

The Four Horsemen

And How to Stop them With their Antidotes

The Gottman Institute

Horsemen	Antidotes	Explanations
1. Criticism	The Antidote to Criticism: Gentle Start-Up	<p>A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, 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.</p> <p>The important thing is to learn the difference between expressing a complaint and criticizing:</p> <p>Complaint: "I was scared when you were running late and didn't call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other."</p> <p>Criticism: "You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe you are that forgetful, you're just selfish. You never think of others! You never think of me!"</p>
2. Contempt	The Antidote to Contempt: Build a Culture of Appreciation and Respect	<p>Contempt goes far beyond criticism. While criticism attacks your partner's character, contempt assumes a position of moral superiority over them:</p> <p>"You're 'tired?' Cry me a river. I've been with the kids all day, running around like mad to keep this house going and all you do when you come home from work is flop down on that sofa like a child and play those idiotic video games. I don't have time to deal with another kid. Could you be any more pathetic?"</p> <p>Research even shows that couples that are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illness (colds, the flu, etc.) than others due to weakened immune systems! Contempt is fueled 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.</p> <p>Most importantly, contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce. It must be eliminated.</p>

3. DEFENSIVENESS

The Antidote to
Defensiveness:
Take Responsibility

The third horseman is defensiveness, and it is typically a response to criticism. We've all been defensive, and this horseman is nearly omnipresent when relationships are on the rocks. 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:

Question: "Did you call Betty and Ralph to let them know that we're not coming tonight as you promised this morning?"

Defensive response: "I was just too darn busy today. As a matter of fact, you know just how busy my schedule was. Why didn't you just do it?"

4. STONEWALLING

The Antidote to
Stonewalling:
Physiological
Self-Soothing

The fourth horseman is stonewalling, which 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 can make evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive or distracting 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 bad habit. And unfortunately, stonewalling isn't easy to stop. 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: "Alright, I'm feeling too angry to keep talking about this. Can we please take a break and come back to it in a bit? It'll be easier to work through this after I've calmed down."

Then take 20 minutes to do something alone that soothes you—read a book or magazine, take a walk, go for a run, really, just do anything that helps to stop feeling flooded—and then return to the conversation once you feel ready.