

## THE FOUR HORSEMEN

The four attitudes that most predict the dissolution of a relationship, especially in combination, are criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling. 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 that each horseman paves the way for the next. Gottman's Four Horseman can be helpful in ALL relationships.....not just marriage.

People in unhappy relationships are usually doing some form of relationship dance involving some combination of pursue-withdraw. In other words, the more one person tries to get close the more the other person withdraws; and the more the other person withdraws, the more the first person tries to get close. Criticism and defensiveness are common aspects of the pursue part of the dance and contempt and stonewalling are common aspects of the withdraw part of the dance. What we are really saying when we are pursuing through criticism and defensiveness is "Notice me. Be with me. Pay attention to me. I need you." What we are really saying when we are withdrawing even when done with contempt and stonewalling is "I don't want you to hurt me. Leave me alone. I am trying to stay in control." Either way, these behaviours are serious indicators that the relationship is in trouble.

### Blame/Criticism

**Criticism is attacking the person instead of the behavior.** You could always have complaints about another person, but there's a big difference between a complaint and a criticism. A complaint addresses a specific failed or undesirable action. A criticism adds some negative words that attack the other person's character or personality. For example, adding to any complaint: "What is wrong with you?" or "You always..." or "There you go again..." will turn it into criticism.

### Defensiveness

**Defensiveness is refusing to own your own behavior.** Although it's understandable that you would feel defensive when criticized, defensiveness is really another way of blaming. It's in effect saying: "it's not me, it's you", and it may escalate the conflict. It is common for the defensive person to feel like he/she is above the conflict, when, in fact, defensiveness is contributing to or escalating it.

### Stonewalling

**Stonewalling includes cutting off communication, silent treatment, refusing to engage, and withdrawal.** In mild cases simply being reluctant to express directly what you are thinking. After one or more of the previous horsemen have been running wild in a conflict, a person may often want to tune out and stonewall. Stonewalling, however, can lead to even more blame, defensiveness, or contempt from others.

### Contempt

**Contempt includes sarcasm, belittling, cynicism, name-calling, hostile humor, and belligerence.** Contempt is the most poisonous of all the horsemen because it conveys disgust and condescension. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about a person. In organizations, it is often conducted in secrecy...a practice some call "pot-stirring" or "water

cooler talk". A person is more likely to have such thoughts if differences are not regularly and openly resolved soon after they occur.

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, by John Gottman