

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Although many of us believe that anger is the root cause of unhappy relationships, **John Gottman** notes that it is not conflict itself that is the problem, but how we handle it. Venting anger constructively can actually do wonders to clear the air and get a relationship back in balance. However, conflict does become a problem when it is characterized by the presence of what Gottman calls the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse:” criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

1. Criticism. Criticism involves attacking your partner’s personality or character, rather than focusing on the specific behavior that bothers you. It is healthy to air disagreements, but not to attack your spouse’s personality or character in the process. This is the difference between saying, “I’m upset that you didn’t take out the trash” and saying, “I can’t believe you didn’t take out the trash. You’re just so irresponsible.” In general, women are more likely to pull this horseman into conflict. – **The antidote:** share your complaints. Answer the question: What do you want instead?

2. Contempt. Contempt is one step up from criticism and involves tearing down or being insulting toward your partner. Contempt is an open sign of disrespect. Examples of contempt include: putting down your spouse, rolling your eyes or sneering, or tearing down the other person with so-called “humor.” – **The Antidote:** Appreciation. While not liking the behavior, appreciate their positive intent (start with assuming the positive and let yourself be proven wrong.)

3. Defensiveness. Adopting a defensive stance in the middle of conflict may be a natural response, but does not help the relationship. When a person is defensive, he or she often experiences a great deal of tension and has difficulty tuning into what is being said. Denying responsibility, making excuses, or meeting one complaint with another are all examples of defensiveness. – **The Antidote:** Accept responsibility. This opens the conversation and avoids shutting it down.

4. Stonewalling. People who stonewall simply refuse to respond. Occasional stonewalling can be healthy, but as a typical way of interacting, stonewalling during conflict can be destructive to the marriage. When you stonewall on a regular basis, you are pulling yourself out of the marriage, rather than working out your problems. Men tend to engage in stonewalling much more often than women do. – **The Antidote:** Self Soothe. Usually happens when feeling overwhelmed and not knowing how to respond. At least begin using *Signs Your Partner is Listening*.

All couples will engage in these types of behaviors at some point in their marriage, but when the four horsemen take permanent residence, the relationship has a high likelihood of failing. In fact, Gottman’s research reveals that the chronic presence of these four factors in a relationship can be used to predict, with over **80% accuracy**, which couples will eventually divorce. When attempts to repair the damage done by these horsemen are met with repeated rejection, Gottman says there is over a 90% chance the relationship will end in divorce.

If your relationship is filled with these four issues, take notice, change yourself, work together, make improvements. Don't delay!

Score Yourself

Last Discussion/Fight:

Date: _____ Issue: _____

	Very Much		Much		A little		Very little		None	
	You	Spouse	You	Spouse	You	Spouse	You	Spouse	You	Spouse
Criticism										
Contempt										
Defensiveness										
Stonewalling										
Total										

Last Discussion/Fight:

Date: _____ Issue: _____

	Very Much		Much		A little		Very little		None	
	You	Spouse	You	Spouse	You	Spouse	You	Spouse	You	Spouse
Criticism										
Contempt										
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Criticism										
Contempt										
Defensiveness										
Stonewalling										
Total										

The Foundational **Big Three** of Any Marriage

Dr. Peter Robbins

#1: **No Labeling or Name Calling (Contempt):**

Commit right here and now NOT to call each other names. All couples fight and sometimes they're intense, loud, exhausting...but not memorable. What makes a fight memorable is name calling. Most couples can't remember what they fought about last week let alone the other day. BUT, a woman may never forget when her husband called her a "so and so" 21 years ago. Name calling cuts deep. It leaves scars. It fades sloooowly...if ever. Even hinting or suggesting "You're just like your mother." counts as name calling. Don't do it. Get loud. Get intense. Get into it...but no name calling. - *BE ANGRY, AND yet DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger* – Eph. 4:26

#2: **Assume the Best (Defensiveness):**

All of us experience conflict. People will offend you...irritate you. Did they do it on purpose? How can you really know? You can't. So what to do? Well if you're like most folks, you'll assume the worst. And, if you're like most folks you'll be wrong. Let's say that you're wrong 75% of the time (which is probably a conservative guess), well that's a lot of time cleaning up unnecessary messes. I'd rather assume the best, that you didn't mean to hurt me, and then have you prove me wrong. Assuming the same rate of error, I'd be 25% of the time wrong. A less mess to clean up.

When my wife "steps on my toes" I think to myself: *Wait a minute. This woman loves me. She married me. She pledged to spend the rest of her life with me. We even share the same toothbrush! (not really 😊) Why would she intentionally hurt me? There must be a mistake. I must be missing something. Before I get all upset, make all kinds of assumptions, I should check in with her to see what's up.* So I do. *Hey honey, did you know that you [hurt my feelings, embarrassed me, made me angry, ignored me, you fill in the blank].* Most likely she wasn't aware and certainly didn't do it on purpose. By approaching her in this manner it allows her to explain and remedy the situation without becoming defensive (because she wasn't attacked). Now, what if others treated you in this manner when you wronged them? I thought so.

Try this radical approach to being wronged. The Bible tells us that "In this world you will have trouble." Paul tells married couples they'll have even more trouble. When trouble comes...assume the best and see where that takes you.

#3: Give no life to Divorce (Stonewalling):

It's been said that whenever you think of something or talk about something you give life to it. I think that's very true. Proverb 23:7 states: *For as he thinks within himself, so he is.*

Often, during the heat of battle, couples will make threats. There's no more powerful threat than the threat to withdraw my love...to leave you...to forsake you. It's a great way to get even, to settle the score...to kill your marriage. For some couples they've made this threat so often and for so long that now, in order to save face, they have to go through with it...even when they really don't want to.

Let's build a home together that has no back door. When there's a fire in the kitchen you'll either have to put out the fire or burn. Nowadays, folks, even before the construction of their marriage takes place, have already drawn into the blueprints a back door...an escape hatch.

In a day when relationships are very tenuous and transitional, the threat of divorce can be devastating. It doesn't take much to give life to divorce. Leaving in the middle of an argument without letting your mate know why and where you're going gives life to divorce...*Where's he going? Will he come back? Is she making plans to leave me?* These are all questions that are left with the one being left behind.

A very understandable and legitimate thing to say is: *Listen. I'm tired of fighting and I don't like you right now. In fact, I don't want to be with you. I'm about to say things I don't want to. I'm committed to you and our marriage and I need a break from this. I'm going for a drive and I'll be back before supper. We'll pick this up later.* And actually, this is what most couples are really trying to say: I need a break. Well, then say that and say it responsibly.

Please commit to give no light or life to divorce... *For as he thinks within himself, so he is.*

Be sure to watch **THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE** by the Gottman's on Dr. Robbins' website: <http://www.turningpointcounseling.org/dr-robbins-resource-page.html> (scroll to the bottom of the page).

Where are you now?

Name: _____ Date: _____ On myself

	A lot	Some	A little	Very Little	None
No Name Calling					
Assume the Best					
No Life to Divorce					

Name: _____ Date: _____ On my spouse

	A lot	Some	A little	Very Little	None
No Name Calling					
Assume the Best					
No Life to Divorce					

Where are you now?

Name: _____ Date: _____ On myself

	A lot	Some	A little	Very Little	None
No Name Calling					
Assume the Best					
No Life to Divorce					

Name: _____ Date: _____ On my spouse

	A lot	Some	A little	Very Little	None
No Name Calling					
Assume the Best					
No Life to Divorce					

Please bring completed form to your next session. You may make a copy for your records.