

# THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF RELATIONSHIP APOCALYPSE

Understanding and Overcoming Toxic  
Communication Patterns



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## Understanding and Overcoming Toxic Communication Patterns

When a couple sit down in front of me, one of the things I look out for is the Four Horsemen. These "Four Horsemen" are terms coined by Dr. John Gottman, a well-known psychologist specialising in relationships.

The Four Horsemen, as identified by Dr. John Gottman, are incredibly destructive in relationships due to their corrosive impact on communication and emotional well-being. These negative communication patterns, namely criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling erode the foundation of trust, respect, and emotional connection that healthy relationships rely on.

Criticism and contempt attack a partner's character and create emotional wounds, while defensiveness shuts down open communication and problem-solving. On the other hand, Stonewalling leads to emotional detachment and a communication breakdown. When these Four Horsemen are left unaddressed, they can lead to escalating conflicts, emotional distance, and, ultimately, the deterioration of the relationship. Recognising and addressing these destructive patterns is crucial for maintaining a loving and thriving partnership.

## To Better Understand, Let's Look Closely at Each One

**Criticism:** Criticism involves making negative judgments or attacking your partner's character. It goes beyond simply expressing a complaint or concern and often includes personal attacks. For example, saying, "You never help with the chores; you're so lazy" is a form of criticism.

**Defensiveness:** When one partner becomes defensive, they try to deflect blame and avoid taking responsibility for their actions. This often involves playing the victim or making excuses. Defensiveness can escalate conflicts because it prevents constructive communication.

**Contempt:** Contempt is a particularly toxic element in relationships. It involves expressing disrespect, disdain, or superiority towards your partner. It can manifest through insults, mockery, or using sarcasm. Contempt is corrosive to love and connection.

**Stonewalling:** Stonewalling occurs when one partner withdraws from the conversation or interaction. They may shut down emotionally and stop responding to their partner's communication attempts. Stonewalling often happens when one partner feels overwhelmed or flooded by the conflict.

**Let's look at some antidotes to address the Four Horsemen, which can improve communication and strengthen relationships.**

### **Addressing Criticism with a Gentle Start-Up**

Instead of resorting to criticism, a gentle start-up involves expressing your concerns or complaints in a more constructive and non-accusatory manner. You can use "I" statements to express your feelings and needs without attacking your partner. For example, instead of saying, "You never listen to me," you can say, "I feel unheard when talking about my day, and I need your attention and support."

### **Combating Defensiveness by Taking Responsibility**

Taking responsibility for your part in the conflict is crucial to counter defensiveness. Instead of deflecting blame, acknowledge your contributions to the issue and express a willingness to work together to find a solution. For instance, if your partner raises a concern, you can respond, "I see how my actions may have contributed to this problem. Let's talk about how we can resolve it."


### **Confronting Contempt by Describing Your Feelings and Needs:**

Rather than express contemptuous feelings or judgments, describe your emotions and needs. This approach encourages empathy and understanding from your partner. For instance, if you're feeling contemptuous, you can express it differently: "I'm feeling frustrated and hurt right now because I need more appreciation and respect in our relationship."

### **Overcoming Stonewalling through Physiological Self-Soothing**

Stonewalling often occurs when someone becomes overwhelmed by emotions during a conflict. To address this, practice physiological self-soothing techniques. Take a break to calm your nerves, and engage in relaxation exercises like deep breathing or meditation to regulate your emotions. Communicate to your partner that you need a short break, but reassure them that you'll return to the conversation later.

Couples can transform destructive communication patterns into healthier, more productive interactions by implementing these antidotes. This strengthens the relationship and fosters greater understanding and emotional connection between partners. Remember that improving communication takes practice and patience, but the rewards for a more harmonious and loving relationship are worth the effort.



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**Dr Angela.**  
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