

The following information is adapted from the research of John Gottman, Ph.D. His research indicates that many couples have distress-maintaining habits rather than self-soothing habits. He identifies two kinds of marriages that are heading for destruction:

1. The hostile/engaged marriage: couples who argue often
2. The hostile/detached marriage: couples who are emotionally uninvolved

The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse

The Four Horseman are disastrous ways of interacting that sabotage attempts to communicate with a partner. The Four Horseman block a couple's ability to use healthier "repair mechanisms."

Criticism

- Invites defensiveness
- Involves attacking someone's personality or character rather than a specific behavior
- Usually with blame (betrayal) Example: "*You always do things like that*"
- Complaining (expressing anger/disagreement) is healthy compared to long-term suppression
- Involves a negative comment about something you wish were true

Antidote: Begin with "I"

Example: "*I wanted the laundry done so I could get to the mall*" vs. "*You should have finished by now. You know I want to get to the mall.*"

Contempt

- The intent to insult and psychologically abuse your partner
- Tend to forget your partner's positive qualities
- Immediate decay of admiration

Signs:

- insults and name calling
- hostile humor
- mockery (words or actions are made fun of "Oh, sure you care about me")
- body language

Antidote: Neutralize your contempt by not seeing arguments with your spouse as a way to retaliate or exhibit your superior moral stance.

Defensiveness

- Feel victimized by the other
- Neither willing to take responsibility for setting things right
- Obstructs communication
- Stuck because you don't understand each other's perspective
- Goal is to "protect yourself"
- React this way to criticism or neutral complaints

Signs:

- denying responsibility
- making excuses
- disagreeing with negative mind reading (second guessing)
- cross-complaining ("So's your old man")
- rubber man/rubber woman
- "yes – butting"
- repeating yourself
- whining
- body language

Antidote: Don't see your partner's words as an attack but as information strongly expressed. If open and receptive when defensiveness is expected, partner is less likely to criticize.

Stonewalling

- Trying to be "neutral"
- Really conveys disapproval, icy distance, and smugness
- Can include self-medicating with alcohol/drugs, workaholism, physical ailments.

Antidote: Use repair mechanisms: Focus on the process; not the content

- "Please let me finish"
- "We're getting off the topic"
- "That hurt my feelings"

Resources

Gottman, John (2006). Ten Lessons to Transform Your Marriage: America's Love Lab Experts Share Their Strategies for Strengthening Your Relationship, (Crown).

Gottman, John (2002) The Relationship Cure: A 5 Step Guide to Strengthening Your Marriage, Family, and Friendships, (Three Rivers Press).

Gottman, John (1999) The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert, (Three River Press).

Gottman, John (1995). Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last, (Simon & Schuster).