

Anxiously Engaged

Supplemental Lesson

How to Fight Well

Part 1: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Thanks to Brianna Koener for her original work on this lesson

Disagreements are part of all marital relationships. But disagreements don't have to be negative. In fact, disagreements in a relationship can—in some instances—be an opportunity for growth. The purpose of this lesson is to consider destructive communication patterns that can happen during a disagreement and how to avoid these patterns. Renowned marriage therapist John Gottman¹ has written frequently about these destructive conflict communication patterns and he refers to them as “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” We will discuss the “Four Horsemen” and then in the following lesson we will consider “antidotes” for each of the horsemen so that you can learn “fight well.”

The Four Horsemen

1. Criticism can be seen in an argument when a partner is verbally attacking the personality or character of the other partner. Criticism in an argument may sound like this, “You are always so selfish. You only think about yourself and never think about what I feel.” In this example, one partner is clearly attacking the character of the other partner by calling them a selfish person.

Activity #1: “Never” and “Always”

- Consider the scenario above. Instead of keeping the disagreement specific to the current situation, the words “always” and “never” make a universal statement about a person's character and can quickly put the other person on the defensive.
 - How do you feel about the words “always” and “never?” How can we work to exclude them from our conflict conversations?
 - How could I do better in keeping my communication specific to the conflict at hand?
2. Contempt is also a type of attack. An example of contempt would be mocking your partner, calling them names, eye rolling, scoffing, or projecting an overall sense of superiority. An example of contempt would be rolling your eyes as you say, “Why are you so stupid? The laundry is not that hard to figure out, I could train a monkey and it would do better than you.” (Sometimes words are not even needed; eye-rolling and other gestures can communicate contempt.) Contempt often comes from continuous negative thoughts about your partner that fester and cause a sense of superiority. Dr. Gottman asserts that this is actually the most deadly of the “four horsemen.”



Activity #2: Discuss the following:

- Have you felt that I've conveyed contempt (either verbal or non-verbal) to you in our conversations?
 - If so, how did that make you feel?
 - How can I do better in this area?
3. **Defensiveness** is when you put yourself in the place of the victim to avoid and reverse blame. Defensiveness usually happens when we feel that our spouse has accused us of something we feel is unjust. An example of a defensive response may sound like this, "I was too busy to pick up groceries today because I was trying to take care of all of your problems. Why can't you go get the groceries?" Defensiveness is extremely easy to slip into when you feel you have been wrongly accused.
4. **Stonewalling** is the final horseman. Stonewalling is when a partner purposefully withdraws from a difficult conversation and stops responding. A person can participate in stonewalling by walking away, acting busy, or ignoring. This can exacerbate the argument even more and lead to damaged trust in partnerships.

Activity #3: Stonewalling

- Consider your family of origin and then discuss the following questions:
- Did the communication patterns in your family include ignoring, "not dealing" or giving the silent treatment? If so, do you notice that you tend toward these patterns in conflict conversations? If so, in what way do you stonewall?

Conflict communication doesn't have to be negative. As we recognize the signs of "The four horsemen of the

THE BOTTOM LINE

apocalypse," we can intentionally work to avoid them in our communication patterns. Make sure to do the next online lesson – How to fight well, Part 2: The four antidotes to the four horsemen of the apocalypse - to learn about Dr. Gottman's specific antidotes to the four horsemen.

¹ [The Gottman Institute's "Four Horsemen"](#)

More resources on John Gottman's "Four Horsemen:" [The Gottman Institute](#)