

ANNEX

Understanding the Four Horsemen of Conflict

Recognising and Responding to Destructive Conflict Patterns

This annex explains four destructive conflict patterns commonly referred to as the 'Four Horsemen.'

The “Four Horsemen” model was developed by psychologist Dr. John Gottman after decades of observing and researching married couples. Through longitudinal studies, he identified four specific patterns of interaction — criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling — that consistently predict relational breakdown when left unaddressed. The model does not seek to label couples or assign blame, but to help identify destructive communication habits early so they can be replaced with healthier responses. Gottman’s research found that it is not the presence of conflict that predicts divorce, but the presence of these patterns during conflict. In other words, strong marriages are not conflict-free; they are repair-capable. The purpose of the model is preventative and restorative — to help couples recognise harmful cycles and intentionally cultivate habits that preserve connection, respect, and emotional safety.

The Four Horsemen:

1. Criticism
2. Contempt
3. Defensiveness
4. Stonewalling

1. Criticism — Attacking the Person Instead of the Problem

Criticism goes beyond raising a concern. It attacks character.

Concern: “I felt hurt when you came home late and didn’t call.”

Criticism: “You’re selfish. You never think about anyone but yourself.”

Signs You May Be Affected by Criticism

- You feel attacked or misunderstood in arguments.
- You often hear “you always...” or “you never...”
- You feel like nothing you do is good enough.
- You dread raising concerns because they escalate quickly.

Healthy Alternative:

- Focus on specific behaviour, not identity.
- Use “I feel...” statements.
- Make clear requests instead of accusations.

2. Contempt — Superiority and Disrespect

Contempt communicates moral superiority. It appears as sarcasm, eye-rolling, mocking tone, public shaming, or dismissive gestures.

Signs You May Be Affected by Contempt

- You feel belittled or disrespected.
- You sense sarcasm or ridicule in conflict.
- You feel emotionally unsafe.
- You withdraw because you feel small.

Healthy Alternative:

- Practice respect even during disagreement.
- Express appreciation regularly.
- Guard tone and facial expressions.

3. Defensiveness — Self-Protection Over Responsibility

Defensiveness shifts blame instead of accepting responsibility.

Instead of: "I see how that hurt you."

Defensiveness says: "Well, you do the same thing!"

Signs You May Be Affected by Defensiveness

- Conversations feel circular.
- Problems never get resolved.
- Apologies are rare or partial.
- You focus on your spouse's faults when confronted.

Healthy Alternative:

- Take responsibility for even a small part.
- Pause before responding.
- Practice saying, "You're right. I could have handled that better."

4. Stonewalling — Emotional Withdrawal

Stonewalling occurs when one partner shuts down emotionally. It may appear as silence, leaving the room, avoiding eye contact, or refusing to engage.

Signs You May Be Affected by Stonewalling

- You feel ignored during arguments.
- Conversations end without resolution.
- Your spouse shuts down under stress.
- You feel lonely even while together.

Healthy Alternative:

- Take a short break and communicate the need to return.
- Regulate your breathing.

- Return to repair the issue.
- Healthy pause is different from permanent withdrawal.

Reflection Questions

1. Which pattern feels most familiar in our marriage?
2. Which one triggers me most deeply?
3. Do I contribute to the same pattern I dislike?
4. What would change if I adjusted my response first?

The Four Horsemen are warning signs, not verdicts. Awareness creates opportunity for growth. Healthy marriages are not conflict-free; they are repair-capable.