



A COUPLES TOOL

THE FOUR HORSEMEN AND THEIR ANTIDOTES

The four communication patterns John Gottman’s research found predict divorce, and the specific antidote for each. Spotting them in real time, and reaching for the antidote, is what changes the conversation.

THE FOUR HORSEMEN

1 • Criticism

Attacking your partner’s character instead of naming a specific behavior. “You never think about anyone but yourself.”

ANTIDOTE · GENTLE START-UP

Lead with a soft “I” statement: “I feel ___ about ___, and what I need is ___.”

2 • Contempt

Disgust, mockery, sarcasm, eye-rolling, an air of superiority. The single strongest predictor of divorce in Gottman’s research.

ANTIDOTE · A CULTURE OF APPRECIATION

Regularly express fondness and admiration, so respect builds up faster than disdain.

3 • Defensiveness

Refusing the complaint by counter-attacking or playing the victim. “It’s not my fault, you’re the one who...”

ANTIDOTE · TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Accept even a small part of the complaint: “You’re right, I did drop that, and I’ll fix it.”

4 • Stonewalling

Shutting down and withdrawing, usually from being physically flooded. Silence, a wall, tuning out.

ANTIDOTE · SELF-SOOTHE, THEN RETURN

Take a real 20-minute break to calm your body, then come back and finish the conversation.

THE ANTIDOTES IN ACTION

Same complaint, two ways. The rewrite keeps the issue and drops the Horseman.

CRITICISM → GENTLE START-UP

“You never think about anyone but yourself.”

“I felt alone with the planning this week. Can we sort it out together?”

CONTEMPT → BUILD APPRECIATION

“Wow. Nice of you to finally show up.”

“I was worried when you were late. I really wanted the evening with you.”

DEFENSIVENESS → TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

“It’s not my fault, you’re the one who forgot to remind me.”

“You’re right, I dropped that. I’ll set a reminder so it doesn’t happen again.”

STONEWALLING → SELF-SOOTHE, RETURN

(goes silent, walks out of the room)

“I’m flooded and need 20 minutes. I’m not dropping this, I’ll come back to it.”



THE RATIO THAT PROTECTS YOU

Gottman's "magic ratio." It's the reserve that makes the Horsemen survivable.

5 TO 1

- Stable couples keep at least five positive interactions for every negative one during conflict, and closer to twenty to one in everyday life.
- The Horsemen are survivable when that reserve of goodwill is deep enough to absorb them.
- Positives are small and cheap: a genuine thank-you, a touch, a shared laugh, turning toward a bid. They add up fast.
- You're not aiming for zero conflict. You're aiming for enough positivity to weather the conflict you do have.

CATCH THEM IN THE MOMENT

IN THE CONVERSATION

- Name it gently, out loud: "I think that came out as criticism." The point is a shared signal, not a verdict.
- Pause before you respond. The Horsemen escalate each other, so interrupting one interrupts the chain.
- Reach for the matching antidote, not a perfect sentence. The move matters more than the words.
- If either of you is flooded (heart racing, mind blank), take the break first. Nothing productive happens while flooded.

The Horsemen showing up is a signal, not a death sentence. Almost every couple slips into them sometimes. What matters is whether they've become the default, and whether you can reach the antidotes. A fuller walk-through is in our post, *The Four Horsemen of Divorce*, at mymentalclimb.com. Adapted from the Gottman Method. My Mental Climb is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or certified by The Gottman Institute.

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