



creating greatness in relationships

Four Relationship Poisons

By Jonathan D. Sherman, LMFT

There are four relationship poisons that John M. Gottman, Ph.D., in his groundbreaking book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail; And How You Can Make Yours Last*, calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. He states these "...four disastrous ways of interacting...sabotage your attempts to communicate with your partner. In order of least to most dangerous, they are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling" (p. 72).

I refer to these four horsemen as poisons to highlight the destructive and deadly impact they have on relationships as I have witnessed too many relationships die under their influence. Fortunately, there are antidotes. However, first we must understand the serious nature of these poisons so that we do not continue to re-inject them as we apply the healing antidotes.

1 The First Poison: Criticism

Let me distinguish between complaints and criticisms. Complaints are actually a healthy part of a relationship. Complaints are specific statements of anger or displeasure about specific behaviors. For example, "I'm mad that you were late and didn't call." Gottman explains that, "Expressing anger and disagreement—airing a complaint—though rarely pleasant makes the marriage stronger in the long run than suppressing the complaint" (p. 73).



Criticism, however, tends to overgeneralize and attacks one's personality and character instead of specific behaviors or problems. For example, "You're always late. You never call. You don't care about me." When complaints are ignored, dismissed and/or not voiced the door is opened for criticism to infect the relationship. These personal critical attacks of "You always...", "You never...", "You should..." and "You don't care" put people immediately on the defensive and must be avoided.

2 The Second Poison: Contempt

Contempt is more destructive to relationships than criticism. Gottman explains that, "What separates contempt from criticism is the intention to insult and psychologically abuse your partner. With your words and body language, you're lobbing insults right into the heart of your partner's sense of self" (p. 79).

Contempt can take many forms such as name calling, mean teasing, hostile humor, insults, mocking, ridicule, eye-rolling, shunning, looking away, sneering and so forth.

All of these work to undermine the other person. For example, a statement of contempt could be, "You are such a selfish piece of crud. All you ever care about is yourself." As we continue to leave issues unresolved, anger escalates and contempt takes us into more hurt, negativity and blame.

3 The Third Poison: Defensiveness

Naturally, we tend to get defensive when insults are hurled at us and when we are being treated with contempt. So we have a knee-jerk reaction of returning anger for anger, blame for blame, we make excuses or deny responsibility, we reiterate our stance repeatedly instead of listening to the other, we turn it back on the other, we play the victim by whining, we show it in our body language via a rigid stance or turning our body away, or we respond with the classic "Yeah, but..."s. An example of this defensive posture is, "Yeah, well, you don't always call either. It's not my fault anyway because . . ."

Such defensiveness is ineffective as it leads to further poor communication that drives us away from developing solutions to our problems. As Gottman explains, "The fact that defensiveness is an understandable reaction to feeling besieged is one reason it is so destructive—the 'victim' doesn't see anything wrong with being defensive. . . . If you are being defensive (even if you feel completely righteous in your stance), you are adding to your . . . troubles" (pp. 85, 89).

4

The Fourth Poison: Stonewalling

People tend to get so overwhelmed and eventually exhausted by such incessant criticism, contempt and defensiveness that they begin to shut down and stop responding. Gottman stated that “Stonewalling often happens while a couple is talking. The stonewaller just removes himself by turning into a stone wall The message to the spouse is the same: I am withdrawing, disengaging from any meaningful interaction with you” (pp. 95).

When listening and interactions cease, conflicts become silent and hostile withdrawals or angry attacks

accusing the other of shutting him or her out. When this develops into a predictable pattern the relationship is nearing the bitter end at this point as the negative interactions far outweigh the positive (e.g., remember from previous articles “the magic 5:1 ratio” of positive to negative interactions). Gottman says that once stonewalling “...becomes a regular resident, it takes a good deal of hard work and soul searching to save the marriage” (p. 95).

Next steps

I imagine most readers reading this have been able to notice examples of their partner doing these things. My question is can you see the ways that you do these things, too? I

challenge you to work more on extracting these poisons out of your own reactions instead of criticizing your partner. Lead by example on this one and you will find that you are more effective in your relationships than when you try to change your spouse.

Visit bardos.net/resources to read the follow-up column entitled “Four Relationship Antidotes” where we will discuss the cures to these relationship toxins. The *Great Relationships Workbook* which is full of articles, worksheets, exercises and activities to help you create a truly great relationship is now available at bardos.net



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