

Surviving the Four Horsemen

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We've heard of the biblical horsemen of the apocalypse, but did you know there are also relational horsemen of the apocalypse? These horsemen appear briefly in almost every relationship, but if they make a permanent home in your home, the Four Horsemen can cause horrific damage to your life.

In their work with thousands of couples, Drs. John and Julie Gottman discovered four destructive ways many couples interact. The Gottmans labeled them the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" because of how each can literally destroy a relationship. These debilitating relational patterns are Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt and Stonewalling.

Criticism is *not* stating a specific complaint about someone's behavior or a concern about your legitimate needs. Criticism is "more global," says Dr. John Gottman. "It adds on some negative words about your spouse's character or personality."

Defensiveness is really a back-door way of blaming your partner. It escalates conflict by ignoring the other person's concern and focusing on why you are right.

Contempt, the most deadly of the four horsemen, is "fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner. You're more likely to have such thoughts if your differences are not resolved... couples who are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illnesses (colds, flu, and so on) than other people," states Gottman. Contempt can appear in a relationship with something as subtle as one partner rolling his or her eyes when the other speaks, or it can appear as relentless verbal condemnation.

Stonewalling is when one or both partners shut out the other person. Instead of giving eye contact, verbal responses, or physical responses (such as nodding one's head when the other speaks), this horseman blocks responsiveness. Gottman says stonewalling "shuts down any hope of resolving the disagreement."

The horsemen are deadly--as deadly as being bit by a venomous snake! Dr. Gottman offers specific antidotes to stop the Four Horsemen's toxic damage to your life.

Stop the Four Horsemen with their Antidotes

1. Avoid **Criticism** with a **Gentle Start Up**. You can state your concerns with kindness, asking for your partner's help rather than condemning his or her words or actions.
2. **Defensiveness** can be transformed when you **Take Responsibility**. Listen to your spouse's concerns and show you hear your partner's perspective. Take responsibility for your words and actions rather than trying to prove you're right. Remember, the real "win" is when your marriage wins!
3. **Contempt** can be replaced when you choose to **Build a Culture of Appreciation**. That means you look for positive things in each other. You remember what made you love each other in the first place and build on that, demonstrating God's love to one another.
4. **Stonewalling** can be avoided when each spouse does his or her own **Physiological Self-Soothing**. To learn how to do this, you can go to www.pbcounseling.com, click on the Resources link, and read the "Managing Anxiety" article, which includes specific grounding exercises to help manage your emotions.

You can make positive choices to build your relationship! People usually feel more lonely in a conflictual relationship than they do when they're actually *alone*. If you are in a disconnected relationship, there is hope for change and growth. You might need to find help--such as a pastor, counselor, or life coach--to help you develop new relationship skills. But, there's no reason you can't begin to make significant changes today. One caveat: it will take teamwork and sustained effort to move from a detached, disconnected relationship to one that becomes a safe haven for both of you.

There are two basic perspectives that can help you begin to change. The first is to look at marriage as not having a “back door.” If you’re really “in it to win it,” the relationship “win” is not only to stay together but also to make intentional choices to create a relationship that is a safe place for both of you to be. The second perspective is to realize that every couple has conflicts that are generated by either minor or major areas of disagreement.

It’s vital to realize that **nearly 70% of the things couples argue about are never resolved.** That doesn’t mean that healthy couples fight continually; it means instead that they learn when to “let go,” how to forgive each other, and how to respect each other’s differences so they can work together collaboratively. When each of you feels loved and respected, communication increases and conflict decreases. When an argument begins to escalate, you could stop and **pray together**, asking God for wisdom and direction.

The Bible gives practical advice to help you connect. Since we all get angry sometimes, Ephesians 4:26-27 (NIV) explains how to avoid destructive anger. It explains, “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.” Basically, this passage teaches that it’s OK to feel angry, but it’s not OK to hold onto anger. When we choose not to forgive one another, we open the door to Satan, allowing him to distort our thinking and cause us to have an accusatory, critical mindset. [If you want to know how to identify and modify problematic anger, you could check out “The Anger Workbook,” by Carter and Minirth.]

We all fail sometimes, especially in the relationships that are most important to us. Isn’t it easier to annoy someone you spend time with than someone who barely knows you? Forgiveness is the lubricant that keeps a marriage going forward. Colossians 3:13-14 describes it like this: “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” [This is not saying to glibly forgive an abuser. If you live with an abusive person, you could discover practical ideas in one of Leslie Vernick’s books, such as “The Emotionally Destructive Relationship.”]

The love that consistently works is God’s love! 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 says, “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”

Does your marriage demonstrate patience or arrogance? Are you kind to one another, or rude? Do you keep track of each other’s failures, or do you rejoice with the truth? Do you protect each other or make insensitive jokes about each other? We can ask God to pour His unfailing love through us to the people in our lives. We can make consistent, biblical choices so that the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” are unwelcome in our lives and homes.

Books to Help You Build Your Relationship

Author	Title	Publisher / ISBN
Chapman, Gary	<i>The Five Love Languages</i>	Northfield Publishing 1-881273-62-8
Chapman, Gary; Thomas, Jennifer	<i>The Five Languages of Apology</i>	Northfield Publishing 78-1-881273-57-8

Eggerichs, Dr. Emerson	<i>Love and Respect</i>	Integrity Publishers 1-59145187-6
Mason, Mike	<i>The Mystery of Marriage</i>	Multnomah 1-59052-374-1
Morris May, Ph.D., Sharon	<i>How to Argue So Your Spouse Will Listen</i>	Thomas Nelson 978-0-8499-1868-1
Penner, Clifford and Joyce	<i>The Gift of Sex: A Christian Guide to Sexual Fulfillment</i>	Word 0-8499-2893-1
Smalley, Dr. Gary	<i>The DNA of Relationships</i>	Tyndale House 0-8423-5532-4
Thomas, Gary	<i>Sacred Marriage</i>	Zondervan 0-310-24282-7
Wheat, Ed, M.D. and Gaye	<i>Intended for Pleasure: Sex Technique and Sexual Fulfillment in Christian Marriage</i>	Revell 0-8007-5856-0
Yerkovich, Milan and Kay	<i>How We Love: A Revolutionary Approach to Deeper Connections in Marriage</i>	Waterbrook Press 1-4000-7298-0

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