



The Four Horsemen

Drs. John and Julie Gottman, through decades of research on couples, identified four communication patterns that wear down trust and connection over time. They called them the “Four Horsemen.” Each one has an antidote, a different way of responding that you can learn and practice.

1 Criticism

Attacking your partner’s character rather than naming a specific behavior or need.

“You never think about anyone but yourself.”

ANTIDOTE · GENTLE START-UP

Talk about your feelings and what you need, without blame. “I felt hurt when plans changed without a heads-up. Can we check in first next time?”

2 Contempt

Speaking from a place of superiority: sarcasm, mockery, name-calling, eye-rolling. The Gottmans found it the strongest predictor of a relationship ending.

“Oh, you’re tired? Must be exhausting doing nothing all day.”

ANTIDOTE · BUILD APPRECIATION

Regularly notice and say what you value in your partner, so respect and fondness are the backdrop, even in conflict.

3 Defensiveness

Protecting yourself with excuses or counter-attacks, which tells your partner their concern doesn’t matter.

“Well, I wouldn’t have forgotten if you’d reminded me.”

ANTIDOTE · TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Own your part, even if it’s small. “You’re right, I did forget. I’m sorry. Let me fix it.” Taking responsibility means owning your own words and actions. It never means accepting blame for someone else’s harmful behavior.

4 Stonewalling

Shutting down and closing off from the conversation, often when someone feels flooded and overwhelmed. Going quiet or stepping away isn’t always stonewalling: it can be a needed pause, a communication need, or a way of staying safe. The pattern to watch for is repeatedly shutting a partner out.

Staring at a phone or giving one-word answers whenever a concern comes up.

ANTIDOTE · SELF-SOOTHE

Name that you’re overwhelmed, take a real break to calm your body, then return to the conversation when you’re both ready.

For relationships where both people can disagree without fear. These tools are meant for everyday conflict between partners who feel safe with each other. If you feel afraid of your partner, or are experiencing threats, control, or violence, these exercises aren’t the right fit, and couples sessions may not be safe. Talk with a clinician individually, or contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline: call 1-800-799-7233, text START to 88788, or visit thehotline.org. In an emergency, call 911.



There is real reason for hope.

Almost every couple falls into these patterns sometimes. Seeing them in your relationship doesn’t mean it’s broken. With awareness, practice and support, couples can break these cycles and build deeper trust and connection.



Communication Strategies

Small shifts in how you speak to each other can change how a conversation goes. Practice these when things are calm, so they're easier to reach for when things get heated.

Use "I" statements

Describe what happened and how it affected you, rather than what's wrong with your partner. It's much harder to argue with someone's feelings than with an accusation.

TRY THIS FORMULA

When _____ happened,

I felt _____.

What I need is _____.

INSTEAD OF

"You never listen to me."

TRY

"When you looked at your phone while I was talking, I felt unimportant. I need us to put phones down when we talk."

Focus on the problem

Try to approach the issue as a team instead of scoring points. Sometimes a partner's frustration comes from their own stress, which can help you not take every comment personally. It never makes mistreatment okay, and it's fine to say when something hurt you.

Ask: What problem are we solving together?

Avoid all-or-nothing

Always and **never** rarely fit the facts, and invite an argument about the exception. Stick to the specific moment.

Try: *"The dishes have piled up this week, and I'm stretched thin."*

Take a break, and say so

When things get too heated, tell your partner you need a pause instead of shutting down or walking out without a word. Saying it out loud lets them know you intend to come back to it.

YOU MIGHT SAY

"I'm getting overwhelmed and I don't want to say something I'll regret. I need 20 minutes to calm down. Then let's come back to this."

- Agree on a break signal ahead of time.
- Take at least 20 minutes to calm down.
- Agree to come back to the conversation when you're both ready and it feels safe, with a therapist's help if you need it.

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