



Antidotes to the Four Horsemen

September 2021

In the June issue of our “Choices” newsletter, we introduced you to the Four Horsemen – destructive forms of communication and behavior that damage or destroy love relationships (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling). These four mounted invaders are essentially dysfunctional ways of interacting and will reek havoc on any love relationship. They were identified and named by Relationship Counsellors and Researchers John and Julie Gottman of Seattle, Washington. The Gottman’s also have identified the antidotes (constructive alternatives) of the Four Horsemen: Gentle Start-up; Building a Culture of Appreciation; Taking Responsibility; and Physiological Self-soothing.

Gentle Start-up – antidote to criticism

Just as the name implies, a gentle start-up means easing into a **legitimate complaint** respectfully and gently. For example, “I really appreciate that you do my laundry - it just appears on the bed folded and ready for me to put away - thank you. When you wash my sweaters can I make a special request? Please do not put them in the dryer as they tend to shrink and get pulled out of shape, just drape them on the drying rack and let them air dry and then I will put them away”. Alternatively, an example of criticism is, “I have asked you a thousand times to stop shrinking my sweaters by throwing them in to the dryer – what is wrong with you – it is such a simple request!” Gentle start-up in essence is, **complain without blame**. We have no right to criticize and attack our partner’s character and when we do, we only damage our relationship. A typical unhealthy response to criticism is contempt.



Build a Culture of Appreciation and Respect - antidote to contempt

As the name implies this aspect of relationship enhancement is **built little by little over time**. It involves treating each other with kindness and respect, gentleness and curtesy. In other words, **treating each other as though you like and care for one another**. Building a culture of appreciation and respect is achieved by **doing small things often**. When we speak and behave as though we love and care for our partner, we regularly express **affection** (“I love you”), **appreciation** (“Thank you for doing my laundry”), **gratitude** (I am so happy you are in my life), and **respect** (I do not always agree with you but your perspective is always important to me). When we do these kinds of things regularly, they become second nature to us (habits) and our relationship grows and thrives. A goal to aim for is what the Gottman’s refer to as the **5:1 magic ratio** - that means when our positive interactions out number our negative interactions 5 to 1 - we are well on our way to building an emotionally healthy love relationship.

Taking Responsibility - antidote to defensiveness

When we feel attacked by our partner, we tend to get defensive in an attempt to protect ourselves. When under attack we may feel a sense of being an **innocent victim** who responds with “righteous” indignation. For instance, if you agreed to move your clutter out of the spare room and several weeks have past and the clutter is still unmoved and your partner calls you on it, rather than saying, “Oh yeah, I’ve been so tired from work that when I get home I just want to relax. Besides, I think it is unreasonable of you to expect me to start moving my stuff when I feel exhausted!” Instead, take responsibility for not doing what you said you would do. For example, “I know you are disappointed and frustrated that I haven’t cleared my stuff out of the spare room. I have been really busy at work, but I promise it will be my top priority this Saturday”. You are **validating** your partners feelings (disappointment and frustration), giving a **reasonable explanation** (tired from work), **taking responsibility** (did not do what you said you would do), and **committing** to do what promised in a reasonable time frame.

Physiological Self-soothing - antidote to Stonewalling

Stonewalling is a dysfunctional attempt to protect ourselves from an emotional attack. A healthy alternative is to self-soothe – which means taking time-out to cool down when communication starts to heat up or is getting out of control (that is when the gloves come off and we start to fight dirty). It prevents us from going underground (stonewalling) when we feel emotionally overwhelmed. During the time-out self-soothing is used as a means of calming ourselves, talking ourselves down, breathing deeply or going for a short walk – that is, doing something different that is positive - so as to regain perspective, objectivity and a constructive desire to solve the issue/problem amicably. Whoever calls the time-out is responsible to call time-in again within a reasonable period of time (typically 5-15 minutes) and the conversation resumes without emotional hostility or confrontation.

Here is an example of self-soothing: You and your partner are discussing ways of bringing your budget under control. One or both of you start to get frustrated and angry. The conversation is starting to heat-up and voices are getting louder and you are beginning to get **over-stimulated** – an experience referred to as **flooding**. When we flood our heart and breathing rates increase as the body prepares its self to either go into fight or flight mode because we are feeling threatened. An unhealthy emotional response is to stonewall, but a healthy emotional response is to self-soothe and call a brief time-out to recalibrate and reset our selves emotionally. When you flood tell your partner you are flooding and need time to calm down. Then go for a **short walk**, or **splash some cold water on your face, breathe deeply and slowly** (in through your nose and out through your mouth), all the time **giving yourself a good talking to**. Something like, “Okay Buddy/Girl, you need to calm down here. You are getting yourself really worked up and bent out of shape. This is not a war – this is my partner who I love and care about. We have to stop spending money as recklessly as we have been, and I am over-reacting. So, breathe deeply for a few minutes and then get back in there and remember you are both on the same team, attempting to come up with a mutually agreeable solution to **our** problem. You can do this!” Then call time-in and have another go at finding a way to curtail spending.

Important note: The technique of physiological self-soothing assumes that the couple actually like and care about each other, and are genuinely seeking to improve the quality of their relationship and skill level in resolving conflict. Like any new skill, learning and applying the antidotes to the Four Horsemen will take time and practice, but for couples who are serious about building a healthy way of communicating and strengthening their relationship, it will be time and effort well spent. Remember, you only get out of a relationship what you invest in it.

Source: The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. John Gottman. Three Rivers Press. New York. 1999

UPDATE

In office, telephone & video counselling

Effective 13 September 2021, Vancouver Island Counselling (VIC) will begin to offer a measured return to in-person/in-office counselling appointments. We ask for your patience and your continued support as we seek to meet a variety of appointment scheduling needs. **VIC closely monitors and adheres to current covid protocols which include the wearing of masks at all times in our offices and during counselling appointments.**

Please note that VIC will continue to provide secure video and telehealth sessions for all those who wish to participate in these highly effective and well-received forms of counselling care.



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