

Anxiously Engaged

Supplemental Lesson

How to Fight Well

Part 2: The Four Antidotes to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Thanks to Brianna Koener for her original work on this lesson

As discussed in the previous lesson- How to fight well, Part 1, The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse- it is important to recognize destructive conflict communication patterns so that you can work toward healthier conflict patterns. This lesson will discuss John Gottman's specific antidotes for each of the four horsemen.

The Four Antidotes

1. Gentle Start Up

The antidote to criticism is the "gentle start up." Let's say your spouse criticizes you for not doing the dishes. Instead of responding back with additional criticism, a gentle start up might look something like this: "I was so overwhelmed today, doing the dishes completely slipped my mind. Can we talk for a moment about what happened today at work?" In this gentle start up you can see that it includes talking about your feelings using "I" statements and expressing a positive need. This can release the negative tension in the conflict and help your partner understand the reasoning behind an action (or inaction).

Activity #1: Practicing a gentle startup

Consider the following example and discuss ways you could gently start and respond in this example.

- Spouse A and B were supposed to meet for lunch, but Spouse A was 25 minutes late. Again.
 - What's an example of a gentle startup that Spouse B could use to express frustration about Spouse A's tardiness?
 - How could this gentle startup be useful?
- How often do I start conflict conversations gently?
- What would a gentle start look like to you?
- How frequently do I use "I statements" in our relationship disagreements?

2. Build a Culture of Appreciation

The antidote for contempt is building a culture of appreciation. Because contempt often stems from a negative pattern of thinking about your partner, the way to combat contempt is to remind yourself of the positive qualities in your partner and to express gratitude for positive actions. As you continue to look for the positive qualities in your partner, the tendency to feel superior to your partner can fade with gratitude.

Activity #2: Building a culture of appreciation

- Privately, each of you write down a list of 7 things you appreciate about your spouse.
- Express one item from the list right now.
- In the next week or so, try to express gratitude to your spouse for each of the other items on your "appreciation list."

3. Take Responsibility

The antidote for defensiveness is taking responsibility for your actions. This means that when your partner expresses a complaint, try to accept your partner's perspective and offer an apology for anything you may have done. An example may look like this, "I know how embarrassing it is for you when we get places late. I am sorry I took so long getting ready. I will try to get ready earlier next time." It takes a great deal of humility to admit a mistake, but it can open doors for improvement and forgiveness in a relationship.

Activity #3: Taking responsibility

Reflect on the scenario from Activity #1 and then discuss the following:

- How could Spouse A respond to Spouse B's gentle startup?
- How could this response make a difference in the conversation?
- What role do you feel humility plays in taking responsibility in conflict conversations?

4. Physiological Self-Soothing

The antidote for stonewalling is physiological self-soothing. Stonewalling often happens in response to an intense burst of emotion called flooding. Flooding typically happens in the tense moments of an argument. When you feel yourself starting to get emotionally overwhelmed in an argument, it is a good idea to let your partner know you need a break or a time-out. When you take a time-out, agree on a set amount of time and then spend time doing something that helps you calm down. After a time apart to cool down, you can continue the conversation in a more productive and calm manner.

Activity #4: Self soothing

- What do you think about the idea of taking a break/time out when we get emotionally overwhelmed in an argument?
- How could you signal with gestures, not words, that you need a break/time out?
- What is an activity that you do that helps you calm down?

THE BOTTOM LINE

As you strive to implement these antidotes into your relationship disagreements, your relationship will continue to develop into something beautiful. This relationship possibility is reflected in the words of the Elder F. Burton Howard, "If you want something to last forever, you treat it differently. You shield it and protect it. You never abuse it. You don't expose it to the elements. You don't make it common or ordinary. It becomes special because you have made it so, and it grows more beautiful and precious as time goes by."

¹ [Gottman Institute, The Four Horsemen: The antidotes](#)

² [Elder F. Burton Howard, "Eternal Marriage," April 2003](#)