RELATIONSHIP KILLERS

and a prescription for better health

Kathy Krentkowski, MA, LCPC, LMHC

There is no perfect relationship. Any time two imperfect people connect, misunderstandings and emotional disconnection are bound to happen. However, there are warning signs to heed that may indicate a threat of severe relationship breakdown. Learn about these signs to know what to watch for and how to course-correct before it's too late.

Researchers and creators of the Love Lab in Washington state, Drs. John and Julie Gottman, offer insight into destructive communication patterns named the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse'. These patterns can predict with over 90% accuracy that the end of a relationship is near. If you see any of these warning signs in your relationship, take notice and seek help.

1. Defensiveness

Communication breaks down when defensiveness shows up. Defensiveness is a posture one takes when feeling attacked and presents oneself as the victim. Self-centered in nature, defensiveness seeks to vindicate oneself and prevents listening to your partner, thereby halting communication and causing both parties to gear up for a battle. Communication does not have to be a fight. Instead of defending, try active listening with internal boundaries in place. Listen to learn about the other person without absorbing the information as a personal attack. If what you are hearing is true, let your guard down, receive what they are saying, notice how it feels, and try to validate their experience. If you are wrong, say you are sorry. If what you are hearing is questionable, ask for more information before you form your response. If what you are hearing is untrue, keep a boundary in place and let the other person know, "I have a different opinion about that, would you like to hear it?"

2. Criticism

A critical spirit is focused on fault-finding and carries disapproval and judgement. A critical eye can be helpful when you are proofreading a text or constructing a project. But in relationships, criticism tears down closeness. It communicates that problems in the relationship reflect some defect in the other. Criticism blames the other person and tears at their personality and character with phrases such as "You always…" and "You never…."

Instead of criticizing, focus your complaint on the specific behavior you are upset about and how it makes you feel. When you hear your partner complaining, acknowledge the feeling behind the complaint – maybe they are afraid or hurt - and try to respond to the feeling first.

3. Stonewalling

Have you ever talked with someone and felt like you were the only one in the room? It's dead-end dialogue!



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When someone becomes emotionally flooded, meaning they are experiencing so much emotion (be it pain, anger, fear) that it overwhelms the nervous system, they can get lost in their emotion and enter survival mode. One way to survive when you feel attacked is to play dead. This may work in the wild, but it cracks closeness in a relationship. What can help one party cope may cause the other to feel abandoned. Stonewalling looks like your partner withdrawing emotionally, leaving the room, going silent, or changing the subject. When this happens, it may be a cue that what's happening in the moment is too much and the conversation needs to halt until some self-soothing can be applied.

In their Love Lab research, the Gottmans use a finger pulse oximeter to measure a person's heart rate when they are in a heated dialogue. When the pulse ox beeps, signifying the heart rate is over 100, it alerts the couple that it is time to take a break, practice calming skills, and then regroup. You may not have a pulse oximeter on your finger when communicating with your spouse, but you can work on learning yourself. When you begin to notice that you are shutting down or revving up, practice taking a break (20 minutes is a good start). During this break, engage your senses, take a walk, work on a puzzle. Do not ruminate over what your partner just said or did, and don't call a friend who will ask you to replay the conversation. This break is a time to unwind and soothe the internal storm. Then, be sure to come back to your partner to resume the conversation or agree on a time to return to talking. Returning to each other is just as important as the break to self-soothe.

4. Contempt

The worst offender, contempt, communicates strong disgust and attacks your partner's sense of self with the intent of injuring. In conflict, contempt sounds like mockery, name-calling, condescending speech, and looks like eye-rolling. Contempt communicates that you are superior to the other person, and this pride or "mightier than thou" attitude truly comes before the fall. Contemptuous behaviors and feelings need to be dealt with right away, or, like a cancer, they will grow and consume all life left in their wake. According to the Gottmans, it is the single best predictor of divorce. It's not easy to move from contempt to appreciation, but it can be done. If you want to let go of contempt and foster admiration again, I suggest starting by asking God for divine help. Then, search for what you appreciate about your partner and foster an atmosphere of respect. Verbalize your gratitude. Reflect on how problems in your relationship are shared and think of issues as a "we" problem rather than a "you" problem.

1 Corinthians 13: 4-7 speak to each of these horsemen and highlight alternative aspects of love. In this text, Paul states that "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" *(NIV).*

The qualities are contrary to our human nature, but with help and a true desire to grow and change, you can move towards health in your relationship, one step at a time, away from disaster.

To read more about John and Julie Gottman's principles for marriage, check out their book, ***"The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work".***



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