

# How to Overcome the Four Relationship Apocalypses

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## Navigating the Four Horsemen of a Relationship Apocalypse: A Guide to Building Lasting Bonds



When navigating the intricacy of relationships, a powerful metaphor known as the "Four Horsemen" looms large, courtesy of Dr. John Gottman, a pioneer in couples therapy. In this blog, we'll examine these four destructive communication patterns named after the apocalyptic horsemen that often lead to doom in relationships if left unchecked. Included in these are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. All couples should understand and be able to address these horsemen if they're manifesting themselves in a relationship and have the tools to cultivate healthy, enduring connections that are able to weather the storms of life.

### The First Horseman: Criticism

The first horseman, criticism, enters into relationships when partners express dissatisfaction by attacking the other person's character. It's more than just acknowledging specific behaviors; it tends to morph into a direct assault on the individual and their actions. For example, instead of saying, "I felt hurt when you forgot our anniversary,"

a critical remark might be, "You always forget important dates! You're so thoughtless."

Criticism can be really damaging, gradually eroding self-esteem in a person and creating a hostile environment in your relationship. To counteract this destructive force, a good rule of thumb is to communicate using "I" statements, focusing on expressing personal feelings and needs without launching an assault on your partner. This approach fosters open dialogue and encourages understanding rather than triggering defensiveness.

### The Second Horseman: Contempt

The second horseman, contempt, manifests when one partner assumes a position of superiority over the other. It involves expressing mockery and belittlement, exuding a demeaning energy. Eye-rolling, sarcasm, and name-calling are common manifestations of contempt. When contempt makes its way into a relationship, it corrodes the foundation of mutual respect and compassion.

To combat contempt, couples need to actively work to create a culture of appreciation and gratitude. Partners can engage in this practice by seeking out and acknowledging each other's positive qualities. Practicing empathy where you might not align with your partner and genuinely trying to understand each other's perspective can also act as a powerful remedy when it comes to contempt.

### The Third Horseman: Defensiveness

Defensiveness is the third horseman, and enters the relationship when one or both partners feel attacked and respond by deflecting the blame onto the other person and/or adopting a victim mentality in situations. Instead of taking responsibility for their actions, defensive individuals will shift the blame onto their partner, perpetuating a cycle of negativity that gets in the way of positive and productive communication.

To combat defensiveness in a relationship, partners can practice active listening and take responsibility when they might contribute to conflict. Instead of reacting defensively, they can express genuine understanding of their partner's concerns and use these situations to recognize areas that they might be able to improve. By being able to take accountability, couples can navigate disagreements more constructively, dismantling the third horseman's power.

## The Fourth Horseman: Stonewalling

The fourth horseman, stonewalling, shows itself when one partner completely withdraws themselves from interaction, shutting down emotionally and physically. This can take the form of the silent treatment, avoiding eye contact, or physically leaving the space. Stonewalling is often a response to feeling overwhelmed, and reaching a point of unwillingness to work through a situation. It can be highly detrimental to the emotional connection in a relationship.

If stonewalling happens, couples can develop strategies for self-soothing and emotional regulation. Taking breaks during heated discussions, practicing mindfulness, and communicating the need for a timeout can often prevent the emotional overload that leads to stonewalling. Creating a safe space for both partners to express themselves without fear of judgment is essential for preventing the fourth horseman.



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Understanding and addressing the Four Horsemen of a relationship is paramount for building and maintaining a robust, healthy connection. By replacing criticism with constructive communication, contempt with appreciation, defensiveness with accountability, and stonewalling with emotional regulation, couples can navigate the inevitable challenges of relationships with resilience and mutual understanding.

It's important to note that no relationship is immune to conflict, but how couples navigate and resolve issues determines the strength and longevity of their bond. By recognizing and actively working to mitigate the impact of the Four Horsemen, couples can create a foundation built on trust, respect, and open communication, ensuring their journey together is one of growth and enduring love.

As couples navigate the intricate dance of communication, understanding, and compromise, they have the essential building blocks of a loving relationship that withstand the test of time. The journey toward a lasting connection is not without its challenges, but armed with the knowledge of the Four Horsemen, couples can steer their relationship toward the oasis of enduring love.

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