

4 Horsemen of Conflict

Conflict is unavoidable. How you manage the conflict can be the difference between your relationship going the distance or heading for separation.

When managed well, conflict is healthy, functional, and natural and allows for opportunities to grow within your relationship. Learning to manage even the unsolvable issues in a respectful manner will assist you in paving the road to relationship that can last a [happy] lifetime.

John Gottman has identified four unhealthy communication approaches that people tend to default to when addressing conflict. Identifying each of them within yourself and making a conscious effort to choose the healthy alternative is a wonderful way to engage in personal development and show your partner that you respect them, even when you may find it difficult to like them.

Horseman 1: Criticism

The difference between attacking your partner and teaching them. This means that it is also the difference between solving one issue and creating a new one. Criticisms typically come in the form of a 'You' statement, and sound like you are blaming someone for something.

Consider the difference between the following statements:

1. "You never put your socks in the basket! You only ever think about yourself!"
2. "It really frustrates me when you leave your socks on the floor. Could you please put them in the basket?"

Option 1 is accusing your partner of being selfish, and is likely to result in your partner defending themselves

Option 2 is raising an issue and proposing a solution, inviting them to learn more about the things that are important to you, and welcoming them to work with you to make things better.

This strategy helps to minimise the number, and intensity, of your arguments.

Horseman 2: Contempt

The greatest predictor of separation and divorce! If ever there were a horseman to try and completely remove from your relationship; this is it. Realistically, it is unlikely that you will stop all signs of contempt – we are human after all – but this horseman is rude and unnecessary. Contempt seeks to emotionally destroy and belittle your partner, while placing yourself on a pedestal of superiority.

Sarcasm: a sharp, biting, or cutting remark

Sneering: a facial expression of disgust

Mockery: to insult, or make light of something important to another

Eye rolling

Cynicism: an attitude of distrust in a person or their motives

Hostile humour: to be aggressive, angry, or unfriendly

These behaviours are unfortunately common, and there is very little thought for the impact these seemingly small behaviours can have on the people they are directed towards. You likely didn't get into a relationship with your partner so that you can offend or hurt them, and yet with every sneer, sarcastic comment, and eye roll that is exactly what you are doing.

To solve this, use the 5:1 Magic Ratio – 5 positive interactions for every 1 negative. It could be a compliment, verbal recognition of an accomplishment or task, offering to help with something, or giving them a gift, but make it something you know they will appreciate [HINT: the 5 love language can be a really helpful resource here]. This way your relationship rule is respect, and the exception to the rule is contempt rather than the other way around. In these cases, you will more likely to ask if they are okay when the contempt occurs but it is out of character and may be a sign that something is wrong.

Horseman 3: Defensiveness

Defensiveness is typically, but not always, a response to criticism; when you feel attacked your instinct is to protect yourself. This approach not only dismisses the issue that was raised in the first place, but creates another problem in its wake.

Becoming defensive is a sign that you are not taking accountability; you are blaming someone, or something, else. Because your partner isn't feeling heard AND they now feel attacked, [you guessed it] they are more likely to become defensive, and so the merry-go-round of conflict continues.

Consider the difference:

Option 1: "It's not my fault your feelings got hurt. You're too sensitive."

Option 2: "I'm sorry I raised my voice, I know you don't like it when I yell. Let me try again."

The responsibility here falls on both parties: Spouse 1 to raise a complaint rather than a criticism, and Spouse 2 to accept responsibility for the part they played, and respond with respect.

It is important to note that defensiveness usually occurs for a reason. When responding with kindness you are not condoning the poor communication or behaviour of the other person, you are taking responsibility for your own actions.

[NOTE: reflective listening exercises are really helpful here]

Horseman 4: Stonewalling

When all else fails, run away! Stonewalling is what happens when we check out of conflict. This response is based in the fight and flight response, and it can look a number of different ways:

Physically

You walk into the other room in the middle of the argument, or you get in the car and leave.

Emotionally

You stop engaging in the conversation, by nodding and 'yessing' or not responding at all.

These responses happen when you can't take anymore; you are physically and emotionally exhausted, you're angry, you're not getting anywhere, and you need a break. Your body is on edge [increased heart rate, raised voice, tensed muscles, sick feeling in your stomach] and you want to protect yourself. You don't want to attack your partner [good on you], but you know that if you stay any longer that's exactly what will happen; so you leave in whichever way you can [physically or emotionally].

As much as you may be stonewalling to protect your partner, it is highly unlikely they will see it the same way, so they will try and push you to keep going. Instead of pushing yourself to breaking point it is important for a number of reasons to take a break.

1. You are listening to your body, which is always a good thing, and it will allow you to continue the conversation with a clear mind later on
2. You give the relationship a great opportunity to build trust, which is incredibly important for the relationship.

To take a break in the middle of an argument you should do two things:

1. Let your partner know how you will be responding when things are calm, "If I feel overwhelmed, I'm going to ask for a moment so that I can collect myself." Both of you must agree to uphold the terms of the 'moment' otherwise it will not work.
2. For maximum effect ask for the break BEFORE things escalate too far. Once you've 'flipped your lid' you should still ask for the break, but you will not have as much control over *how* you ask for it, so it may come across as one of the other horsemen [critical or contemptuous]. Asking early on ensures greater odds of maintaining respect.

Once you've called for your 'moment' take at least 20-30 minutes to do something soothing; this is the time it takes for your body to reset.

The Do's and Don'ts of the 'moment':

DO...

Read a book
Have a cup of tea
Yoga

DON'T...

Stew over the argument
Think about how you are better than they are
Play the victim

This is where the trust exercise comes in: you trust that your partner will give you the space you need, and your partner trusts you to come back and work towards a resolution.

After you have taken your moment, come together again, be mindful of the 4 Horsemen, and work together as a team.

Tips:

1. Take some time to identify which of the Horsemen you are most likely to use in an argument
2. When you are in conflict with your partner, pull yourself up when you use them, "I'm sorry, that was very critical of me. Let me try again." – your partner will appreciate the effort, and you get the benefit of not only becoming more self-aware, but knowing that you are taking steps to show your partner how much they mean to you.
3. Put yourself in their shoes. You may not agree with their perspective but that doesn't make it wrong. Your partner's feelings are just as important as yours, but their experience of the world may mean that they feel differently, or have a different opinion, than you do about the same situation.
4. Seek understanding. When in doubt, ask a question. If you don't understand why your partner is sensitive about a particular topic, ask them if they can help you to understand.