

The Four Horsemen

FOUR COMMUNICATION PATTERNS THAT PREDICT RELATIONSHIP DISTRESS

Through decades of observing couples, psychologist John Gottman identified four communication patterns that reliably predict relationship breakdown when they become habitual. They tend to build on each other — but each has a research-backed antidote.

01 — CRITICISM

Attacking Character

Framing a complaint as an attack on your partner's character. ("You always..." "You never...")



ANTIDOTE

Gentle Start-Up

Raise the issue as a specific need, using "I" statements instead of blame. ("I feel... when... I need...")

02 — CONTEMPT

Disrespect & Disgust

Mockery, sarcasm, eye-rolling or name-calling that conveys superiority. The single strongest predictor of relationship breakdown.



ANTIDOTE

Culture of Appreciation

Deliberately build fondness and respect — noticing and naming what you appreciate in your partner, even during conflict.

03 — DEFENSIVENESS

Deflecting Responsibility

Responding to a concern with self-protection, counter-blame or playing the victim rather than hearing it.



ANTIDOTE

Take Responsibility

Accept even a small part of the concern as valid, before explaining your own perspective.

04 — STONEWALLING

Shutting Down

Withdrawing from the conversation emotionally or physically, often as a response to feeling overwhelmed.



ANTIDOTE

Self-Soothe, Then Return

Take a genuine break — at least twenty minutes — to calm the body, then agree to return to the conversation.

These patterns are common under stress. Noticing them is the first step — not a sign the relationship is doomed.

SOURCES

Gottman, J.M. & Silver, N. (1999). The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work. Crown Publishers.
Gottman, J.M. & Levenson, R.W. (1992). Marital processes predictive of later dissolution. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 63(2), 221–233.

NOTE

Evidence-informed educational resource.