

**WILL YOUR RELATIONSHIP SURVIVE?  
FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE  
By Marlene and Bob Neufeld**

The four attitudes that most predict the dissolution of a relationship, especially in combination, are criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling. 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.

In our work with couples, we have found that unhappy couples are usually doing some form of relationship dance involving some combination of pursue-withdraw. In other words, the more one person tries to get close the more the other person withdraws; and the more the other person withdraws, the more the first person tries to get close. Criticism and defensiveness are common aspects of the pursue part of the dance and contempt and stonewalling are common aspects of the withdraw part of the dance. What we are really saying when we are pursuing through criticism and defensiveness is “Notice me. Be with me. Pay attention to me. I need you.” What we are really saying when we are withdrawing even when done with contempt and stonewalling is “I don’t want you to hurt me. Leave me alone. I am trying to stay in control.” Either way, these behaviours are serious indicators that the relationship is in trouble. For more about these patterns see [http://www.marleneandbob.com/articles.htm/THE\\_DANCE\\_OF\\_RELATIONSHIP.doc](http://www.marleneandbob.com/articles.htm/THE_DANCE_OF_RELATIONSHIP.doc).

1. **Criticism:** Attacking your partner’s personality or character, usually with the intent of making someone right and someone wrong
  - Generalizations: “you always...” “you never...”“you’re the type of person who ...”
  - “why are you so ...”
2. **Contempt:** Attacking your partner’s sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her
  - Insults and name calling: “bitch, bastard, wimp, fat, stupid, ugly, slob, lazy...”
  - Hostile humor, sarcasm or mockery
  - Body language & tone of voice: sneering, rolling your eyes, curling your upper lip
3. **Defensiveness:** Seeing self as the victim, warding off a perceived attack
  - 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:** 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
  - Stony silence
  - Monosyllabic mutterings
  - Changing the subject
  - Removing yourself physically

See [www.marleneandbob.com/articles.htm](http://www.marleneandbob.com/articles.htm) for a Self-test to determine if you are riding the 4 horsemen.

**So what can you do if you notice yourself participating in criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and/or stonewalling?** (for more details see <http://www.marleneandbob.com/articles.htm>)

1. Learn to make specific complaints & 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, for the core emotions your partner is expressing and 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, and what they want; 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; replace thoughts of righteous indignation or innocent victimization with thoughts of appreciation, and responsibility that are soothing & validating)
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 Psychotherapy. They specialize in “2 on 2 couples coaching/psychotherapy” in person, on the phone and on Skype and in couples workshops and retreats. They are a couple who help couples learn life-changing skills and create closer, more loving relationships with one another. To learn more, see [www.marleneandbob.com](http://www.marleneandbob.com) or call 613-594-9248 to arrange a complimentary 1-hour introductory session.*