

The 4 Strongest Predictors of Divorce

The "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" put marriages at major risk.

Mark Travers

Posted September 5, 2024 | [Reviewed by Michelle Quirk](#)

Psychology Today

KEY POINTS

- Criticism is damaging because it shifts focus from the issue at hand to the perceived flaws of one's partner.
- Persistent use of defensiveness only delays addressing problems within the relationship.
- Contempt conveys to your partner that you consider yourself superior and think very little of them.



Source: CHUTTERSNAPE / Unsplash

In 1992, renowned clinical psychologist and marriage counselor John Gottman conducted a groundbreaking statistical exploration of marriages and divorces. Through this [research](#), published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*, he was able to predict which couples would eventually divorce with a staggering 94 percent accuracy. Since then, Gottman—along with his wife, Julie Gottman—has conducted extensive research into the factors that make or break relationships.

Their work has pointed to various key dynamics that contribute to marital success or failure. And, according to their [research](#) from the *Clinical Handbook of Couple Therapy*, the presence of the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”—a metaphor borrowed from the New Testament that signifies the end of times—is among the greatest predictors of divorce. These four behaviors, if consistently appearing in a marriage, can signal serious trouble ahead.

1. Criticism

The Gottmans define criticism, the first horseman, as the presentation of problems within a relationship as a direct result of your spouse's shortcomings. Unlike a simple complaint or a critique about a specific mistake, criticism is a direct attack on your partner's character—often comprised of sweeping generalizations.

This behavior can be particularly damaging because it shifts the focus from the issue at hand to the perceived flaws of your partner—which ultimately makes it more about who they are rather than what they've done.

For example, a genuine complaint might sound like, "I got really worried yesterday when you didn't call me to let me know that your night out with your friends would go on as late as it did." Here, you're addressing a specific behavior and the feelings it caused you without attacking your partner.

In contrast, criticism might sound like, "You always keep me out of the loop and never think about how I feel. I'd never do something so selfish." Here, your focus shifts from the behavior to a broad, negative assessment of your spouse's character.

By saying "You always do this" and "You never do that," you begin framing your partner consistently as a flawed or selfish perpetrator. Criticism does not serve to express dissatisfaction but rather to place blame; this can leave your other half feeling rejected, hurt, and angry—which can quickly snowball into further problems or horsemen.

2. Defensiveness

The second horseman, defensiveness, is understood as a partner's attempt at self-protection or preservation, which often rears its head in the response to criticism. This horseman can take two forms—both of which undermine the resolution of conflicts within a relationship.

The first form is the "innocent victim stance," in which we whine or fish for excuses for our mistakes to make it seem as though we're being wrongfully accused. For instance, if your partner asks you why you didn't let them know you'd be out so late, you'd respond with, "I haven't seen my friends in ages, and you know how long I've been wanting to see them. Am I not allowed to have one night of fun?" Here, you shift the blame away from your actions and onto your partner's perceived unfairness.

The second form is the "righteous indignation stance," in which we fight criticism with criticism in an attempt to counterattack. For example, if your partner complains about something you'd promised to do, but forgot, you'd counter with, "I had such a long day. You knew today would be busy for me, so why didn't you just do it yourself?" Here, you ignore the issue at hand entirely and, instead, deflect with a criticism of your partner's actions or inactions.

There's no denying that we all rely on defensiveness from time to time. However, the persistent use of it only delays addressing problems within the relationship, as it's a great weapon for avoiding accountability. However, in a healthy relationship, partners shouldn't find much difficulty in taking responsibility for a mistake or shortcoming—as they should have nothing to fear in doing so. Ultimately, defensiveness only serves to show our spouse that we don't take their concerns seriously, which can escalate existing problems into bigger, scarier ones.

3. Contempt

The third horseman, and certainly the most vicious one, is contempt—which involves making indignant statements from a perceived position of authority over your partner. It is the meanest, most condescending of the horsemen, which the Gottmans declare to be the greatest predictor of divorce. Contempt is generally the outcome of deep-seated resentment or anger, and can manifest in various ways:

- **Sarcasm:** Using biting remarks to belittle your partner.
- **Insults:** Making ad hominem attacks on your partner's character or intelligence.
- **Name-calling:** Using derogatory or demeaning names to address your partner.
- **Disrespectful body language:** Eye-rolling, scoffing, sneering, or other gestures that signal disdain.

Given the hateful nature of contempt, its effects on a relationship can be devastating—and it's needless to say that persistent signs of contempt are a major red flag. It's nearly impossible to solve a problem when contempt is present, as it's incredibly difficult to overlook. Contempt conveys to your partner that you consider yourself superior and think very little of them—which is a guaranteed way to leave them feeling worthless or inferior.

4. Stonewalling

The final horseman is stonewalling, which involves complete and utter disengagement from an interaction with your partner. This total withdrawal usually occurs in response to the other horsemen, most frequently contempt. In this state, you completely shut down; you become so angry, hurt, or overwhelmed that you stop listening entirely and make it very clear to your spouse, too. For instance, you might

- Cease listening cues, such as head nods, eye contact, and facial movements
- Turn away from the conversation
- Tune out entirely
- Act busy with other tasks
- Actively ignore the other person

Stonewalling typically rears its head when the other three horsemen become so unbearable that there seems to be no other way to handle an interaction. But, once stonewalling starts, it can become a deeply ingrained, maladaptive coping mechanism that is difficult to break. It's not conducive to problem-solving or reconciliation because, as the name suggests, your partner may feel like they're talking to a brick wall; they'll have no way to get through to you and, in turn, no way to make progress in forming a reconnection.

A version of this post also appears on Forbes.com.

Facebook image: PeopleImages.com - Yuri A/Shutterstock

About the Author:

[Mark Travers, Ph.D.](#), is an American psychologist with degrees from Cornell University and the University of Colorado Boulder.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/social-instincts/202409/the-4-strongest-predictors-of-divorce>