

AVOIDING THE “FOUR HORSEMEN” IN RELATIONSHIPS

Difficulty: **INTENSIVE** | Frequency: **VARIABLE** | Duration: **VARIABLE**

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT



All couples experience conflict, but researchers have found that how partners deal with this conflict has major implications for the longevity of their relationship. In particular, leading couples researcher John Gottman and his colleagues have identified four specific behaviors, which they call the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” that spell doom for couples.

To help you guard against these “four horsemen,” this exercise teaches you to recognize them and consider more constructive alternatives. Understanding the signs of these toxic behaviors is a vital step toward avoiding them and having a healthier response to conflict.

TIME REQUIRED

20 minutes to read about the “four horsemen.” Then the amount of time to deploy a constructive strategy will depend on the nature of the conflict; the frequency will depend on how often you experience conflict in your relationship. One goal could be to try to use one of these positive strategies—or at least assess the quality of your conflict—once per month.

HOW TO DO IT

1. Read the descriptions of the “four horsemen” below and consider whether you and/or your partner ever engage in any of these behaviors during conflicts.
2. Read the descriptions of the constructive alternatives that can be used in place of the “four horsemen” and consider how you might put these behaviors into practice, if you have not already.
3. The next time you find yourself in a conflict with your partner, make an active effort to avoid the “four horsemen” and engage in more constructive behaviors instead. Don’t be too hard on yourself if you slip up—it can be challenging to stay focused during the heat of an argument, and these habits can take time to change.
4. After the conflict, make a note of how things went. Did you or your partner engage in any of the “four horsemen” behaviors, and if so, did you catch yourself and try to take a different approach during the conflict? What went well, and what could you improve for next time?
5. If/when you feel comfortable, you could invite your partner to participate with you in this practice.

The Four Horsemen

1. Criticism. Some forms of criticism are constructive, but in this case criticism refers to making negative judgments

or proclamations about your partner in extreme, absolute terms. A sign that you may be engaging in this more harmful form of criticism is if you catch yourself using terms like “never” and “always”—for example, “You never think about anyone but yourself!” or, “You are always so stubborn!”

Note that criticism itself is not necessarily a recipe for relationship failure—the problem with criticism is that excessive or extreme criticism can, over time, lead to the more destructive “horsemen.”

Constructive alternative: There’s nothing wrong with voicing concerns and complaints in a relationship, but try to do so in a way that focuses on your own feelings (and how your partner’s behavior affects you)—for instance, by making “I” statements, like “I feel lonely when you come home late for dinner”—and mentions specific negative behaviors rather than making global attacks on their entire personality (“I feel neglected when you make plans without me” rather than “You are so inconsiderate!”). See the [Active Listening practice](#) for more suggestions along these lines.

2. Contempt. Contempt is a more destructive form of criticism that involves treating your partner with disrespect, disgust, condescension, or ridicule. It may involve mean-spirited sarcasm, mockery, eye-rolling, sneering, or name-calling. Contempt can grow over time when a person focuses on the qualities they dislike in their partner and builds up these qualities in their mind.

Constructive alternative: Instead of keeping score of all of your partner’s flaws, consider their positive qualities and the things you appreciate most about them. In fact, it may help to write a list of these qualities and return to it when you need a reminder.

3. Defensiveness. Defensiveness tends to arise when people feel criticized or attacked; it involves making excuses to avoid taking responsibility, or even deflecting blame onto your partner. If you hear yourself saying “I didn’t do anything wrong,” or blaming your partner for something else after they have leveled a complaint against you, ask yourself whether this is really the case. Even if your partner made some mistakes, that doesn’t free you from responsibility for things you could have done differently as well. The problem with defensiveness is that it communicates to your partner that you aren’t really listening to her or taking his concerns seriously. And by introducing new grievances, it can also exacerbate the conflict by making your partner feel attacked and defensive.

Constructive alternative: Take the time to hear your partner out and take responsibility when appropriate. A simple, genuine apology can go a long way.

4. Stonewalling. Stonewalling involves putting up a (metaphorical) wall between you and your partner by withdrawing, shutting down, and physically and emotionally distancing yourself from your partner. An example of stonewalling is to give your partner the “silent treatment” or to abruptly leave without telling your partner where you’re going. Stonewalling can sometimes result when the first three “horsemen” accumulate and become overwhelming. Stonewalling is especially destructive to relationships because it can make one’s partner feel abandoned and rejected.

Constructive alternative: If you need time out to take a few deep breaths and collect your thoughts, let your partner know, and then return to the conversation when you’re ready. This way, your partner will understand that you are taking care of yourself, not trying to reject him.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Carrere, S., Buehlman, K.T., Coan, J.A., Gottman, J.M., Coan, J.A., and Ruckstuhl, L., (2000). [Predicting Marital Stability and Divorce in Newlywed Couples](#), *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14(1), 42-58.

A study of 95 newlywed heterosexual couples (mostly white) found that how they handled conflict in a single, brief interaction, recorded in a laboratory, predicted the stability of their relationship four to six years later with 87.5% accuracy, and seven to nine years later with 81% accuracy. Couples who displayed the Four Horsemen behaviors were significantly more likely to have broken up.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

Additional research has engaged people from other groups and cultures:

- [Cohabiting gay and lesbian couples](#) in the San Francisco Bay Area who showed greater contempt and defensiveness in discussions together were less satisfied with their relationships.
- [White Americans, African Americans, and Latino Americans](#) who reported greater use of Four Horsemen behaviors had a higher risk of divorce, lower relationship quality, and lower relationship satisfaction.
- [Couples in Hong Kong](#) who reported more engagement in the Four Horsemen tended to be more dissatisfied in their relationships.
- [Chinese married couples](#) who frequently displayed defensiveness, stonewalling, and verbal aggression reported [lower marital quality](#), less positive emotion, and more negative emotion than collaborative couples who displayed less destructive communication.
- [Brazilian heterosexual couples](#) who said they generally avoided the Four Horsemen reported high-quality relationships, while couples who frequently engaged in the Four Horsemen reported low-quality relationships.
- Among [Black and Latino adolescents in urban high schools](#)—many of whom were pregnant, parenting, or in foster care—those who reported greater engagement in Four Horsemen behaviors showed higher rates of dating violence.

[Gottman Method couples therapy](#), a program developed by John Gottman that aims to improve relationship quality, teaches people how to avoid the Four Horsemen. It has shown benefits for various groups:

- [Gay and lesbian couples in San Francisco with relationship problems](#) became more satisfied with their relationships after attending 11 sessions of Gottman Method couples therapy.
- Iranian couples who participated in eight or ten sessions of Gottman Method couples therapy [decreased in emotional divorce](#) (“checking out” from a relationship), [improved in marital quality](#), and [reported more intimacy](#).

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Most couples experience conflict in their relationship from time to time, and although occasional conflict is not necessarily harmful to a relationship (some research suggests it can even be helpful), conflict can sometimes elicit destructive behaviors that undermine relationship satisfaction. Identifying destructive behaviors is an important first step toward reducing them and replacing them with more constructive behaviors, which can in turn improve communication and increase satisfaction. This process takes time and practice, and in some cases couples may benefit from seeking the support of a relationship counselor

SOURCES

John Gottman, Ph.D., [The Gottman Institute](#)

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail... and How You Can Make Yours Last, by John Gottman, Ph.D.

This practice is part of [Greater Good in Action](#), a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the [Greater Good Science Center](#) at UC Berkeley and [HopeLab](#).

