



The Quickest Way to Kill a Relationship

Drs. John and Julie Gottman of The Gottman Institute have spent their careers deciphering romantic relationships. Why do some last while others do not? Why are some happier and others less so? I use much of their research in my own couples work. They also have a great email they send out regularly called “Marriage Minute from The Gottman Institute” that I highly recommend you check out.

Today, I wanted to address something the Gottmans call “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” They chose this term because, just like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse depict the end of times in the New Testament, these “Four Horsemen” depict the end of marriages. Allow me to introduce you to the Gottman Four Horsemen:

1. Criticism.

Now, we are not talking about offering a critique or voicing a complaint. Criticism is an attack on your partner towards the core of their character. Big difference. A Complaint is about a specific issue, whereas a Criticism speaks to your partner’s whole being. Words like “never” and “always” get used during Criticisms. Note the difference between these statements:

- a. “When you were late getting home, I felt scared and concerned. Please let me know when you are running late from now on.”
- b. “As usual, you were selfishly thinking only about yourself and didn’t feel the need to let me know you weren’t going to be on time. You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I really don’t think you are forgetful – you’re just selfish.”

Now, criticism alone is not necessarily a predictor of relationship failure. The issue is that it opens the door for the far more deadly horseman to enter into your relationship. Over time criticism becomes a pattern, and as the pattern is repeated with frequency and intensity, the 2nd Horseman nudges itself in.

2. Contempt.

Now we’ve moved from being critical to being plain mean. Contempt breeds disrespect, mocking, ridicule, name-calling, and negative body language (eye-rolling and heavy sighs). As contempt enters in, ruminating on all the things we hate about our partner starts. And the mumbling to ourselves about how pathetic our partner is starts. And eventually, we

tell our partner exactly how disgusting we find them. Not surprisingly, contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce.

3. Defensiveness.

This 3rd Horseman is typically a response to criticism, and is predictably present when relationships are struggling. Defensiveness is most people’s response when they feel unjustly accused, called out on for not keeping an agreement, and/or want their partner to back off. For example:

Q: “Did you pick up the dry cleaning like you said you would?”

A: “Didn’t I just tell you how busy I was today? It’s not like I’ve been doing nothing all day! If it was so important to you, you should have done it yourself.”

WHOA! You committed to doing something and you didn’t do it. All you need to do is own up to it and figure out how to fix it: “I sure didn’t do that, it got crazy today. I’ll make sure I do it tomorrow.” Now, this works only if you follow through the next time. If you are regularly committing to things and not following through, it sends the message that you can’t be counted on.

Back to Defensiveness. It doesn’t have the desired effect of getting your partner to see your point of view and back down. It actually usually escalates the conflict and causes your partner to eventually develop contempt.

4. Stonewalling.

This 4th Horseman is the practice of withdrawing, shutting down, and not responding to your partner. It is usually a response to contempt. Rather than confront the perceived contempt, the person chooses to tune out, busy themselves with other things and people, and sometimes engage in obsessive or distracting behaviors (think alcohol, affairs, video gaming).

So, here we have the four behaviors guaranteed to kill a relationship. I hope as you were reading, you were taking a look at yourself. Which of these have YOU engaged in? (It’s easy to recognize the things your partner has done, but you don’t have control over that.) Next month, we will discuss how to remove these Horsemen from your relationship – get ready for a wild ride!