

Activity

#04

The break down: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

This activity will help you to understand the four stages that relationships tend to go through when they are breaking down.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a metaphor depicting the end of times in the New Testament. In relationships these are described as: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Stonewalling. Being able to identify them in your relationship is a necessary first step to eliminating them and replacing them with healthy, productive communication patterns.

How to use this tool

- 1 Read through the four phases.
- 2 Think about whether you recognise the behaviour in yourself, in your partner and in your relationship.
- 3 Share your responses with your partner - and ask them to share their responses with you.
- 4 Look at the areas where you agree and the areas where you disagree.
- 5 Use this knowledge to consider what actions you need to take - both individually and jointly.

Based on the model developed by John Gottman and The Gottman Institute (2014).
Visit www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling.



Horseman 1 - Criticism

Criticising your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint. The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is a personal attack. It is an attack on your partner at the core of their character. In effect, you are dismantling their whole being when you criticise.

If you find that you and your partner are critical of each other, don't assume your relationship is doomed to fail.

The problem with criticism is that, when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way for the other, far deadlier horsemen to follow. It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt, and often causes the perpetrator and victim to fall into an escalating pattern where the first horseman reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity, which eventually leads to contempt.

The antidote - Gentle Start-Up

A complaint focuses on a specific behaviour, but criticism attacks a person's very character. The antidote for criticism is to complain without blame by using a soft or gentle start-up. Avoid saying "you," which can indicate blame, and instead talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express what you need in a positive way.

To put it simply, think of these two things to formulate your soft start-up: What do I feel? What do I need?

Notice that the antidote starts with "I feel," leads into "I need," and then respectfully asks to fulfill that need. There's no blame or criticism, which prevents the discussion from escalating into an argument.



Horseman 2 - Contempt

When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean - we treat others with disrespect, mock them with sarcasm, ridicule, call them names, and mimic or use body language such as eye-rolling or scoffing. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless.

Contempt goes far beyond criticism. While criticism attacks your partner's character, contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over them. It is fuelled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner - which come to a head when the perpetrator attacks the accused from a position of relative superiority.

Most importantly, contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce. It must be eliminated.

The antidote - Build a culture of appreciation and respect

One of our mottos is 'Small Things Often': if you regularly express appreciation, gratitude, affection, and respect for your partner, you'll create a positive perspective in your relationship that acts as a buffer for negative feelings. The more positive you feel, the less likely that you'll feel or express contempt.

Another way that we explain this is our discovery of the 5:1 "magic ratio" of positive to negative interactions that a relationship must have to succeed. If you have five or more positive interactions for every one negative interaction, then you're making regular deposits into your emotional bank account, which keeps your relationship in the green.

Horseman 3 - Defensiveness



This is typically a response to criticism. When we feel unjustly accused, we fish for excuses and play the innocent victim so that our partner will back off. Unfortunately, this strategy is almost never successful. Our excuses just tell our partner that we don't take their concerns seriously and that we won't take responsibility for our mistakes.

This partner not only responds defensively, but they reverse blame in an attempt to make it the other partner's fault. Instead, a non-defensive response can express acceptance of responsibility, admission of fault, and understanding of your partner's perspective.

This approach will only escalate the conflict if the critical spouse does not back down or apologise as this is really a way of blaming your partner, and it won't allow for healthy conflict management.

The antidote - Take responsibility

Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying that the problem isn't me, it's you. As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.

By taking responsibility for part of the conflict (trying to leave too early), even while asserting that they don't like to be late, this partner prevents the conflict from escalating by admitting their role in the conflict. From here, this couple can work towards a compromise.

Horseman 4 - Stonewalling



This is usually a response to contempt. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction, shuts down, and simply stops responding to their partner. Rather than confronting the issues with their partner, people who stonewall disengage.

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 bad habit. It is a result of feeling physiologically flooded, and when we stonewall, we may not even be in a physiological state where we can discuss things rationally.

If you feel like you're stonewalling during a conflict, stop the discussion and ask your partner to take a break. Return to the conversation once you feel ready.

The antidote - Physiological self-soothing

Through physiologically soothing, you can take the heat out of the argument. Arguing increases heart rates, releases stress hormones into the bloodstream, and can even trigger a fight-or-flight response.

The antidote to stonewalling is to practice physiological self-soothing, and the first step of self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion and call a timeout. If you don't take a break, you'll find yourself either stonewalling and bottling up your emotions, or you'll end up exploding at your partner, or both, and neither will get you anywhere good.

When you take a break, it should last at least twenty minutes because it will take that long before your body physiologically calms down. Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting, like listening to music, reading, or exercising.

Do you see any signs in yourself?



Horseman 1 - Criticism



Horseman 2 - Contempt



Horseman 3 - Defensiveness



Horseman 4 - Stonewalling

Do you see any signs in partner?



Horseman 1 - Criticism



Horseman 2 - Contempt



Horseman 3 - Defensiveness



Horseman 4 - Stonewalling

Do you see any signs in relationship?



Horseman 1 - Criticism

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 1 - Criticism.



Horseman 2 - Contempt

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 2 - Contempt.



Horseman 3 - Defensiveness

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 3 - Defensiveness.



Horseman 4 - Stonewalling

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 4 - Stonewalling.

Summarise what you have identified:



Horseman 1 - Criticism

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 1 - Criticism.



Horseman 2 - Contempt

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 2 - Contempt.



Horseman 3 - Defensiveness

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 3 - Defensiveness.



Horseman 4 - Stonewalling

Empty box for notes related to Horseman 4 - Stonewalling.



What have you learnt?

Has anything surprised you? Has anything disappointed you? Have you spotted any unknown strengths or positives? Write down what you learnt.



What do you need to do or change?

Write down a few actions that you need to take, either individually or together.

In partnership with

