

Romantic Relationships: Managing challenges, developing close bonds



Danger signals in relationships (indicators of decline):

- Ratio of positive interactions to negative interactions is substantially less than 5:1. One to one ratio is high risk for break-up
- Absence of shared positive emotions – little humor, affection, or active interest in one another
- Little to no attempts to soothe or support one another
- *Escalation of negativity not negativity-in-kind* predicts failure (i.e., conflict rapidly escalates leading to name calling and communication breakdown during *escalation*)

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in relationships – relational patterns that lead to loss of connection and attachment:

Relational expert, John Gottman, suggests that each ‘horseman’ paves the way for the next.

1. **Criticism:** Attacking your partner’s personality or character, usually with the intent of making someone right and someone wrong

- Generalizations: “you always...”, “you never...”, “you’re the type of person who ...”
- “Why are you so ...”, “Do you care about anyone besides yourself?”

2. **Defensiveness:** Seeing self as the victim, warding off a perceived attack

- Making excuses (e.g., external circumstances beyond your control forced you to act in a certain way) “It’s not my fault...”, “I didn’t...”
- Cross-complaining: meeting your partner’s complaint or criticism with a complaint of your own, ignoring what your partner said “Well, you don’t care about my...”, “What about the time you...”
- Disagreeing and then cross-complaining “That’s not true, you’re the one who ...”
- Yes-butting: start off agreeing but end up disagreeing “I understand what you’re saying, but...”
- Repeating yourself without paying attention to what the other person is saying “Yeah, yeah, yeah.”
- Whining “It’s not fair”, “There you go again”, “Why do you keep bringing that up?”

3. **Contempt:** Attacking your partner’s sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her

- Insults and name calling: “jerk, bitch, selfish bastard, wimp, fat, stupid, ugly, slob, lazy...”
- Hostile humor, sarcasm or mockery “Poor baby”, “Are we going to run to...”, “Look at you...”
- Body language & tone of voice: sneering, rolling your eyes, curling your upper lip, looking away

4. **Stonewalling:** Withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. Partners may think they are trying to be “neutral” but stonewalling conveys disapproval, icy distance, separation, disconnection, and/or smugness

- Stony silence (a form of passive aggressiveness)
- Monosyllabic mutterings “mmm-hmm”
- Changing the subject “Anyway...”
- Removing yourself physically (fleeing)

Strategies to Identify and Address Relational Concerns

ANTIDOTES to the **Horsemen:**

1. **Criticism** → Expressing a complaint without suggestion that the other person is somehow defective
2. **Defensiveness** → Accepting responsibility for at least part of the problem
3. **Contempt** → Creating a culture of praise and pride, focusing on what is going well in the relationship
4. **Stonewalling** → Self-soothing, giving listener options, staying emotionally connected and supportive

Other Remedies:

- ✓ Learn to make specific complaints & requests: When X happened, I felt Y; I would like Z.
- ✓ Validate your partner: Ask questions; let your partner know what makes sense to you about what is being said; recap what was said; do your best to put yourself in your partner’s shoes.
- ✓ Shift to appreciation: 5 times as many positive expressions & interactions as negative.
- ✓ Claim responsibility: “What can I learn from this?” & “What can I do about it?”
- ✓ Re-write your inner script: Replace thoughts of righteous indignation or innocent victimization with thoughts of responsibility and appreciation; thoughts that are soothing & validating.
- ✓ Practice getting undefended: Pick battles; allow the small issues to be what they really are: unique aspects of each of you, puffs of air, venting; let go of the stories that you are making up.

Adapted by Lyndon Aguiar, Ph.D., from *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by Gottman, J. M. (2000)

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