

# Becoming a better me: The Four Horseman

## Utah Marriage Commission

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A renowned psychologist, John Gottman, is quoted saying, "We repeat what we don't repair." This thoughtful remark could have been made as he shared his insight on behavior that can destroy relationships using the metaphor of The Four Horsemen. The metaphor is originally from the Bible, with each horseman representing something that could lead to the end of the world. While the four horsemen metaphor Dr. Gottman teaches may not end the world, they may have an extremely detrimental impact on your relationship. As you read about each of the four behaviors, think about how you may have used them in your current relationship or in past relationships and how you might avoid that behavior in the future.

#### Criticism

No one likes to be criticized. It can feel embarrassing or hurtful when someone attacks the way you do something or the way you behave. When we feel hurt

or embarrassed, we aren't open to hearing negative or constructive criticism.

You may criticize your partner because you feel like you've told them something a thousand times or maybe you are frustrated when you compare the effort you believe each of you are putting into the relationship. Rather than criticizing your partner, try to soften the things you say.

For example:

Criticism sounds like, "Every time you load the dishwasher I must go back and do it again. If you're finally going to help me, at least do it right!"

A softer start-up would be, "Honey, thank you for loading the dishwasher. I find that the bowls wash better if you make sure they are spaced apart a little bit more. I would really appreciate it if you continued to help me with the dishes after dinner. It makes a big difference in my day."

#### Contempt

Contempt causes us to communicate in a really mean way. When someone acts with contempt, they have no respect for the other person. Name-calling, ridiculing, and mocking are all examples of this behavior. Contempt goes beyond criticism. Rather than attacking someone's actions, you are trying to make them feel worthless. If you have ever wanted someone to feel bad about who they are, you were feeling contempt. This is an extremely dangerous behavior for a relationship and frequently leads to divorce. If you feel that you or your partner displays behaviors of contempt, it may not be a safe relationship.

For example:

Someone feeling contempt might say, "You think your life is hard? I go to work all day putting in more hours than anyone else in the office while you stay here all day doing nothing! You have a great life because of me, you lazy slob!"

Contempt can be combated with appreciation. Rather than considering all you do for your partner, consider the things they do for you.

#### Defensiveness

Defensiveness is often a response to criticism. We want to defend ourselves when we feel wrongly accused, even if we know the criticism is rightly placed. It is extremely difficult to accept criticism, especially when it isn't given

kindly. When criticized, try to take responsibility when you can.

For example:

Your wife asks if you've registered the kids for school and you haven't. She gets upset and explains she is very busy and can't be expected to do everything for the kids all the time.

You can respond with defensiveness saying, "I'm just as busy as you. Why should I be the one to register the kids for school?"

Or you can respond by taking some responsibility, "I know you do a lot for our family. I got busy this afternoon and didn't make it over to the school. I will make sure to have the kids registered tomorrow."

You can see how one opens the gate for an argument while the other stops the argument in its tracks.

### **Stonewalling**

Stonewalling is when someone shuts down and stops responding. This is often in response to contempt. Stonewalling isn't good for you or your relationship. Instead, take time to be alone and do something that is psychologically soothing until you can come back and have a productive conversation.

### **Resources**

To learn more about Gottman's Four Horsemen visit [The Gottman Institute](#). To continue learning how you can improve your relationship explore [The Utah Marriage Commission website](#).