thoughts and feelings, which makes sense, given that many

of us go into fight-or-flight mode in these situations.

However, for the most part, people can remember their physical responses: Folding their arms over their chest, shoving their hands into their pockets, getting tunnel vision, feeling their heart race, looking down, and getting dry mouth are just a few. It's worth thinking about the physical cues that show up for you when experiencing defensiveness and devising a strategy that can help pull you back into the present moment.

When I get defensive, I often get tunnel vision and start planning what I'm going to say instead of listening. But I have found some ways to disarm my defensiveness. My strategy is to subtly open my palms, even if my hands are just hanging by my side or on my lap, and actually say, "I'm sorry. Can you say that again? I really want to understand." It's pretty effective. If I'm having a really hard time, I might say, "I'm sorry. I'm feeling overwhelmed. I'm going to get a glass of water. Can we sit down in ten minutes and start again?"

FLOODING

This seems like the perfect place to talk about the concept of flooding. The body can become overwhelmed when it senses danger, and for a lot of us, a difficult conversation, hard feedback, or an argument is enough to send our body into overdrive. We can feel overwhelmed, attacked, and confused. **According to the Gottman Institute, flooding is "a sensation of feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed during conflict, making it virtually impossible to have a productive, problem-solving discussion."**

In his book *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last*, John Gottman explains, "We each have a sort of built-in meter that measures how much negativity accumulates during such interactions. When the level gets too high for you, the needle starts going haywire and flooding begins. Just how readily people become flooded is individual." He also shares that flooding is affected by how much stress you have going on in your life. The more pressure we're under, the more likely we are to be easily flooded.

One of the worst patterns that I brought to my marriage from my family was "Get back in here and fight with me!" Growing up, we didn't take breaks during fights. No one ever said, "This is no longer productive and we should take a time-out before someone gets their feelings hurt." Our strategy was get louder and meaner until you win or someone else is crying. When I first married Steve, in the middle of a heated argument he would say, "Let's stop and take a break." I was like, "What are you talking about?"

At some point, I realized that stopping scared me. Fighting together seemed less painful than hurting alone. Looking back, I just didn't know how to do it. I had never been taught or seen it modeled. Gottman's work helped me understand the mechanics behind "Okay, can we circle back in twenty minutes?" or "Okay, how much time do you need?" Knowing that we're coming back to finish the discussion, and when, reassures me in some way.

This research also helped me realize that it wasn't just Steve who was getting overwhelmed. I get overwhelmed too. The difference is our strategies. He shuts down; I lash out. Disastrous.

Now when I feel flooded, I'm as likely to say "Time-out" as he is. This is a good thing because, according to Gottman, chronic flooding sets us up to dread communicating. Gottman discusses this effect in the context of marriages and partnerships, but I've seen the same thing in organizations. I've interviewed many research participants who experience chronic flooding with their bosses, so much so that every time they're called into the office, they're already on the path to overwhelm.

There's only so much our bodies and nervous systems can stand before they flip the survival switch and stop communicating and start protecting or attacking. Looking back, I've never once regretted calling a time-out at

home or work. Not once. I've never experienced a little time and space being a bad thing, but I have plenty of regrets the other way around.

The Gottman Assessment can help you understand the state of your relationship. For an in-depth analysis of your relationship health, check out the Gottman Assessment, a virtual relationship evaluation tool for couples.

Brené Brown

Dr. Brené Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston, where she holds the Huffington Foundation Endowed Chair at the Graduate College of Social Work. Brené is also a visiting professor in management at the University of Texas at Austin McCombs School of Business.

She has spent the past two decades studying courage, vulnerability, shame, and empathy. She is the author of six #1 *New York Times* best sellers and is the host of two award-winning Spotify podcasts, *Unlocking Us* and *Dare to Lead*.

Brené's books have been translated into more than 30 languages, and her titles include *Atlas of the Heart*, *Dare to Lead*, *Braving the Wilderness*, *Rising Strong*, *Daring Greatly*, and *The Gifts of Imperfection*. With Tarana Burke, she co-edited the best-selling anthology *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience*.

Her TED talk on the Power of Vulnerability is one of the top five most-viewed TED talks in the world, with over 50 million views. She is also the first researcher to have a filmed lecture on Netflix, and in March 2022, she launched a new show on HBO Max that focuses on her latest book, *Atlas of the Heart*.

Brené lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband, Steve. They have two children, Ellen and Charlie.

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