



Dr. John 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, I may want to let my husband know that I find it annoying that we don't travel very often. I could let him know just this – that I wish we traveled more. Or I 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 for me. 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 I go so far as to do this preventatively – defending myself before I'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. I finally learned this lesson one summer in



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college when my sister and I were working together painting my parents' house. Every time I'd make a mistake and she'd notice, I'd get defensive, she'd get frustrated and it just went downhill from there. Halfway through the summer I decided to try a different tactic – the next time she saw a mistake I'd made, I 'fessed right up, apologized and asked what I could do to fix it. My sister told me it wasn't that big of a deal and not to worry about it, just be aware for the future. I was amazed by how differently things turned out when I resisted the urge to be defensive and instead owned up to my mistakes. Of course, I'm sure my husband and family can attest that as enlightening as that summer was, I'm not completely cured of this habit.

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



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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 I 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