

From the Gottman Relationship Blog

Many of you may be familiar with the fact that Dr. Gottman can predict the long-term success or failure of a relationship with 94% accuracy by watching the first three minutes of a couple having a conflict discussion ([source](#)). What you may not know, however, is the basis for his predictions. His projections are based largely on the success or failure of repair attempts, and on the observation of four potentially destructive communication styles that he calls "[The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.](#)" In today's posting, we will introduce this topic by sharing a quiz with you.

The following questionnaire assesses the presence of the Four Horsemen (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling) in your relationship. Read each statement, and choose True or False.

When we discuss our relationship issues:

1. I feel attacked or criticized when we talk about our disagreements. (T/F)
2. I usually feel like my personality is being assaulted. (T/F)
3. In our disputes, at times, I don't even feel like my partner likes me much. (T/F)
4. I have to defend myself because the charges against me are so unfair. (T/F)
5. I often feel unappreciated by my partner. (T/F)
6. My feelings and intentions are often misunderstood. (T/F)
7. I'm not appreciated for all the good I do in this relationship. (T/F)
8. I often just want to leave the scene of arguments. (T/F)
9. I get disgusted by all the negativity between us. (T/F)
10. I feel insulted by my partner at times. (T/F)
11. I sometimes just clam up and become quiet. (T/F)
12. I can get mean and insulting in our disputes. (T/F)
13. I basically feel disrespected. (T/F)
14. Many of our issues are just not my problem. (T/F)
15. The way we talk makes me want to withdraw from the whole relationship. (T/F)
16. I think to myself, "Who needs all this conflict?" (T/F)
17. My partner never really changes. (T/F)
18. Our problems have made me feel desperate at times. (T/F)
19. My partner doesn't face issues responsibly and maturely. (T/F)
20. I try to point out flaws in my partner's personality that need improvement. (T/F)
21. I feel explosive and out of control about issues at times. (T/F)
22. My partner uses phrases like "You always" or "You never" when complaining (T/F)
23. I often get the blame for what are really our shared problems. (T/F)
24. I don't have a lot of respect for my partner's position on our basic issues. (T/F)
25. My partner can be quite selfish and self-centered. (T/F)
26. I feel disgusted by some of my partner's attitudes. (T/F)
27. My partner gets far too emotional. (T/F)
28. Small issues often escalate out of proportion. (T/F)
29. Arguments seem to come out of nowhere. (T/F)
30. My partner's feelings get hurt too easily. (T/F)

Feeling wonderful? Feeling not so wonderful? This quiz, unlike many of the previous questionnaires we have shared with you on The Gottman Relationship Blog, has no key.

There is no number of True or False responses to add up for a numerical assessment of your relationship.

Dr. Gottman's decades of research with more than 3,000 couples has allowed him to create a method for helping couples break through barriers to achieve greater understanding, connection, and intimacy in their relationships. To dive deeper into the material we mention in these blog posts, pick up a copy of one of his books: [The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work](#), [The Relationship Cure](#), or his most recent release, [What Makes Love Last?](#).

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a metaphor depicting the end of times in the New Testament. They describe conquest, war, hunger, and death respectively. Dr. Gottman uses this metaphor to describe communication styles that can predict the end of a relationship.

The first horseman of the apocalypse is **criticism**. Criticizing your partner is different than offering a critique or voicing a complaint! The latter two are about specific issues, whereas the former is an ad hominem attack: it is an attack on your partner at the core. In effect, you are dismantling his or her whole being when you criticize.

- Complaint: "I was scared when you were running late and didn't call me. I thought we had agreed that we would do that for each other."
- Criticism: "You never think about how your behavior is affecting other people. I don't believe you are that forgetful, you're just selfish! You never think of others! You never think of me!"

If you find that you and your partner are critical of each other, don't assume your relationship is doomed to fail. The problem with criticism is that, when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way for the other, far deadlier horsemen. It makes the victim feel assaulted, rejected, and hurt, and often causes the perpetrator and victim to fall into an escalating pattern where the first horseman reappears with greater and greater frequency and intensity.

The second horseman is **contempt**. When we communicate in this state, we are truly mean - treating others with disrespect, mocking them with sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling, mimicking, and/or body language such as eye-rolling. The target of contempt is made to feel despised and worthless.

"You're 'tired?' Cry me a river. I've been with the kids all day, running around like mad to keep this house going and all you do when you come home from work is flop down on that sofa like a child and play those idiotic computer games. I don't have time to deal with another kid - try to be more pathetic..."

