

## A COUPLES TOOL

# THE FOUR HORSEMEN AND THEIR ANTIDOTES

The four communication patterns John Gottman's research found predict divorce, and the specific antidote for each. Spotting them in real time, and reaching for the antidote, is what changes the conversation.

## THE FOUR HORSEMEN

### 1 • Criticism

Attacking your partner's character instead of naming a specific behavior. "You never think about anyone but yourself."

#### ANTIDOTE • GENTLE START-UP

Lead with a soft "I" statement: "I feel \_\_\_ about \_\_\_, and what I need is \_\_\_."

### 3 • Defensiveness

Refusing the complaint by counter-attacking or playing the victim. "It's not my fault, you're the one who..."

#### ANTIDOTE • TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Accept even a small part of the complaint: "You're right, I did drop that, and I'll fix it."

### 2 • Contempt

Disgust, mockery, sarcasm, eye-rolling, an air of superiority. The single strongest predictor of divorce in Gottman's research.

#### ANTIDOTE • A CULTURE OF APPRECIATION

Regularly express fondness and admiration, so respect builds up faster than disdain.

### 4 • Stonewalling

Shutting down and withdrawing, usually from being physically flooded. Silence, a wall, tuning out.

#### ANTIDOTE • SELF-SOOTHE, THEN RETURN

Take a real 20-minute break to calm your body, then come back and finish the conversation.

## THE RATIO THAT PROTECTS YOU

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Gottman's "magic ratio." It's the reserve that makes the Horsemen survivable.

### 5 TO 1

- Stable couples keep at least five positive interactions for every negative one during conflict, and closer to twenty to one in everyday life.
- The Horsemen are survivable when that reserve of goodwill is deep enough to absorb them.
- Positives are small and cheap: a genuine thank-you, a touch, a shared laugh, turning toward a bid. They add up fast.
- You're not aiming for zero conflict. You're aiming for enough positivity to weather the conflict you do have.

## CATCH THEM IN THE MOMENT

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### In the conversation

- Name it gently, out loud: "I think that came out as criticism." The point is a shared signal, not a verdict.
- Pause before you respond. The Horsemen escalate each other, so interrupting one interrupts the chain.
- Reach for the matching antidote, not a perfect sentence. The move matters more than the words.
- If either of you is flooded (heart racing, mind blank), take the break first. Nothing productive happens while flooded.

**The Horsemen showing up is a signal, not a death sentence.** Almost every couple runs them sometimes. What matters is whether they've become the default, and whether you can reach the antidotes. A fuller walk-through is in our post, *The Four Horsemen of Divorce*, at [mymentalclimb.com](http://mymentalclimb.com). Adapted from the Gottman Method.

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