

## Four Communication Styles That Spell Trouble In Your Marriage

You know it when you see it.

Maybe you're having dinner with a couple of old friends you haven't seen in awhile. Maybe you're standing around chatting with another couple at the soccer field. Just a casual chat and you can practically sniff it out: the marriage that is on the rocks.

Not headed for certain doom, per se, but definitely in some trouble. The only way to alter the course and prevent future problems is to identify the tell tail communication styles and correct them.

If you're inside a marriage with the following communication issues, you'll recognize clues intimately and feel their destructive effects. If you're on the outside looking in, you may not identify them explicitly, but you sense that there's something very wrong with the couple's communication style. Words are spoken, but constructive ideas never seem to get through, and both parties show pain through their words.

What's going on here, anyway?

John Gottman is a clinical therapist whose "Love Labs" are places where couples actually play out their typical communication style, as they are observed by researchers.

Partners are hooked up to monitors that test physical reactions and facial expressions. All of the responsive data is collected and matched to the dialogue and examined by trained observers. Over the years some common traits of couples emerged. Successful couples (meaning couples who stay together, or "masters") have vastly different communication styles than couples that end up divorcing ("disasters").

The four communication styles that spell disaster are easy to spot. They are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Their effect reflects the intensity of the problem -- they actually play off each other --so let's walk through each one in turn.

### The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

**Criticism** is not voicing a complaint or opinion. Rather it is a blow to the person's character. A complaint shows disapproval of the other's actions or mistakes, but it is not an outright attack on the person. The difference is:

- "You forgot the milk. Did you forget to write it down, or were you just thinking of other things?"
- "You forgot the milk again. You never think of anyone but yourself."

In the first example, the attack is on the behavior. In the second, it's on the person.

**Defensiveness** is the natural response to criticism. Someone who is defensive turns the problem on the criticizer, and doesn't take ownership of the issue.

In fact, this is a natural reaction to criticism. When someone feels criticized, they don't accept fault. Instead they turn the tables on the argument and blame the other person. For example, say the criticism is, "Did you forgot the milk again?"

- “How many times do I get to go out and play golf? Since I work all week it would be nice to just take one day off with my friends to relax. Tell me again why didn’t you get the milk when you were at the store last week? You weren’t doing anything.”
- “Oops, sorry, I’ll just run out and grab some now. Need anything else while I’m there?”

Obviously the second response is one where the speaker doesn’t feel threatened. There’s no history of an attack/blame pattern. Since the one who forgot the milk doesn’t perceive blame, he or she doesn’t feel the need to blame the other.

**Contempt** is an ugly form of criticism. It’s criticism peppered with rudeness, immature gestures like making faces and acting out. It’s criticism paired with name-calling, disrespect, and meanness. The point is to make the other person feel lower than low, but in actuality it drags down the perpetrator, too. It looks like this:

“Oh, pu-lease. You do whatever you want, whenever you want. You hang around with losers and then expect everyone to cover you when you do something idiotic. Are you ever going to grow up?”

**Stonewalling** follows contempt like a dog on a leash. It’s a total shutdown of response. One person talks; the other turns around, walks away, ignores the sound of the voice, or busies himself with other things. It’s literally like a wall is being erected in an instant. Before long, just being around the other person triggers a stone wall. By the time this fourth “horseman” come galloping through a marriage, the marriage is virtually over.

Can a relationship where the four horsemen rule ever become healthy again? It’s *possible*, with ridiculous amounts of effort, but unlikely. Unfortunately these four horsemen are habits that become ingrained in the relationship. Neither party is likely to co-exist on a different level with the other.

Of course, I’m a believer in therapy, other wise I’ wouldn’t be in this business of healing relationships. I always believe healing is possible, but it takes pure effort by two willing people. I’ve found that when the four horsemen rear their heads it’s time to take a heard look at getting some help and establish new communication patterns.

### **Repairing Damage**

Even “master” couples find themselves engaging in these destructive communication styles every now and then. If you have a solid base to start with, then repairing hurtful slights and even outright criticism is 100% possible. Where there’s a will there’s a way...although it may take some thoughtful effort, teamwork, and possibly the intervention of a therapist or counselor to develop new tools and communication styles that work better.

### **Prevention is the answer**

You can stop the pattern if you start with the criticism and nip it in the bud. There are so many alternatives to criticism to make the relationship easy and fun again, at least in the moment. However you have to be open and willing to explore some new emotions...emotions like humor, [appreciation](#) <link>, kindness, empathy, forgiveness, and a recognition that “this too shall pass.”

Every relationship has its tests. No one ever feels 100% love every moment of every day. Sure, character traits and annoying patterns start to bug us! It’s natural. But living in a state of negativity will shorten the life of your relationship as well as the life of your body and soul. It’s totally worth practicing new habits when you recognize these four horsemen taking over.

