

FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The four attitudes that most predict the dissolution of a relationship, especially in combination, are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling (in order of least to most dangerous). Dr. John Gottman, a psychologist at the University of Washington, studied more than 2,000 married couples over two decades. He discovered patterns about how partners relate to each other which can be used to predict – with 94% accuracy – which marriages will succeed and which will fail. Gottman says the each horseman paves the way for the next.

1. Criticism: Attacking your partner's personality or character, usually with the intent of making someone right and someone wrong.

- Generalizations: "You always..." "You never..." "You're the type of person who ..."
"Why are you so ...?"

2. Contempt: Attacking your partner's sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her.

- Insults and name-calling: "_____, _____, wimp, fat, stupid, ugly, slob, lazy..."
- Hostile humor, sarcasm, or mockery
- Body language & tone of voice: sneering, rolling your eyes, curling your upper lip

3. Defensiveness: Seeing self as the victim, warding off a perceived attack.

- Making excuses (e.g., external circumstances beyond your control forced you to act a certain way) "It's not my fault...", "I didn't..."
- Cross-complaining: meeting your partner's complaint, or criticism with a complaint of your own, ignoring what your partner said
- Disagreeing and then cross-complaining "That's not true, you're the one who ..." "I did this because you did ..."
- Yes-butting: start off agreeing but end up disagreeing
- Repeating yourself without paying attention to what the other person is saying
- Whining, "It's not fair."

4. Stonewalling: Withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. Partners may think they are trying to be "neutral" but stonewalling conveys disapproval, icy distance, separation, disconnection, and/or smugness.

- Stony silence, Silent treatment
- Monosyllabic mutterings
- Changing the subject
- Removing yourself physically

Remedies:

- Learn to make specific complaints & requests (when X happened, I felt Y, I want Z).
- Conscious communication: Speaking the unarguable truth & listening generously.
- Validate your partner (let your partner know what makes sense to you about what they are saying and that you understand what they are feeling. See it through their eyes).
- Shift to appreciation (5 times as much positive feeling and interaction as negative).
- Claim responsibility: "What can I learn from this?" and "What can I do about it?"
- Re-write your inner script (replace thoughts of righteous indignation or victimization with thoughts of appreciation and responsibility that are soothing and validating).
- Practice getting undefended (allowing your partner's utterances to be what they are: just thoughts) and let go of the stories that you are making up.

Roddy Young, LCSW, Imago Relationship Therapist

Roddy@RoddyYoung.com

713-598-0110