

5n5

Destructive Arguments in Couples



All couples argue, and arguments don't ruin a relationship. Destructive arguments do! Here are five tips to avoid destructive arguments in relationships. Learn about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and how they can be turned from destructive to constructive ways to communicate.

Tip One: A harsh start-up is the beginning of a discussion with negative and accusatory statements which frequently include criticism and sarcasm. *For example, "You told me that you would clean up the garage this weekend. This is the third time in a row I heard that from you. Your inability to keep your promises baffles me."*

According to John Gottman, author of many books on healthy relationships, here are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse you should avoid!

Tip Two:

The first Horseman of the Apocalypse is **Criticism**.

- We frequently have complaints about our partners. But, there is a big difference between complaints and **criticisms**. Complaints focus on a specific behavior or event. For example, *"I am really angry that you did not clean the garage yesterday. We agreed that we would take turns. Could you please do it now?"* In contrast, **criticism** is global and expresses negative feelings about your partner's character or personality. Two very common ways to turn a complaint into a criticism is by adding 'You never ' or "You always". **Criticism** is very common in couples' relationship, and by itself this pattern is not a signal for divorce. The problem with **criticism** is that when it becomes very frequent, it paves the way for the other far more lethal negative interactions such contempt. Watch out for verbal and nonverbal expressions of contempt for your partner.

Tip Three:

The second Horseman of the Apocalypse **Contempt**.

- This arises from a sense of superiority over one's partner. It is a form of disrespect, and is intended as a way to demean your partner. *This is an example: "We paying a lot for your car, and you cannot even wash it? What is wrong with you?"* Sarcasm and cynicism are types of **contempt**. So are name-calling, eye-rolling, mockery, and hostile humor. In whatever way, contempt is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust. **Contempt** is the most damaging of the 4 horsemen.

Tip Four:

Defensiveness is the third Horseman:

- The more critical and contemptuous a partner is, the more **defensive** the other partner becomes, and vice-verse. This circular repetitive dynamic is what makes it so difficult for partners to put a stop to it. A common form of **defensiveness** is the "innocent victim" stance, which often entails whining and sends the message: *"Why are you picking on me? What about all the good things I do?"* In all its forms, **defensiveness** just escalates the conflict, which is why it's so deadly. Take ownership for your negative patterns of negative interactions. Remember, it takes two to tango.

Tip Five:

The fourth and final horseman is **Stonewalling**:

- Tuning out from your partner signals the arrival of the fourth horseman, **stonewalling**. *An example of stonewalling is the classical scene of a husband returning from a day of work to meet his frustrated stay-home wife's complaints and criticisms and he responds by turning the TV on. The less responsive the husband is, the more his wife yells; the more she yells the more unresponsive he gets. Eventually, he gets up and leaves the room.* **Stonewalling** is deadly because it harvests disconnection in your relationship.

Do not let the *four horseman of the apocalypse* to run rampant. They are lethal to your relationship, and have very strong predictive potential for divorce.

