

The Top 4 Behaviors That Doom Relationships— And What To Do About Them

by Fernando Lopez

There are 4 toxic behaviors that are so lethal to a relationship that John Gottman (relationship expert and best-selling author) calls them the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They are criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling.

As you read the description of each of these behaviors below, notice which ones are present in your relationships.

Under each behavior, I have included antidotes that neutralize their toxicity whether you are the *receiver* or the *giver* of them. If you are the recipient of a Horseman behavior, your responsibility is to respond with one of the antidotes instead of reacting with more counterproductive Horseman behavior. It might feel a bit like swallowing your pride, but you will like the results. When you stop using these behaviors, you will see that your partner also stops, because the Horsemen cannot live alone.

Horsemen behaviors have their root in powerlessness—they often happen when people are otherwise feeling powerless vis-à-vis the situation they're in. So it might seem paradoxical but when somebody is using horsemen, you need to bring them more into their power rather than making them feel even more powerless.

1: Blame/Criticism.

Criticism consists of attacking or blaming your partner instead of his behavior. You will always have some complaints about your partner. But there's a big difference between a complaint and a criticism. A complaint addresses a specific failed action. A criticism adds some negative words about your partner's character or personality. For example, adding at the end of any complaint: "What is wrong with you?" will turn it into criticism.

Question to mull over: When are you critical of your partner?

Antidotes

1. As mentioned above, complain about a specific behavior instead of criticizing the person.
2. Go one step further and turn those complaints into requests instead. Examples:
 - a. *If you are being critical:* instead of saying "you didn't tell me about the event", say "I don't want to miss another one of those events; what do you think of putting all events in the company calendar from now on? Will you do it?"

- b. *If your partner is being critical:* Listen for the reasonable request embedded in the complaint. If you hear “you didn’t tell me about the event”, simply say: “I’m sorry. Would you like me to add this kind of events to the company calendar so that it is not an issue in the future?” This is in stark comparison to defending yourself (e.g. “You didn’t tell me you wanted to go”)--which is basically saying, it’s your fault because you didn’t tell me you wanted to go. It escalates the conflict and it doesn’t catalyze any positive change.

Remember that requests are not demands. To make a true request, you have to communicate that a counteroffer or a negative answer are valid and respected responses. (You can also make demands, but don’t disguise them as requests).

3. Don’t make the situation personal: Focus on “What does the relationship need from us now” instead of “Who is doing what to whom”. By being clear that blame won’t get you anywhere, you can focus on the changes the two of you need to make to take care of the issue.
4. When receiving criticism, hold the attitude that the person criticizing you is doing so because s/he cares about what you do, not because s/he wants to make you feel bad or nag you. It is their unskillful attempt to give you useful feedback. Holding this perspective, have a conversation with them about how they can present complaints and criticism in a more useful and acceptable manner to you.
5. Look at what’s your contribution to the problem you’re feeling critical about or being criticized for. Even if your partner had a bigger contribution, you will feel less powerless if you are aware of how you contributed to the problem also and what you can change about it regardless of what your partner does.
6. Apologize. Even if in your opinion you weren’t being critical, what counts is what the listener experienced. Remain curious about the impact of what you say and take responsibility and clean up any messes.

2: Defensiveness.

Although it’s understandable that you would defend yourself when criticized, research shows that this approach rarely works. An attacking partner does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really another way of blaming. It’s in effect saying: “it’s not me, it’s you”, and it escalates the conflict. It is common for the defensive partner to feel like he is above the conflict, when in fact, he is contributing to the conflict just as much.

Question to mull over: When do you react with defensiveness or fail to take responsibility for your contribution to problems?

Antidotes

1. If you are feeling defensive:

- a. Repeat what you heard and ask for clarification. For example: "I'm hearing you say that I am not trustworthy. Can you clarify that?"
 - b. Search for the "2%" truth in what you are hearing. For example: It is true that I often don't leave enough time for unpredictable delays and I can see how that would make me untrustworthy.
2. If your partner is getting defensive:
 - a. Ask them what they heard you say. It is quite possible that they misunderstood you or that they felt criticized without you being aware of it. Take responsibility for your impact and rephrase what you wanted to say.
 - b. Show your partner that you respect and trust him and that his image is not at stake (assuming that is true). This will lower his defenses and you'll have a more productive conversation.
 3. Active listening. Usually people get defensive when they don't feel heard. Make sure you're conveying to the other person that you are understanding what s/he is saying.

