

Avoiding the Four Horsemen in Relationship

1. **Criticism.** Some forms of criticisms are constructive, but in this case criticism refers to making negative judgments or proclamations about your partner in extreme, absolute terms. A sign that you may be engaging in this more harmful form of criticism is if you catch yourself using terms like “never” and “always”—for example, “You never think about anyone but yourself!” or “You are always so stubborn!”

Note that criticism itself is not necessarily a recipe for relationship failure—the problem with criticism is that excessive or extreme criticism can, over time, lead to the more destructive “horsemen.”

Constructive Alternative: There’s nothing wrong with voicing concerns and complaints in a relationship, but try to do so in a way that focuses on your own feelings (and how your partner’s behavior affects you) for instance by making “I” statements, like “I feel lonely when you come home late for dinner” and mentions specific negative behaviors rather than making global attacks on their entire personality (“I feel irritated when you make plans without me” rather than “You are so inconsiderate!”).

2. **Contempt.** Contempt is a more destructive form of criticism that involves treating your partner with disrespect, disgust, condescension, or ridicule. It may involve mean-spirited sarcasm, dismissive gestures, mockery, eye-rolling, sneering, or name-calling. Contempt can grow over time when the person focuses on the qualities they dislike in their partner and builds up these qualities in their mind. Contempt is often an indicator that we need to give ourselves more self-care.

Constructive Alternative: Instead of keeping score of all your partner’s flaws, consider their positive qualities and the things you appreciate most about them. In fact, it may help to write a list of these qualities and return to it when you need a reminder.

3. **Defensiveness.** Defensiveness tends to arise when people perceive they are being criticized or attacked; it involves making excuses to avoid taking responsibility, or even deflecting blame onto you partner. If you hear someone saying “I didn’t do anything wrong,” or blaming your partner for something else after they have leveled a complaint against you, ask yourself if this is really the case. Even if your partner made some mistakes, that doesn’t free you from the responsibility for things you could have done differently as well. The problem with defensiveness is that it communicates to your partner that you aren’t really listening to her or taking his concerns seriously. And by introducing new grievances, it can also exacerbate the conflict by making your partner feel attacked and defensiveness.

Constructive Alternative: Take the time to hear your partner out and take responsibility when appropriate. A simple genuine apology can go a long way.

4. **Stonewalling.** Stonewalling involves putting a (metaphorical) wall between you and your partner by withdrawing, shutting down, and physically and emotionally distancing yourself from your partner. An example of stonewalling is to give your partner the “silent treatment” or to

abruptly leave without telling your partner where you're going. Stonewalling can sometimes result when the first three "horsemen" accumulate and become overwhelming. Stonewalling is especially destructive because it can create the sense of abandonment and rejection.

Constructive Alternative: If you need time to take a few deep breaths and collect your thoughts, let your partner know, and then return to the conversation when you're ready. This way, your partner will understand that you are taking care of yourself, not trying to reject him.

Adapted from: Greater Good in Action, http://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/avoiding_the_four_horsemen_in_relationships#