



# The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

## & THEIR ANTIDOTES

In his 50+ years of research, Dr. John Gottman identified specific negative communication patterns that reliably predict divorce. He named them The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Fortunately, each horseman has a proven positive behavior that will counteract negativity, which Dr. Gottman terms “antidotes.”

Use this download as a guide to understanding and addressing the Four Horsemen in your relationship. Read through each of the horsemen and consider whether you or your partner use these negative patterns in your conflict discussions. From there, you can begin to implement the antidotes and find healthier communication patterns.



THE FIRST HORSEMAN:

## Criticism

Verbally attacking personality or character.



ANTIDOTE TO CRITICISM:

## *Gentle Startup*

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

## 1 Criticism

You may have complaints about the person you love, but complaints are different from criticism.

Complaints usually contain a feeling about a specific situation and an accompanying request. Criticism expresses negative feelings or opinions about another person’s personality or character. Criticism often contains words like “you always” or “you never.”

### EXAMPLE:

#### Complaint:

“I’m upset that you didn’t help me clean up before our guests arrived. Could you help me next time?”

VS

#### Criticism:

“You never help me around the house. Why are you so lazy? What’s wrong with you?”

ANTIDOTE TO CRITICISM:

## *Gentle Startup*

A gentle start-up begins 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.

### EXAMPLE:

#### 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?”

*In this example, instead of criticizing with “you” statements and “always” generalizations, this person implements a Gentle Startup by using “I’m feeling”, and stating their need (in this case, “can we talk?”).*



THE SECOND HORSEMAN:

## Contempt

Attacking sense of self with intent to insult or assuming a position of moral superiority.



ANTIDOTE TO CONTEMPT:

## *Build a Culture of Appreciation*

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

## 2 Contempt

Contempt is the worst of the four horsemen. It is the most destructive negative behavior in relationships. In Dr. John Gottman's five decades of research, he found it to be the number one predictor of divorce.

Contempt goes far beyond the first horseman, criticism. While criticism attacks your partner's character, contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over them. It is a form of disrespect.

This horseman includes mocking, eye-rolling, sneering, name-calling, and hostile humor. In whatever form, contempt is poisonous to the relationship because it conveys disgust. It leads to more conflict rather than reconciliation.

Contempt, simply put, says, "I'm better than you. And you are lesser than me."

### EXAMPLE:

#### Contempt

"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?"

ANTIDOTE TO CONTEMPT:

## *Build a Culture of Appreciation*

One way to build a culture of appreciation is by practicing 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.

Another way is to show and verbalize regular appreciation and admiration for your partner. Look for ways of letting the other person know that they are important and valued, focus on what you cherish in each other and share those thoughts regularly, and show affection on a regular basis.

A third way to build a culture of appreciation is by having more positive interactions in your relationship than negative ones. Dr. John Gottman terms this the "magic ratio" or "the 5:1 ratio" and uses a banking metaphor to describe it. Essentially, 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. The bottom line: focus on creating more positive interactions with your partner.

ANTIDOTE TO CONTEMPT:

*Build a Culture of Appreciation (continued)*

**EXAMPLE:**

**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 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 THIRD HORSEMAN:

## Defensiveness

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



ANTIDOTE TO DEFENSIVENESS:

## *Take Responsibility*

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

### 3 Defensiveness

Defensiveness is self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in an attempt to ward off a perceived attack. It's typically a response to criticism. When a person feels unjustly accused, they look for excuses so that their partner will back off. Unfortunately, this strategy is almost never successful. Excuses just tell their partner that they don't take their concerns seriously and that they won't take responsibility for mistakes.

One common form of defensiveness is the "innocent victim" stance, where the defensive partner sends the message "why are you picking on me" or "nothing I do will please you."

Defensiveness also goes hand in hand with blame. The defensive partner may reverse blame in an attempt to make it the other partner's fault.

#### EXAMPLE:

##### Question:

"Did you call Betty and Ralph to let them know that we're not coming tonight as you promised this morning?"

##### 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?"

ANTIDOTE TO DEFENSIVENESS:

## *Take Responsibility*

By taking responsibility in your part of the conflict, you can prevent the conflict from escalating.

Having acknowledged that you have some role in the problem, you are accepting responsibility for a part of it. From here, you can work towards a compromise and have a real dialogue with your partner. You become a team working through the problem together.

#### EXAMPLE:

##### 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 FOURTH HORSEMAN:

## Stonewalling

Withdrawing from an interaction to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance, and separation.



ANTIDOTE TO STONEWALLING:

## *Physiological Self-Soothing*

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

### 4 Stonewalling

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.

This horseman usually arrives later in the course of the relationship than the other three and may show up as a response to the other horsemen in a partnership. When discussions begin with harsh start-ups and criticism and contempt are frequent in conflict conversations, one partner may turn to stonewalling to tune out their partner and avoid dealing with conflict.

#### EXAMPLE:

Shutting down during an argument, looking away, tuning out your partner, not listening, “the silent treatment”.

#### Stonewalling during conflict leads to...

- A decrease in the ability to process information (reduced hearing, reduced peripheral vision, problems with shifting attention away from a defensive posture).
- An increase in defensiveness.
- A reduction in the ability for creative problem-solving.
- A reduction in the ability to listen and empathize.

ANTIDOTE TO STONEWALLING:

## *Physiological Self-Soothing*

When one partner begins stonewalling during a conflict conversation, usually they are physiologically flooded. Once that person becomes flooded, it is impossible to continue discussing the issue at hand in a rational and respectful way.

Taking a break to engage in physiological self-soothing combats flooding during conflict.

#### EXAMPLE:

“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.*

*When you take a break, it should last at least twenty minutes. This is how long it takes for your body to physiologically calm 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.*

# Your Quick Four Horsemen Guide

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