



Relationship Red Flags: The Four Horsemen

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As discovered by Dr. John Gottman, a world-renowned professor and researcher on marriage and relationships, there are four negative patterns that predict divorce and other relationship breakdowns. He named them the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and they are: criticism/blame, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.

Here are the definitions:

Criticism: complaining as if there is something defective in your partner's personality.

Defensiveness: the self-protective responses, warding off attack. Two types – Righteous indignation or Innocent victimhood.

Contempt: speaking from a superior plane, a holier-than-thou position. (sulfuric acid for love)

Stonewalling: listener withdrawal from interaction, emotional disengagement.

And here are their impacts on relationships:

Gottman says criticism/blame is really a way of fueling an attack, where you state your complaint as an attack on the other person. It's not constructive, and it winds up leading to an escalation of the conflict.

Defensiveness gets in the way of two people working as a team to figure out a solution. It's usually the first and most natural reaction to blame.

Contempt is the best predictor of divorce, because it makes the other person the problem. You need respect for a relationship to work.

Stonewalling, also known as the silent treatment, is the total withdrawal from engagement with another. Honestly, it's just plain spiteful.

What Gottman reported is that these behaviors exist in every relationship at some level or another. However, when they manifest on a more regular basis, they begin to infect the relationship with toxicity. If you think about it, you might see how these behaviors actually build upon one another as the relationship deteriorates.

In his studies, Gottman also identified specific “antidotes” to each behavior. The common element in all of them is the “repair bid” that move of taking responsibility for one’s own actions and using a softer, gentler approach to resolving the issue.

I’ve found both in my work as a Parenting Coordinator and relationship coach that identifying these behaviors for clients and helping them to identify one another’s repair bid is one of the most powerful tools I can share. When people are more aware of their actions and the unintended impact they have on the relationship, they can make the conscious choice to change those actions. Experience tells me that this holds true in professional relationships as well.