The Four Horsemen

Relationships: Four Conflict Habits and Their Antidotes

The four horsemen are four habits in conflict that wear a relationship down over time: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Psychologist John Gottman identified them by studying couples over many years, and he and psychologist Julie Schwartz Gottman teach an antidote for each one. This worksheet helps you spot the habits and practice the antidotes.

1 The habits and their antidotes

Criticism Antidote: a gentle start-up	Attacking your partner's character instead of the problem: *"You never think about anyone but yourself."* Instead, start with how you feel and what you need: *"I felt let down when you didn't call. I need a heads-up when plans change."*
Contempt Antidote: appreciation and respect	Mocking, eye-rolling, name-calling, or acting superior. Instead, say what you appreciate about your partner and share your feelings without insults.
Defensiveness Antidote: take responsibility	Making excuses or blaming back: *"It's not my fault, you didn't remind me."* Instead, own your part, even if it is small: *"You're right, I forgot. I'm sorry."*
Stonewalling Antidote: a break to calm down	Shutting down or going silent in the middle of an argument. Instead, ask for a pause, take at least 20 minutes to calm down, and then come back to the talk.

Why does this work? *In Gottman's research, couples who used these habits often were more likely to break up later, and contempt was the strongest warning sign. The antidotes keep an argument about the problem, which makes it easier to repair.*

2 Which ones show up for you?

Think about your arguments over the past month. For each habit, write never, sometimes, or often, and when it tends to happen.

Habit	How often?	When it tends to happen
Criticism		
Contempt		
Defensiveness		
Stonewalling		

**This worksheet provides information but is not a substitute for therapy. It works best with guidance from a professional.*

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3 Practice the antidotes

Think of a recent argument. Write something you said or did, which habit it was, and how you could say it with the antidote.

What I said or did	Habit	What I could say instead
"Why do I have to ask you a hundred times?"	*Criticism*	*"I'm feeling stretched. Could you take out the trash tonight?"*

The antidote to contempt is appreciation. One thing my partner does that I appreciate, and when I could tell them:

4 When you feel flooded

Stonewalling often happens when your body is flooded with stress. A planned break helps you both calm down and come back ready to listen.

Signs that I am getting flooded (for example, a racing heart or an urge to leave):

What I will do during a break to calm down:

Words I can use to ask for a break:

Example: "I'm too upset to listen well. Can we take 20 minutes and come back to this?"

These ideas are for everyday conflict between partners who feel safe with each other. If your partner hurts, threatens, or controls you, couples work is not the right first step. A therapist or the National Domestic Violence Hotline (1-800-799-7233) can help.

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