

Communication Styles to Avoid

Dr. John Gottman is a professor emeritus at the University of Washington who is known for his work on marital stability and relationship analysis. In Gottman's research he asked what makes for a satisfying marriage and what predicts divorce. Among his work is what he identified as the 4 Horseman of the Apocalypse, communication styles that predict relationship failure:

Criticism

When you criticize your partner and imply that there is something wrong with them. You take a problem between you and your partner and turn it into a problem with your partner's personality or character. Examples are using the words: "You always" or "you never" . Your partner is most likely to feel under attack and to respond defensively.

Contempt

Contempt is any statement or nonverbal behavior that puts yourself on a higher ground than your partner. Examples of contempt are attacking your partner's sense of self by insulting, mocking, calling them names, rolling your eyes and sneering in disgust. Of all the horsemen, contempt is the most serious. Couples have to realize that these types of put downs will destroy the fondness and admiration between them.

Defensiveness

When you attempt to defend yourself from a perceived attack with a counter complaint, or when you are making excuses you are being defensive. Examples are "yes-butting": start off agreeing and then end up disagreeing, or whining that "it's not fair." Defensiveness keeps partners from taking responsibility for problems and escalates negative communication.

Stonewalling:

Stonewalling happens when the listener withdraws from the conversation or the relationship to avoid conflict. The stonewaller might actually physically leave the room or they might just stop following the conversation and appear to shut down. Examples are stony silence and the silent treatment. Stonewalling is hurtful, the recipient of stonewalling feels ignored, invalidated, misunderstood.

The 5:1 Ratio

Gottman is also known for the magic ratio of 5:1. Through his research he has determined that as long as there are five times as many positive interactions between partners as there are negative, the relationship is likely to be stable.