



THE FOUR HORSEMEN & THEIR ANTIDOTES

A GOTTMAN METHOD RELATIONSHIP TOOL

The Gottman Institute describes four communication patterns that can damage connection during conflict: **criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling**. The goal is not to avoid disagreement, but to recognize these patterns and replace them with healthier responses.

1. CRITICISM

Attacking your partner's character or personality rather than addressing a specific behavior or concern. It often sounds like blame, judgment, or "you always/you never."

ANTIDOTE: GENTLE START-UP

Describe what is happening without blame. Use "I" statements, name your feeling, and make a positive, specific request.

Instead of: "You never listen to me. You only care about yourself."

Try: "I'm feeling unheard right now. I need a few minutes where I can share what's on my mind. Can you listen before we problem-solve?"

2. CONTEMPT

Communicating from a position of superiority. It can show up as sarcasm, mockery, insults, eye-rolling, sneering, hostile humor, or treating your partner as beneath you.

ANTIDOTE: BUILD A CULTURE OF APPRECIATION & RESPECT

Practice noticing and expressing what you value. Use respect even when frustrated. Make requests without attacking your partner's worth or character.

Instead of: "Of course you forgot again. You're unbelievable."

Try: "I know you have a lot going on. This matters to me, and I'd appreciate it if you would take care of it today."



3. DEFENSIVENESS

Protecting yourself by making excuses, denying responsibility, counterattacking, or shifting the blame back to your partner.

ANTIDOTE: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Look for the part of the problem that belongs to you - even if it is only a small part. Acknowledging your contribution does not mean accepting all of the blame.

Instead of: "This isn't my fault. You're the one who made us late."

Try: "You're right that I could have been more prepared. I can take responsibility for my part."

4. STONEWALLING

Withdrawing from the interaction: shutting down, going silent, turning away, or becoming emotionally unavailable. It often happens when someone is physiologically flooded or overwhelmed.

ANTIDOTE: PHYSIOLOGICAL SELF-SOOTHING

Pause the conflict before you shut down. Take a break long enough for your body to settle, do something genuinely calming, and return to the conversation at an agreed time.

Instead of: Going silent, walking away without explanation, or refusing to respond.

Try: "I'm getting overwhelmed and I don't want to shut down. I need a break. Let's come back to this after I've had time to calm down."

A QUICK WAY TO REMEMBER

Criticism	→ Gentle start-up	Contempt	→ Appreciation & respect
Defensiveness	→ Take responsibility	Stonewalling	→ Self-soothe & return

Reference: Adapted for client education from The Gottman Institute's "The Four Horsemen: The Antidotes," based on the work of Drs. John and Julie Gottman. The Gottman Institute, gottman.com. This handout is independently prepared by Sike & Spirit Counseling and is not an official Gottman Institute publication.