

**WILL YOUR RELATIONSHIP SURVIVE?
THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE**
by Marlene Neufeld, MSW, RSW and Bob Neufeld, M.Ed.

There are four attitudes which have been found to predict relationship failure. These are criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. When these attitudes are present in a relationship, especially when more than one is present, then there is a very good chance that the relationship will not survive.

Dr. John Gottman, a psychologist at the University of Washington, studied more than 2,000 married couples over two decades. He discovered patterns about how partners relate to each other which can be used to predict – with 94% accuracy – which marriages will succeed and which will fail. Gottman says that each horseman paves the way for the next. (Gottman, John. 1994. Why Marriages Succeed or Fail)

1. **Criticism:** Criticism is the act of finding fault or judging unfavorably. When you criticize your partner, you attack your partner's personality or character, usually with the intent of making yourself right and your partner wrong. Criticism includes generalizations such as "you always...", "you never..." and "you're the type of person who ..."
2. **Contempt:** Contempt is a feeling of disdain or scorn. Contempt attacks your partner's sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her. Typical contemptuous comments made by partners include insults and name calling, hostile humor, sarcasm or mockery as well as contemptuous body language and tone of voice: sneering, rolling your eyes, curling your upper lip.
3. **Defensiveness:** Defensiveness is seeing yourself as the victim and warding off a perceived attack. When partners are defensive they are not open to learning and are also not able to access the vulnerable feelings underneath. Some typical defensive responses are:
 - Making excuses (e.g., external circumstances beyond your control forced you to act in a certain way) "It's not my fault...", "I didn't..."
 - Cross-complaining: meeting your partner's complaint, or criticism with a complaint of your own, ignoring what your partner said.
 - Disagreeing and then cross-complaining "That's not true, you're the one who ..."
 - Yes-butting: start off agreeing but end up disagreeing.
 - Repeating yourself without paying attention to what the other person is saying.
 - Whining "It's not fair."
4. **Stonewalling:** Stonewalling is withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. Partners may think they are trying to be "neutral" but stonewalling conveys disapproval, icy distance, separation, disconnection, and/or smugness. Some typical stonewall responses are stony silence, monosyllabic mutterings, changing the subject and removing yourself physically. Stonewalling is considered to be the most "dangerous" of the four horsemen.

So what can you do if you notice yourself participating in criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and/or stonewalling?

1. Learn to make specific complaints and requests (when X happened, I felt Y, I want Z)
2. Learn to communicate consciously by speaking the unarguable truth.
3. Learn to listen generously. Listen for accuracy, and with empathy. Listen for what your partner really wants.
4. Validate your partner (let your partner know what makes sense to you about what they are saying; let them know you understand what they are feeling, see through their eyes).
5. Shift to appreciation (5 positive interactions are necessary to compensate for one negative interaction)
6. Claim responsibility: “What can I learn from this?” & “What can **I** do about it?”
7. Re-write your inner script (notice when you are thinking critical, contemptuous or defensive thoughts).
8. Practice getting undefended (allowing your partner’s utterances to be what they really are: just thoughts and puffs of air) and let go of the stories that you are making up.

Marlene & Bob Neufeld practice body-centered Coaching and Therapy. They specialize in “2 on 2 couples coaching” and in experiential group playshops. For more information about their next Couples Course call 613-594-9248 or see www.marleneandbob.com. See www.marleneandbob.com for a Self-test to determine if you are riding the 4 horsemen.