The Four Horsemen

Recognizing destructive conflict patterns - and replacing them with healthier responses

Conflict is normal. The concern is not whether partners disagree, but whether conflict repeatedly becomes attacking, disrespectful, defensive, or emotionally disconnected. These patterns can be changed with awareness, practice, and repair.

1 CRITICISM

Attacking the person's character instead of addressing a specific behavior or concern.

Sounds like: *"You never care about anyone but yourself."*

ANTIDOTE: GENTLE STARTUP

Describe what happened, name your feeling, and make a clear request.

Try: *"I felt overwhelmed when the kitchen was left messy. Could we clean it together tonight?"*

2 CONTEMPT

Communicating disgust, superiority, disrespect, mockery, sarcasm, or ridicule.

Sounds like: *"Of course you forgot. You're completely useless."*

ANTIDOTE: BUILD APPRECIATION AND RESPECT

Speak from a position of equality. Notice strengths and express appreciation regularly.

Try: *"I'm frustrated that this was missed, but I know you've had a lot going on. Can we make a plan?"*

3 DEFENSIVENESS

Responding with excuses, denial, blame, counterattacks, or victimhood rather than hearing the concern.

Sounds like: *"It's not my fault. You should have reminded me."*

ANTIDOTE: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Accept the part that is true, even when you do not agree with everything being said.

Try: *"You're right—I forgot. I can see why that was frustrating. I'll take care of it now."*

4 STONEWALLING

Shutting down, withdrawing, going silent, or disengaging because conflict feels overwhelming.

Sounds like: *Looking away, refusing to respond, leaving without explanation, or emotionally checking out.*

ANTIDOTE: SELF-SOOTHE, THEN RETURN

Ask for a break, calm your body, and name a specific time to resume the conversation.

Try: *"I'm too flooded to talk productively. I need 30 minutes, and I will come back at 7:30."*

Turning Conflict Into Connection

The goal is not perfect communication. The goal is to notice the pattern early, slow down, and make a repair before the conflict escalates.

WHEN YOU NOTICE A HORSEMAN

- ✓ Pause before responding.
- ✓ Name the pattern without attacking: "We're getting defensive."
- ✓ Lower your voice and slow your pace.
- ✓ Focus on one issue at a time.
- ✓ Ask for what you need instead of describing what is wrong with your partner.

USE A REPAIR ATTEMPT

- ✓ *"Can we start this conversation over?"*
- ✓ *"That came out more harshly than I intended."*
- ✓ *"I understand why you feel that way."*
- ✓ *"We are on the same team."*
- ✓ *"Let's take a break and come back when we can listen better."*

When You Become Flooded

Flooding means your body is in a high-arousal stress response. Thinking, listening, and empathy become harder. Take at least 20 minutes to settle your nervous system, but avoid rehearsing the argument. Walk, breathe slowly, stretch, listen to calming music, or do another neutral activity. Always agree on when you will return.

Personal Reflection

The horseman I am most likely to use is:

_____

The situations that tend to trigger this pattern are:

_____

What I may be feeling or needing underneath the pattern:

_____

The antidote I will practice this week:

_____

A repair statement I can use:

_____

KEY IDEA: Notice the pattern. Pause the escalation. Use the antidote. Repair and reconnect.

Attribution: The Four Horsemen, their antidotes, flooding, and repair are Gottman Method concepts. See Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (2015), *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* (rev. ed.).
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