



### “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”

This is John Gottman’s somewhat humorous term for some not so funny things that happen to our relationship when it starts moving in to a more distressed state. All couples engage in these practices from time to time. But, when the Four Horsemen are present most of the time, unless there is a real focus on correcting them, this leads to the demise of a couple.

**Horseman # 1: Criticism** - We all have complaints with things that our partner may have done or not done. But, when we turn this complaint into something personal it is a ‘criticism’. Example; “I’m really frustrated that you’ve left the garden tools out in the rain again. It’s wrecking them and we’ve talked about it before.” Versus “I’m really frustrated that you’ve left the garden tools out in the rain again. What’s wrong with you? You are sooo thoughtless and ignorant.”

You’ll notice that the first is a comment about the behavior whereas the second goes to the person’s character or personality.

**Horseman # 2: Defensiveness** – When we feel as if our character or personality has been attacked then it’s easy to get defensive. It’s as if we’re saying, “I’m not guilty. It’s you! I take no responsibility for it. It’s your fault.” Defensiveness moves us into past tense talking. Investigating the various contributions gives us a future focus. In virtually every situation there are contributing factors that lead to certain actions or behaviors. When we think about contributing factors versus blaming it leads us in to more productive conversations.

**Horseman # 3: Contempt** – Sometimes as our adrenaline gets going criticism and counter criticism leads to name calling (“idiot, lazy, thoughtless, a-hole, etc.”) Sometimes a sneering, sarcastic, exasperated tone takes over and we do a lot of damage to the other person’s self esteem. In Gottman’s research he discovered that of the four horsemen, contempt had the greatest capacity to destroy things between us and our partner. He described it as “sulphuric acid for relationships”.

**Horseman # 4: Stonewalling** – As conflict escalates Gottman observed through physiological measurements that the blood pressure, heart rate, and adrenaline system became highly activated. He calls this “flooding”. What was noted on some of these occasions was that the couple would be having a conversation and one partner (more often men than women) was literally shutting down their responses. Their eye contact, facial expressions and physical reactions became still. It was as if the engaged partner was talking to a ‘stone wall’. But, behind the scenes readings of heart rate, adrenaline flow, etc. were going crazy! Internally there was incredible anxiety going on but from an outsider’s perspective, he wasn’t responding at all to his partner’s needs. This leads her to escalating her demands until such time as the couple are so frustrated that the argument ends. They both become more pessimistic about future problem solving interactions and anxious about when another conflict breaks out.

---

#### Some Tips to Avoid the Horsemen

- Use a soft start up to begin a difficult conversation
- Use “I” instead of “you” to start your sentences. Identify your own feelings and experiences and work toward helping the other person get their “I” on the table by asking open ended questions without evaluation.
- Remember that there are always two or more perspectives in every situation.
- Worry less about blame and more about the contributing factors that got us into this situation
- Take breaks/‘time outs’ if you can feel your anxiety level go – “flooding”
- Respect one another’s ‘time out’ requests and come back to the conversation when you’re calmer
- Sometimes the issue doesn’t have to be resolved all at once. Make room for tentative solutions until such time as you can come to an even better one.
- Remember that not all arguments are about the thing we are talking about and that’s why they aren’t getting it resolved. Search for meaning behind the topic.

One of John Gottman’s most useful resources is his book: [The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work](#). The book describes many of these concepts in more detail.

**Ruth Barwell M.A., R.S.W.**

[www.counsellingowensound.com](http://www.counsellingowensound.com)