

2.1 Earlier in the program, we discussed some of the important aspects of healthy conflict in couple relationships. There are also some important pitfalls to avoid. Dr. John Gottman is one of the most well-known marriage researchers, and he devoted his career to studying and understanding couple relationships. He identified four behaviors that may happen during conflict in couples' relationships, and these are highly predictive of divorce. In fact, their effect on couple relationships is so toxic that Dr. Gottman even labeled them "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Yikes! Let's go through each one of them so you'll know to be on the lookout for these toxic conflict strategies in your own relationship!

2.2 The first horseman is **Criticism**. This means that one partner makes global statements that put down the other person or attack their character. So, instead of saying, "I was upset that you left dirty dishes in the sink," a partner engaging in criticism might say, "You are always such a slob!" Criticism is toxic for couples because of the extent of negativity it infuses into a relationship.

2.3 Second, Gottman described **Contempt** as a toxic force on couple relationships. Contempt is described by Gottman as insults and psychological abuse. When someone acts contemptuously toward their partner, they make their partner feel about an inch tall. Contempt can come in the form of making fun of your partner, but also in partner's nonverbals, such as if they roll their eyes when their partner talks.

2.4 The third horseman is **Defensiveness**. Defensiveness happens when one or both partners don't listen to one another's concerns, but rather they meet any concerns with attacks of their own. So, again, if one partner says, "I was upset that you left dirty dishes in the sink," their defensive partner's response might say, "Well, you made a big mess in the kitchen last week, too." Defensiveness tends to make conflict get worse, not better.

2.5 The final Horseman is **Stonewalling**. Stonewalling involves removing yourself from a conflict situation, either physically or emotionally. Physically, this might mean walking out, with no promise of when you'll return. Emotionally, someone might just simply check out of a conversation, by not listening or by turning one's attention to someone else.

2.6 Taken together, Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling have a seriously negative impact on couple relationships, and Gottman's research suggest that they can begin to create a negative cycle that becomes very difficult for couples to escape. So, if you notice any of these patterns becoming a regular occurrence in your interactions with your partner, consider taking immediate action to start to reverse the trend. It's possible to change, but it'll take some intentional effort. We'll discuss some ways to reverse negative conflict patterns in your relationship in a few minutes, but first, let's do a quick assessment to check in on your learning so far. After that, we'll look at a case study so you can start to apply the information about couple conflict that we've discussed so far.

2.7 Review

Match each of the 4 Horsemen (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling) with these behavioral descriptions.

- A. Making global statements that put a person down or attack their character.
- B. Rather than listening, meeting concerns with attacks of their own.
- C. Removing oneself from a conflict, either physically or emotionally.
- D. Insults and psychological abuse that make one's partner feel an inch tall.

2.8 Review

In the story below, match the dynamics of the couple's relationship to the 4 Horsemen (Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness, and Stonewalling)

- A. Chris and Jim are fighting. Jim's eyes roll each time Chris speaks.
- B. Chris says to Jim: "You are such a jerk for never considering my feelings."
- C. Jim turns his back on Chris and walks out the door without saying anything.
- D. Jim later comes back to Chris and yells: "You say I never consider your feelings, but you don't ever even listen to what I have to say."

2.9 Review

What does Gottman's research indicate that the 4 Horsemen are highly predictive of?

- A. Partners eventually growing distant from each other
- B. Divorce
- C. Depression
- D. Unresolved anger

Answers 2.7 Criticism A, Contempt D, Defensiveness B, Stonewalling C; 2.8 Criticism B, Contempt A, Defensiveness D, Stonewalling C; 2.9 B.