

John Gottman's FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

John Gottman, Ph.D., is a well-respected psychologist and marriage researcher who reports that an unhappy marriage can increase your chances of becoming ill by 35% and take four years off your life! He believes "working on your marriage every day will do more for your health and longevity than working out at a health club". Although many of us believe that anger is the root cause of unhappy relationships, Gottman notes that it is not conflict itself that is the problem, but how we handle it. Venting anger constructively can actually do wonders to clear the air and get a relationship back in balance. However, conflict does become a problem when it is characterized by the presence of what Gottman calls the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse": criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

1. Criticism. Criticism involves attacking your partner's personality or character, rather than focusing on the specific behavior that bothers you. It is healthy to air disagreements, but not to attack your spouse's personality or character in the process. This is the difference between saying, "I'm upset that you didn't take out the trash" and saying, "I can't believe you didn't take out the trash. You're just so irresponsible." In general, women are more likely to pull this horseman into conflict.

2. Contempt. Contempt is one step up from criticism and involves tearing down or being insulting toward your partner. Contempt is an open sign of disrespect. Examples of contempt include: putting down your spouse, rolling your eyes or sneering, or tearing down the other person with so-called "humor."

3. Defensiveness. Adopting a defensive stance in the middle of conflict may be a natural response, but does not help the relationship. When a person is defensive, he or she often experiences a great deal of tension and has difficulty tuning into what is being said. Denying responsibility, making excuses, or meeting one complaint with another are all examples of defensiveness.

4. Stonewalling. People who stonewall simply refuse to respond. Occasional stonewalling can be healthy, but as a typical way of interacting, stonewalling during conflict can be destructive to the marriage. When you stonewall on a regular basis, you are pulling yourself out of the marriage, rather than working out your problems. Men tend to engage in stonewalling much more often than women do.

All couples will engage in these types of behaviors at some point in their marriage, but when the four horsemen take permanent residence, the relationship has a high likelihood of failing. In fact, Gottman's research reveals that the chronic presence of these four factors in a relationship can be used to predict, with over 80% accuracy, which couples will eventually divorce. When attempts to repair the damage done by these horsemen are met with repeated rejection, Gottman says there is over a 90% chance the relationship will end in divorce. If your relationship is filled with these four issues, take notice, change yourself, work together, make improvements. Don't delay! As Gottman has made clear, with work and an investment in overcoming these challenges marriage can improve and become successful. If left unattended divorce is often inevitable.

Excerpted from an article, "Marriage and Healthy" by Poonam Sharma, Ph.D.; further information and research can be found in Dr. John Gottman's book, "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work".