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## THE 'FOUR HORSEMEN' WHO THREATEN YOUR RELATIONSHIP

Good love relationships do not just happen spontaneously when a couple decide to get together. This idea is a fallacy in the same vein of the Hollywood nonsense – “love is never having to say you’re sorry”. Healthy intimate partnerships are skillfully crafted applying principles that work and avoiding those things which do not work and are destructive.

John and Julie Gottman – highly regarded relationship research/counsellors from Seattle, Washington – have identified four destructive behaviors to avoid in love-based relationships. They call them “The Four Horsemen” and identify these destructive riders as:

1. Criticism
2. Contempt
3. Defensiveness
4. Stonewalling

### **CRITICISM – the first horseman**

There is a fundamental difference between voicing displeasure or dissatisfaction over something, and criticizing a partner. For example, it is perfectly acceptable to say, “I am disappointed we did not get to spend very much time together over the long weekend”. It is destructive to say, “I don’t know what is wrong with you, but you are so absorbed with you family that you have no time for me!” The former is an invitation to discuss hurt feelings and disappointment to the ends of finding a workable solution to a problem, the latter is an attack on the character of the partner.

Months or years of this kind of character attack will result in resentment and justification for the attacked partner to become defensive and contemptuous as a result of feeling hurt, rejected and emotionally assaulted.

### **CONTEMPT – the second horseman**

Contempt is manifested in disrespect, sarcasm (the lowest form of wit), intimidation and name calling. The destructive objective of contempt is to cause the companion to feel despised and worthless. This destructive tango happens when one partner feels hurt by the other and desires to hurt back so as to cause equal or greater hurt to their partner. For example, when one partner feels hurt because they did not get to spend much quality time with the other over the long weekend, they criticize their partner who in turn responds with contempt, “What are you, some kind of dependent baby needing me to hold your hand – grow up and get a life. Your neediness sickens me!” This personal attack causes them to become defensive in an attempt to protect their emotional vulnerability.

## DEFENSIVENESS – the third horseman

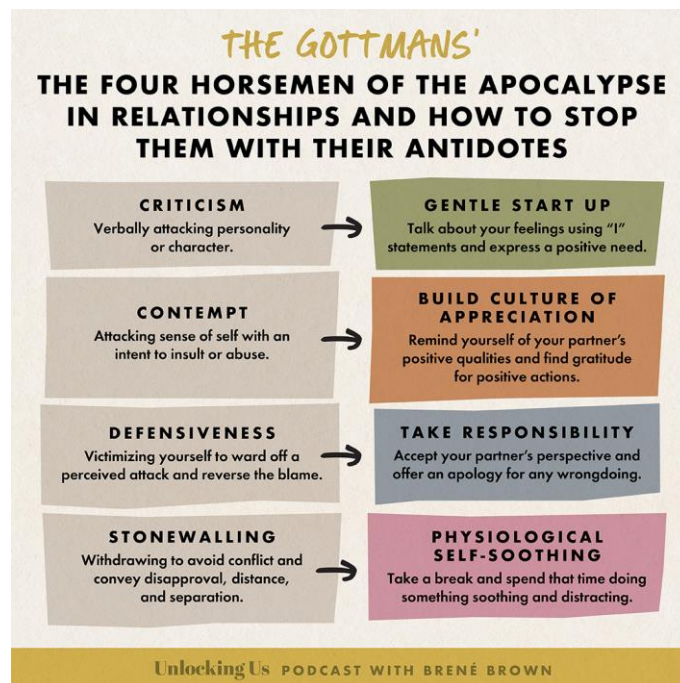
A typical response to contempt is defensiveness. For example, one of the partners protests, “If you don’t want to spend any time with me there are plenty of others who would love to. You can have your family but I will find someone who wants to spend time with me!” You can no doubt see that this fight is going nowhere but down! Criticism leads to contempt which in turn results in defensiveness and this typically results in the arrival of the fourth horseman – stonewalling.

## STONEWALLING – the fourth horseman

Now the other partner feels threatened by being abandoned and betrayed. Unsurprisingly they withdraw, shut down emotionally and become uncommunicative - this is stonewalling. Their silence is a form of punishment and no amount of cajoling or manipulation will shake them out of their closed mouth silence. When a partner withdraws and refuses to speak to their companion, they are subjecting them to a very powerful form of punishment - and they do it because it works!

This whole scenario came about because one partner wanted to spend more time with their companion. Rather than acknowledge the expressed unhappiness and disappointment, what followed was a cascading emotional melt down that resulted in even deeper hurt caused by the arrival of the four horsemen; criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. There can be no room for these harbingers of hurt in a couple’s relationship because over time they will poison any love and tenderness between them. Identify them and let them have no place in your relationship for they will certainly bring destruction.

The Gottman’s are so confident of their research-based findings involving “The Four Horsemen” that they predict the eventual separation and divorce of any couple who do not hold these mounted invaders in check and away from their relationship. For more information, see their excellent book “Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work”.



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