

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**



Use Gentle  
Start Up

**DEFENSIVENESS**



Take  
Responsibility

**CONTEMPT**



Describe Your Own  
Feelings and Needs  
*Don't Describe Your Partner*

**STONEWALLING**



Do Physiological  
Self-Soothing

## 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."*



Use Gentle  
Start Up

## 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 ways 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.



Describe Your Own  
Feelings and Needs  
*Don't Describe Your Partner*

## 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

OTHER GOTTMAN  
RELATIONSHIP GUIDES:

Relaxation

Small Things Often

How to be a Great Listener

Aftermath of a Fight

Fondness & Admiration

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