

SEVEN STEPS

TO INFIDELITY RECOVERY SUCCESS

HORSEMAN FOUR: STONEWALLING

Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shutting down and closing themselves off from the speaker because they are feeling overwhelmed or physiologically flooded. Rather than confronting the issue, someone who is stonewalling will be totally unresponsive, making evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive behaviors.

It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable "out," but when it does, it frequently becomes a habit.

Trying to communicate with someone who is acting in this way can be frustrating, and if the stonewalling continues, completely infuriating.

When you are making every effort to address a problem, whether you are attempting to talk about something that is upsetting you, explain your feelings about an ongoing area of conflict, or try to reach a resolution - *and your partner is pretending that you aren't there* - you are likely to reach a level of upset or anger so high that you psychologically and emotionally "check out" as well.

The first part of the antidote to experiencing this extreme unpleasantness is to *STOP*.

The second step is to *practice physiological self soothing*.

If you learn to do these things when your conversations become fights and tempers flare, you can keep your relationship from experiencing repeated



and deeply destructive stress and save yourself and your partner from going nuts.

Sound promising? Read on.

When to stop:

When things escalate to a level where you sense yourself reaching your boiling point (that feeling of a kettle whistling inside of you, and steam ready to come out of your ears), it's time to take yourself off the flame! The same goes for your partner.

Let each other know when you're feeling overwhelmed, and say that you need to take a break. This break should last at least twenty minutes, since it will take that much time for your bodies to physiologically calm down.

How to self-soothe:

It is crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation ("*I don't have to take this anymore!*") and innocent victimhood ("*Why is he always picking on me?*"). Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting, like listening to music, reading a book, or taking a walk around the block.

The Four Horsemen typically come as a sequence of interactions that start with criticism and spill over into defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.

The really important thing to keep in mind is that even in happy, stable, and successful marriages and relationships, the four horsemen all occur. No couple is perfect! The difference is that in those marriages they don't occur as frequently, and when they do, those couples are more effective at repairing them.

HERE ARE THE FACTS:

As we have written previously, masters of relationships maintain a 5:1 ratio of positivity to negativity during conflict discussions. Positive interactions include displays of interest, affection, humor, empathy, and affirming body language (like eye contact and head nodding).

While it may be intuitive that negative exchanges outweighing the positive is a sign of relationship trouble, the 5:1 ratio also suggests that negativity is



healthy as long as the ratio is maintained and the four horsemen are not present.

Cycles of non-constructive arguing and a lack of positive affect are major predictors of stonewalling, particularly predicative of stonewalling being used as an attempt to self-soothe or de-escalate, but backfiring and resulting in relationship deterioration. When these cycles grow more and more intense, and physiological arousal begins to skyrocket, the following dynamics emerge:

- For both partners, there is: (a) a decrease in the ability to process information (reduced hearing, reduced peripheral vision, problems with shifting attention away from a defensive posture); (b) an increase in defensiveness; (c) a reduction in the ability for creative problem solving; and (d) a reduction in the ability to listen and empathize.
- Men are consistently more likely to stonewall than women. They will withdraw emotionally from conflict discussions while women remain emotionally engaged. 85% of stonewallers were men.
- When women do stonewall, it is quite predictive of divorce.
- Men are more likely to rehearse distress-maintaining thoughts than women, which may prolong their physiological arousal and hyper-vigilance, often causing their partners to flare up in response, until both are brought to a point of emotional detachment and avoidance.
- Male stonewalling is very upsetting for women, increasing their physiological arousal (things like increased heart rates, etc.) and intensifying their pursuit of the issue.

To summarize: stonewalling is bad! Here is a good rule: When the two of you are in conflict, and someone checks out, check in with them and take a break. In other words, when stonewalling starts, STOP. Attempts to continue will not make productive headway for either of you, but rather will intensify your shared conflict and emotional distress.

You've probably realized this by now. We've all had experiences trying (so



hard!) to speak and not being heard. What's important to take away from this posting is an awareness that stonewalling is both natural and deadly. It is a normal defense mechanism, and it goes something like this:

If I can just shut it out, if I can pretend not to see it or hear it, the problem won't be there anymore. If I can just get through this, it will poof and disappear.

If you tend to avoid conflict by thinking along these lines, something else may poof and disappear: your relationship. But don't panic! There's no cause for alarm, because there will be no poofing or disappearing if you know just one thing: a healthy way to cope with the urge to stonewall and emotionally withdraw. That way is **Physiological Self-Soothing**.

THE STRATEGY TO OVERCOME STONEWALLING

The first step of overcoming stonewalling is to stop the discussion. If you keep going, you'll find yourself exploding at your partner or imploding, neither of which will get you anywhere other than one step farther down the relationship cascades that lead to separation.

The only reasonable strategy, therefore, is to let your partner know that you're feeling flooded and need to take a break. It's crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation and innocent victimhood. Many people find that the best approach to self-soothing is to focus on calming the body through a meditative technique. Here's a simple one:

The Practice of Physiological Self-Soothing:

1. Think of a neutral signal that you and your partner can use in a conversation to let each other know when one of you feels flooded with emotion. This can be a word or a physical motion, e.g. "Collywobbles!" or "Hocus-pocus," or simply raising both hands into a stop position. Come up with your own! If you choose a ridiculous signal, you may find that the very use of it helps begin to diffuse tension.
2. When you have moved apart to take your break, attempt the following: imagine a place that makes you feel calm and safe. A sacred space where nothing can touch you. It may be a place you remember from childhood - a



cozy corner you read in, your old bedroom, or a friend's house. It may be a beautiful forest you explored on a trip. It may be a dreamscape. As you imagine yourself in this sanctuary, lose yourself in the peace of mind that it brings you. Meditating on a haven in your imagination can be a perfect, relaxing break from a difficult conversation.

3. Practice focusing on your breath: it should be deep, regular, and even. Usually when you get flooded, you either hold your breath a lot or breathe shallowly. So, inhale and exhale naturally. As in Eastern practices - from yoga to contemplative meditation - you may find yourself calmer and more centered if you stop for a moment, and allow the noise around you to temporarily fade away.

4. Tense and relax parts of your body that feel tight or uncomfortable. Feel the warmth and heaviness flow out of your limbs. Take your time. This technique is similar to a focus on breathing, but you may find one or the other preferable. Work with either of these techniques to feel your stress flow away.

Think of these as starting points for the creation of an island of peace within yourself. You can return to this place again and again, whenever you like.

Your (and your partner's) mental health play a large role in determining the health of your relationship. Don't forget to take care of yourselves! Devote enough time and energy to self-care (getting enough sleep, nutrition, exercise, time for pursuit of your passions), and watch the frequency and intensity of fights between the two of you drop dramatically.

Remember: the ability to self-soothe is one of the most important skills you can learn. Practicing it can help you not only in romantic relationships, but in all other areas of your life.



ROLEPLAY

Now it is your turn. With the same rules as last lesson, role-play stonewalling.

