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JOYFUL MUSINGS

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Beware the Four Horsemen

One of my biggest frustrations as a therapist is that by the time most couples come in for help, their relationship is so damaged that it's very difficult to turn things around. Sometimes, they're really coming in more for permission to separate than for a way to work on making it better.

Disagreements are inevitable in any relationship, and especially in a marriage. Whether large or small, they're just part of sharing life with someone. They don't mean you're with the wrong person, and they don't mean your relationship is doomed. In fact, happy couples have just as many disagreements as unhappy ones. The key is learning how to deal with disagreements while they're still small and before negative patterns get established.

Negativity destroys relationships. In fact, the more negative interactions you have, the higher the risk of divorce. John Gottman, professor of psychology at the University of Washington and cofounder of the Gottman Institute (also known as the Love Lab), has spent decades studying factors that lead to marital success and can predict with 91 percent accuracy which couples will divorce. His research has found that unstable marriages have a ratio of less than one positive interaction to each negative interaction. By contrast, stable marriages have five positive interactions to every negative one.

Gottman has identified four behaviors that are particularly destructive and predictive of failure: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. So harmful are these behaviors, he named them The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling can occur in any relationship -- even a good one. While an occasional snipe at one's beloved is undoubtedly inevitable in any marriage, negative behaviors need to be eliminated when they first appear or they'll take over. The Four Horsemen create cycles of negativity that become increasingly destructive. Given free rein, they can destroy a potentially happy, strong marriage.

The first horseman, criticism, is an attack on a person's character or personality, and it tends to be global. Statements such as "You always do things like that," or "You're so inconsiderate," usually delivered with a dose of blame, are examples of criticism.

That's not to say that couples shouldn't air complaints. They should. Complaints differ from criticism, however. Complaints are statements about a person's behavior and your feelings about it, minus the blame factor. "When you

come home late for dinner without calling, I feel taken for granted" is a complaint. "You are so thoughtless and inconsiderate of my feelings" is a criticism.

Contempt, the second horseman, is an escalated form of criticism. Unlike criticism, contempt is intended to insult and psychologically abuse the partner. Here's an example: "Oh, shut up. You're so incompetent. I don't know why I married you." It doesn't take much for contempt to quickly overshadow the positive aspects of your relationship and make you forget all the good things about your mate. Insults, name-calling, sarcasm, mockery, and even eye-rolling are expressions of contempt.

The third horseman, defensiveness, often comes riding onto the scene when you feel attacked. If one partner says, "You're such a slob. You never pick up your socks," the defensive partner might counter with, "Oh, yeah? What about you? You said you'd clean the garage a month ago, and it's still a pigsty." Defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner: You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't *me*, it's *you*." People on the defensive play the role of the innocent victim, deny responsibility, make excuses. They counter their partner's criticism with one of their own, whine or perhaps discount a suggestion by saying, "yes, but ...".

Stonewalling is the most deadly of the horsemen. It rides onto the scene when the negativity of the first three horsemen becomes overwhelming and the person just tunes out. When one partner tries to talk about difficult issues, the other clams up, and it's like talking to a stone wall. There's no response, just withdrawal, disengagement, refusal to communicate, silence. Sometimes the stonewaller will even get up and walk out of the room or the house. Though either partner can engage in this behavior, it's more typically a male response. Once it becomes habitual and takes up residence, the marriage is in serious trouble.

If any of these horsemen have been riding through your relationship, send them on their way. Work through disagreements like you're partners, not adversaries. And don't wait until the horsemen are permanent residents before you ask for help.

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