

The Four Horsemen & Their Antidotes

The **four horsemen** are behaviors that escalate conflict and damage a relationship. Over time, these harmful behaviors may become a normal part of communication between partners.

Antidotes are skills that replace each of the four horsemen. These skills help resolve conflict and encourage positive feelings between partners.



Four Horsemen



Antidotes

Criticism

Dealing with problems through harsh, blaming, or hurtful expressions of judgment or disapproval.

- Focus is on perceived personal flaws rather than changeable behaviors.
- Often met with defensiveness.

"This kitchen is a mess. You're such a slob."

Gentle Startup

Dealing with problems in a calm and gentle way. The focus is on the problem—not the person.

- Save the discussion for an appropriate time.
- Use warm body language and tone of voice.
- Use "I" statements.

"I feel frustrated when dirty dishes are left in the sink. Could you please do the dishes tonight?"

Defensiveness

Deflecting responsibility for your own mistakes and behaviors, or refusing to accept feedback.

- Making excuses for behavior.
- Shifting blame to your partner.

"It isn't my fault I yelled. You were late, not me!"

Take Responsibility

Own up to your behavior without blaming others.

- Avoid taking feedback personally.
- Use feedback as an opportunity to improve.
- Show remorse and apologize.

"I shouldn't have raised my voice. I'm sorry."

Contempt

Showing anger, disgust, or hostility toward your partner.

- Using putdowns or insults.
- Acting superior to your partner.
- Using a mocking or sarcastic tone.

Share Fondness & Admiration

Foster a healthy relationship by regularly showing each other respect and appreciation.

- Show affection.
- Recognize your partner's strengths.
- Give compliments.

Stonewalling

Emotionally withdrawing, shutting down, or going silent during important discussions.

- Often a response to feeling overwhelmed.
- Used to avoid difficult discussions or problems.
- Underlying problems go unresolved.

Use Self-Soothing

Use relaxation techniques to calm down and stay present with your partner.

- Agree to pause the conversation briefly.
- Use deep breathing.
- Use progressive muscle relaxation (PMR).