

“The Four Horsemen” - Barriers to Communication and their Antidotes

Summarized from [the Gottman Institute](#)

The Gottman Institute studies relationships and looks for evidenced based signs of what works, and what doesn't. They use the metaphor of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” to describe four dynamics that can predict the end of a romantic relationship. Luckily, they have also discovered the “antidotes” that can change these unhealthy dynamics.

Criticism

Attacking someone's personality or character, usually with some level of blame. Often “you” statements – “You should have done the laundry by now, you know I wanted to go out later!”

Antidote: Complaining – *Expressing anger or disagreement about a specific behavior. Often uses “I” statements – “I wanted the laundry to be finished by now so I could get out before everything closes.” Complaining does not involve blame or get personal.*

Next time, try: Instead of criticizing the other person, tell them what you would like them to do instead.

Defensiveness

Avoiding any responsibility for partner's complaints. This can look like denying responsibility, making excuses, disagreeing with negative mind-reading, cross-complaining, “yes-but”-ing, repeating yourself, whining.

Antidote: Taking responsibility for some part of the problem.

Next time, try: Considering if there any part of the other person's complaint that makes some sense to you. If so, say, “I can see what you're saying about (this part).” See how that changes the conversation.

Contempt

The intention here is to insult and psychologically abuse the other person. This happens when the relationship feels so negative, that one partner has difficulty identifying anything positive about the other. It can include insults and name-calling,

hostile humor, and mockery. It is also visible in body language and facial expressions. Contempt in communication between partners is a strong predictor of divorce.

Antidote: Culture of appreciation – *focus on what you admire about the other person.*

Next time, try: Noticing when you are expressing contempt and stopping yourself immediately. There are also exercises that you can do to remember and rekindle the things you admire or appreciate about the other person, which will start to shift the habit of expressing contempt.

Stonewalling

Habitual disengagement during conflict.

Antidote: Self-soothing—*Monitor your emotional arousal during arguments; take breaks and do something to calm down. Find a way to stay engaged in the discussion, even if it means taking a break.*

Next time, try: Catching yourself when you are starting to get emotionally overwhelmed during a conflict. Let the other person know you are going to take a break, but will return to finish the discussion when you are more calm. It generally takes about 20 minutes to calm down from “emotional flooding.”