



Whoa! Stopping the 4 Horsemen

Last month, I introduced you to Gottman's 4 Horsemen: the 4 things that will kill a relationship if they are not stopped:

1. **Criticism, or attacking your partner's character**
2. **Contempt, which is the single greatest predictor of divorce**
3. **Defensiveness, instead of acknowledging/owning your mistakes**
4. **Stonewalling, or shutting down**

This month, let's talk about what to do if you have allowed the horsemen to enter into your relationship. As you look at the list above, you may have realized that the horsemen are connected to conflict. They initially come around during conflict, then they worm their way into the entire relationship. Here is how we're going to get them to "giddy-up" on out of your relationship!

Gentle Start-up instead of Criticism.

Remember, a complaint is focused on a specific incident or behavior, while criticism is an all-out attack. In order to stay focused on the specific thing you are unhappy about, the way you approach the conversation is imperative. The Gottmans' research indicates that 94% of the time, the way a discussion starts determines

the way it will end. While formulating your approach, ask yourself two questions: What do I feel? What do I need? Remember to avoid words like "always" and "never," and use "I Statements" instead of the word "you."

Instead of: "You always talk about yourself, but you never ask about me. Why are you so selfish?"

Try: "I'm feeling left out of our discussion, and I really need to vent too. I'd like to talk about my day when you're done."

Appreciation and Respect shuts down Contempt.

Contempt comes from feeling you are morally superior to your partner. If you are focusing on all the things you don't like about your partner, you are more likely to develop contempt. So, you must shift your focus. Begin looking for things your partner does that you appreciate. Begin to express your appreciation when those things happen. Very often we are quick to criticize but slow to praise. This breeds contempt. As I've said before, whatever you are focused on and looking for is what you will get more of.

Take Responsibility instead of being Defensive.

Defensiveness is all about reacting to feeling attacked. "It's not my fault" implies that it IS your partner's fault in some way. And, most importantly, the conflict never gets resolved. The trick is to take responsibility for your part in the situation. You don't have to own the whole thing, but there is always something we could have done differently in conflictual situations. "I shouldn't have gotten so defensive." "I shouldn't have raised my voice at you."

Take a Time Out to avoid Stonewalling.

We usually stonewall (or completely disengage) when we are feeling overwhelmed or "flooded." One of the best things you can do when you are feeling overwhelmed, is to take a Time Out. Remove yourself from the situation and allow yourself to calm down so you can think clearly. Time Outs also interrupt the conflict; when the Time Out is over, there is a better chance you will both be ready to talk about how to fix the issue. Time Outs go something like this: "I'm feeling overwhelmed, and I need to take a break. I'll be back in 20 minutes, and then we can talk."

The Gottmans have devoted their careers to researching and understanding how both healthy and unhealthy relationships work. Let's use all their hard work