

# THE FOUR HORSEMEN WHO COULD BE HARMING YOUR RELATION-

*Every relationship has its conflicts and communication issues, but not all relationship problems are created equal. Well known psychologist, writer and relationship expert John Gottman reveals at least four characteristics which tend to spell serious trouble for intimate partners. So damaging are their effects that together Gottman has named them: The Four Horsemen. But while the New Testament's version of The Four Horsemen represent the end of times, these horsemen don't even necessarily have to lead to the end of a relationship—not when couples learn how to identify these characteristics and replace them with healthier ones.*

**Criticism.** This is different from constructive feedback and complaints—both of which, while potentially perceived as “negative,” can be legitimate ways to express concerns over a specific issue or situation. Harmful criticism questions a person's entire character, rather than a specific trait or behaviour. Statements such as “You're always “ or

“You're so selfish and you never listen to me” are common examples of unhealthy criticism. Instead of acknowledging a specific concern (e.g., “I feel frustrated when you arrive late”), an overly critical partner will show annoyance and put down their partner in an ill-suited attempt to express their frustration. If criticisms are ongoing and continue, the partner may begin to feel hurt, rejected, and under attack. Unfortunately, this can pave the way for the other Horsemen to enter the relationship.

**Contempt.** Contempt is the darker side of criticism. Beyond merely putting a person down, the contemptuous partner assumes moral superiority over them. They feel “better than” their partner and attempt to make him or her feel worthless. Cruel and unloving sarcasm, ridicule, and mean-spirited language (verbal and non-verbal) will be prevalent.

**Defensiveness.** Being repeatedly criticised often causes a partner to feel and act defensively, this can then imply the other is correct and cause guilt. He or she may come up with excuses in an attempt to explain away what their partner is accusing them of, rather than assuming personal responsibility or trying to see things from their partner's perspective. While understandable, defensiveness isn't an effective conflict resolution strategy. Defensiveness can fuel feelings of

contempt and resentment, and often leads to bickering between the partners - a blame game that is unproductive, destructive, and stressful.

**Stonewalling.** The last of The Four Horsemen is essentially a diversion tactic. One or both partners —usually in response to overwhelming negativity created by the three other Horsemen— withdraws, shuts down, and stops interacting or communicating. Instead of confronting the issue or seeking help, a stonewalling person simply evades the situation, often by walking away, tuning out, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive or repetitive behaviours.

## How to stop the rot!

The first step in eliminating The Four Horsemen from a relationship is becoming aware that they exist. Couples must learn to recognise these traits when they show up; working with a marriage counsellor can help.

## The next step is to replace these negative traits with positive ones. These include:

- Discussing concerns or complaints using “I statements.”
- Regularly expressing kindness, gratitude and appreciation.
- Taking personal responsibility and offering genuine apologies when indicated.



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