3: Contempt.

Contempt includes sarcasm, belittling, cynicism, name-calling, hostile humor, and belligerence. Contempt is the most poisonous of all horsemen because it conveys disgust and condescension. It has been shown to be harmful to the physical health of an individual. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about a partner. You're more likely to have such thoughts if your differences are not regularly resolved after they occur.

Question to mull over: When do you act with contempt of others?

Antidotes

1. If your partner is acting contemptuously:
 - a. Express your feelings, identify the unwanted behavior, and indicate a willingness to resolve the situation. Speak appropriately for the cultural context you're in. Example:
"Hey, Mark. Cool out, man. I'm starting to get angry. I don't like it when people call me names. Can we work this out like friends?"
As in the example above, avoid using "you" statements and assuming that you know what the solution is.
 - b. Try asking: "What is your intention in saying that?" They may not be aware that they sound contemptuous to you. Clarifying their intention will help to get at the deeper purpose under what is being said.

- c. Or ask: "Are you aware of your impact right now? (Explain your experience) Is it the impact you want to have?" People sometimes use horsemen unconsciously and don't know what else they can use.
2. If you are feeling contemptuous:
 - a. Use this sentence: "I feel ... I want ..." (e.g. "I am feeling contempt towards you, I want to be able to respect you and understand you.") Note that in this sentence, what you want has to do with yourself, not with what you want the other person to do.
 - b. Realize that respect is given, not earned. If you don't respect someone, take this to be about your inability to see the greatness, creativity, and resourcefulness that lives in that person, not about that person's lower value as a human being. Your actions (even if they are strong corrective actions) will be much more effective when you do them from respect rather than contempt. Constructive conflict is only possible from a basis of respect.
 3. Stop any sarcasm, cynicism, name-calling, belligerence, etc. Saying "I'm sarcastic/cynical and that is the way I am" is not an excuse! It is harming your relationships more than you think. Be funny and interesting in other ways.
 4. Create a culture of in your relationships of fondness and admiration. Learn about your partners. Seek to understand them and acknowledge them first.

4: Stonewalling.

Stonewalling includes cutting off communication, silent treatments, refusals to engage, withdrawal, or in mild cases simply being reluctant to express directly what you are thinking. Often, after one or more of the previous horsemen have been running wild, a partner will want to tune out of the whole thing and stonewall. The problem is that this will feed even more the contempt in the other partner.

Question to mull over: What areas do you avoid talking about?

Antidotes

1. If you are flooded, find a way to self-soothe. Do you have a meditation or relaxation practice?
2. Look at your fear of speaking; what information is it giving you? What part of your identity is at stake? Get grounded in who you really are before speaking.
3. Differentiate between fear and actual danger involved if you say something. If there is actual danger, you don't want to expose yourself to it, but it may be useful to explain the reason for withholding the information.
4. What safety conditions can you design with your partner so that you (or he) are better able to speak directly? Perhaps you can set a specific time to talk, set some confidentiality about what is spoken, and meet at a neutral place.

5. If your partner is stonewalling you, take a look at what you are doing that makes him not feel safe expressing himself. Do you feel contempt? Have you not valued his ideas in the past? Have you been judgmental?

What's next?

Focus on how you want to be regardless of what your partner does. That will make a big difference in itself because horsemen have a hard time living alone.

Behaviorally rehearse the antidotes you want to use, so that when you actually need them you know what to do. At the same time, know that specific “techniques” you use are only as good as the attitude you say them with. Likewise, if you have cultivated the right attitude, you may not need a specific technique.

Stay curious and find your own antidotes. Name the Horsemen when you notice them (but not in a blaming or critical way) and then get curious about them. Examples: “We are getting defensive” or “We are being critical”—“what is happening?” “What will help us work through this?”

Find ways to add positivity to your relationship. A “reservoir” of positivity will help deal with Horsemen when they show up. Having conversations about the things that do work well about the team or relationship is a powerful way of creating positivity and moving away from Horsemen behavior. Creating positivity and articulating what you appreciate about your partners may in fact be the most powerful Horsemen antidote you can use.

Questions or comments? Please email me at: fernando@flopez.com

Bibliography and Acknowledgements

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