In his research, Dr. Gottman found that couples that are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illness (colds, the flu, etc.) than others, as their immune systems weaken! Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner - which come to a head in the perpetrator attacking the accused from a position of relative superiority. Contempt is the single greatest predictor of divorce according to Dr. Gottman's work. It must be eliminated!

The third horseman is **defensiveness**. We've all been defensive. This horseman is nearly omnipresent when relationships are on the rocks. When we feel accused unjustly, we fish for excuses so that our partner will back off. Unfortunately, this strategy is almost never successful. Our excuses just tell our partner that we don't take them seriously, trying to get them to buy something that they don't believe, that we are blowing them off.

- She: "Did you call Betty and Ralph to let them know that we're not coming tonight as you promised this morning?"
- He: "I was just too darn busy today. As a matter of fact you know just how busy my schedule was. Why didn't you just do it?"

He not only responds defensively, but turns the table and makes it her fault. A non-defensive response would have been:

"Oops, I forgot. I should have asked you this morning to do it because I knew my day would be packed. Let me call them right now."

Although it is perfectly understandable for the male to defend himself in the example given above, this approach doesn't have the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner.

The fourth horseman is **stonewalling**. Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction. In other words, stonewalling is when one person shuts down and closes himself/herself off from the other. It is a lack of responsiveness to your partner and the interaction between the two of you. Rather than confronting the issues (which tend to accumulate!) with our partner, we make evasive maneuvers such as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in obsessive behaviors. It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable "out," but when it does, it frequently becomes a habit.

Being able to identify **The Four Horsemen** in your conflict discussions is a necessary first step to eliminating them, but this knowledge is not enough. To drive away destructive communication patterns, you must replace them with healthy, productive ones. Practice, practice, practice! Pay close attention the next time you find yourself engaged in a difficult conversation with your partner, a friend, or even with your children. See if you can spot any of **The Four Horsemen**, and try to observe their effects on the people involved.

Even the most successful relationships have conflict. Our research has shown that it's not the appearance of conflict, but rather how it's managed that predicts the success or failure of a relationship. We say "manage" conflict rather than "resolve," because relationship conflict is natural and has functional, positive aspects. The first step in effectively managing conflict is to identify and fight The Four Horsemen when they arrive in your conflict discussions. To do otherwise is to risk serious problems in the future of your relationship. Below, we share antidotes for fighting off The Four Horsemen in your relationship:

Criticism: A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, while a criticism attacks the character of the person. The antidote for criticism is to complain without blame. Talk about your feelings using I statements and then express a positive need. What do you feel? What do you need?

- Criticism: “You always talk about yourself. You are so selfish.”
- Antidote: “I’m feeling left out by our talk tonight. Can we please talk about my day?”

Defensiveness: Defensiveness is defined as self-protection in the form of righteous indignation or innocent victimhood in attempt to ward off a perceived attack. Many people become defensive when they are being criticized, but the problem is that being defensive never helps to solve the problem at hand. Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying, in effect, the problem isn't me, it's you. As a result, the problem is not resolved and the conflict escalates further. The antidote is to accept responsibility, even if only for part of the conflict.

- Defensiveness: “It’s not my fault that we’re always late, it’s your fault.”
- Antidote: “Well, part of this is my problem, I need to think more about time.”

Contempt: Statements that come from a relative position of superiority. Some examples of displays of contempt include when a person uses sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, eyerolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. Contempt is the greatest predictor of divorce and must be eliminated. The antidote is building a culture of appreciation and respect.

- Contempt: “You’re an idiot.”
- Antidote: “I’m proud of the way you handled that teacher conference.”

Stonewalling: Stonewalling occurs when the listener withdraws from the interaction. The antidote is to practice physiological self-soothing. The first step of physiological self-soothing is to stop the conflict discussion. If you keep going, you'll find yourself exploding at your partner or imploding (stonewalling), neither of which will get you anywhere. The only reasonable strategy, therefore, is to let your partner know that you're feeling flooded and need to take a break. That break should last at least twenty minutes, since it will be that long before your body physiologically calms down. It's crucial that during this time you avoid thoughts of righteous indignation ("I don't have to take this anymore") and innocent victimhood ("Why is he always picking on me?"). Spend your time doing something soothing and distracting, like listening to music or exercising.

In one of our longitudinal research studies, we interrupted couples after fifteen minutes and told them we needed to adjust the equipment. We asked them not to talk about their issue, but just to read magazines for half an hour. When they started talking about their issue again, their heart rates were significantly lower and their interaction more positive and productive.