



Communication Handout

Let's go over a few of John Gottman's key concepts.

1. The 4 Horsemen
2. The 7 Predictors of Divorce
3. The 6 Predictors of Relationship Success

GOTTMAN'S FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Criticism

It's okay (and can be healthy) to complain about what's wrong in your relationship. The problem arises when complaining turns into criticizing. A complaint focuses on the event or behavior you want to change, whereas criticism attacks your partner's personality. When you find yourself generalizing that your partner "always" or "never" does something, you are falling prey to criticism. For example, you may want to let your husband know that you find it annoying that we don't travel very often. You could let him know just this – that you wish you traveled more. Or you could blame him for this problem and criticize him by saying something like "We *never* travel because you are *always so selfish* and don't care about my interests."

What to do instead: Try to state your complaint without blame. Let your partner know that you are unhappy about something, but don't make it your partner's fault. Avoid "always" and "never."

Defensiveness

This one is particularly hard. When someone suggests I've done something wrong, my instinct is to react quickly with an "It's not my fault" followed by some excuse. Sometimes we go so far as to do this preventively – defending ourselves before we've even been accused. Defensiveness also occurs when you respond to your partner's complaints with complaints of your own, such as when your partner lets you know they find it annoying that you leave empty shampoo bottles in the shower and you respond by pointing out that you find it annoying when they don't make the bed.

What to do instead: The problem with defensiveness is that it doesn't allow you to see your role in the problem and its frustrating for the other person who feels like they aren't being heard. Take responsibility. If your partner lets you



know that something you do bothers them, consider if they might be right and look for your part in the problem.

Contempt

Everybody has their angry moments, but when you begin to feel contempt for your partner, that's a clear sign that something needs to change. Contempt is the best predictor of divorce. Contempt is that feeling that you are better than your partner, and comes out when you make derisive comments to your partner with the intention of being insulting. If you are calling your partner names, mocking your partner and being sarcastic or rolling your eyes at him or her, you are likely feeling contempt. Sometimes you might tease your partner in the spirit of playfulness, which is beneficial. But if you find yourself teasing your partner in a mean-spirited way, such as making fun of something you know they are sensitive about, that is a sign of contempt. Calling your partner an idiot (and meaning it) is a surefire sign your relationship is in the dumps.

What to do instead: Instead of focusing on all the things that you hate about your partner, build a culture of appreciation where you focus on what your partner adds to your relationship. If you are feeling contemptuous, perhaps you need to take a moment to imagine what your life would be like if you'd never met your partner.

Stonewalling

Stonewalling is not so much about what you do, but what you don't do. Imagine how a stone wall would react to you when you told it how you were feeling. When you sit there in stony silence or utter single word answers, you are disengaging from the interaction. This happens in response to feeling overwhelmed by your partner's strong negativity. Gottman has found that men are more likely than women to engage in stonewalling.

What to do instead: Instead of disengaging as a response to being overwhelmed, try letting your partner know that you need to take some time to calm down and plan to return to the conversation when you feel more relaxed.

Although we have described the four horsemen separately, they often go together – criticism from one partner may lead to the other partner's defensiveness which may promote feelings of contempt, and eventually stonewalling. Couples who can joke, laugh and share moments (a touch, a quick smile) during a fight are better at combating this negative cycle and are happier with their relationships.



Dr. John Gottman: Seven Predictors of Divorce

1. **Harsh Start of Arguments**

The partner who starts the argument is aggressive or hostile, is insulting, attacks his partner's character, uses sarcasm, shows contempt or disgust—all of which lead to escalation or withdrawal.

2. **Criticism**

Attacking character or traits, instead of addressing the problem specifically.

3. **Contempt**

Disgust, disrespect, condescension, sarcasm, eye-rolling.

4. **Defensiveness**

Trying to prove *I'm* not the problem—*you're* the problem; justifying your behavior.

5. **Flooding**

Gottman uses this term to describe the dramatic physiological changes (adrenaline pumping, increases in heart rate, blood pressure, respiration) that precede stonewalling by a partner. Flooding and stonewalling start to occur later in marriage, after years of Harsh Starts, Criticism, Contempt, and Defensiveness.

6. **Stonewalling**

Withdrawing, silence, no eye contact, no response, blank facial expression, leaving, being physically or emotionally unreachable. Stonewalling's immediate cause is Flooding. Stonewalling appears to be an attempt to reduce Flooding's heavy bodily stress. For prehistoric, hunter-gatherer reasons, Gottman speculates, men are more susceptible to Flooding than women, so men are much more likely to Stonewall. And, as women are 80% more likely to bring up sticky marital issues than men, an important implication of this finding is that women, particularly, need to avoid Harsh Starts in order not to set up the dynamics that lead to Flooding and Stonewalling.

7. **Failed Repair Attempts**

These are situations where attempts by one partner to repair damage and keep negativity from escalating out of control are ignored or otherwise meet with failure. Partner B doesn't respond positively to Partner A's attempts at apology, humor, or any other means of easing tensions.

Gottman finds that these seven factors both individually and cumulatively predict divorce. The pattern tends to begin with Harsh Starts, and this sets off a cascade of responses that leads over time to the various other Divorce Predictors.



Dr. John Gottman: Six Predictors of Marital Success and Happiness

1. **High Levels of Friendship, Respect, Affection, and Humor**

This is defined as liking each other, being each other's best friend, doing things together; showing interest in and respect for the other's thoughts and feelings, avoiding put-downs, supporting each other's goals and aspirations, feeling affection for each other, having fun and laughter together, being Number One in each other's eyes.

2. **A Ratio of 5:1 or Better of Positive to Negative Interactions**

This means that your relationship averages at least five pleasant, friendly, or loving experiences or periods of time for every hostile word, angry argument, or time spent feeling hurt or resentful. And 5:1 is the minimum!

3. **Successful "Bids for Attention"**

e.g., The wife says, "Hey, listen to this!" She is trying to get her husband's attention for a conversation. If the husband keeps on reading the paper, ignoring her, he's turning away her bid for attention. If he says "Huh?" and lifts his eyes off the Sports Page for a second or two, he's turning toward her—a good sign. And if he actually listens to whatever she wanted to say, that's a real connection!

In successful marriages, partners turn toward each other 86% of the time (vs. divorcing couples who on average turn toward each other 33% of the time, or less).

4. **Soft Starts of Disagreements**

In successful marriages, disagreements are started softly, without critical, contemptuous remarks about the other person (cf. Gottman's first Divorce Predictor).

5. **Husband Accepts Influence from Wife**

In successful marriages, husbands accept influence from their wives. (e.g., If a wife says she's afraid her husband is driving too fast for the rainy road conditions, and he says, "No way I'm slowing down, I know what I'm doing!"—this is a shaky marriage.)

There must be give and take in a relationship—giving and accepting influence, and research shows that women are well accustomed to accepting influence from men. So it's crucial that men learn to do the same!

6. **Partners are Aware of and Respect the Other's Needs, Likes, Dislikes, and Their Inner Life**

They ask questions to find out; they listen; they care!