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## Four Things That Can Break A Relationship

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### Introduction

This article is all about relationships ... intimate relationships. Do you want a relationship, are you unhappy in your current relationship, or do you want to fine-tune your relationship? Then maybe this article is for you.

And don't forget, our last article discussed personal growth. Click here to find out more.

Do you feel like you and your partner argue over little or insignificant things (at the time it may not seem that way, but on reflection **after** the argument it might). Have you ever tried to talk about this, but feel like you both find yourself arguing again, sometimes about the same insignificant things? Well, you're not alone. Research by John Gottman, Ph.D (the relationship guru) shows that there are four common interactions in relationships that can destroy love – he calls them “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”. These show up in everyday interactions and lead to arguments ... often about nothing.

So read on to find out what these four common interactions are, how you can recognise them, and what you can do about them if you notice them ‘showing up’.

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### AWAKEN PSYCHOLOGY

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### 1. First Horseman – Criticism

Criticism occurs when we frame a complaint about our partner's behaviour as a personal attack (e.g., criticism = "You're so lazy. Why can't you, just for once, clean up after yourself?" : complaint = "You've left your dirty dishes on the table. Please try to clean up after yourself." In criticism, one partner puts the other one down, and you're implying that instead of HAVING a problem, they ARE the problem.

**What to do instead :** I'm not saying you can't complain; however it's how you do it that matters. Remember, a complaint is specific to a behaviour that you would like your partner to change (it's not personally attacking). So next time you want your partner to do something differently, try stating the behaviour that you would like them to change.

### 2. Second Horseman – Defensiveness

Defensiveness is an attempt to protect oneself, and it occurs when we feel we're being attacked (real or imagined). Sometimes it is done by counter-attacking, or by taking the stance of the innocent victim (e.g., "What, me? Well, what about you! You never clean up after yourself!"). Defensiveness gives the message that you will not be impacted or influenced by what your partner has to say, or that what they're saying is not valid or real.

**What to do instead :** Accept some responsibility in the situation, and also look for what you agree with in what your partner is saying. So next time your partner is asking you to change your behaviour, rather than perceiving a complaint as criticism (and make sure it's not criticism first), try to communicate with your partner that you hear them and that what they're saying matters ("I'm sorry I didn't put my dishes in the dishwasher. I'll remember to do it next time").

### 3. Third Horseman – Stonewalling

In Stonewalling, the listener withdraws from the conversation because they become overwhelmed internally, yet physically they stay in the room. If your partner is stonewalling, they might look like they're not listening, they may look away from you or to the side, or they may cross their arms. A stonewaller is actually trying to calm the situation down; however it often backfires (the stonewaller has a chance to repetitively think negative thoughts, and their partner feels ignored so they will attempt to be heard by being louder).

**What to do instead :** Learn to actively calm yourself down (learn breathing techniques, count to 10 slowly, or gently rock back and forth on your feet – from your toes to your heels), then re-engage in the conversation. If it helps, the partner who doesn't Stonewall can gently point out to the partner who does Stonewall that they notice they're doing it. Over time, you'll get better at picking it up for yourself, and you can engage in techniques to calm yourself down as soon as you notice you want to Stonewall.

### 4. Fourth Horseman – Contempt

The final Horseman is Contempt. Contempt is often the negative game changer in a relationship, and nothing is more destructive to love. Contempt includes things like threats, name-calling, and insulting. When you're contemptuous to your partner you put them down, you mock them, or you correct them – you might do this with your words, or your body language (think eye rolling or sneering). You are looking for their mistakes. The message you're giving is "I'm smarter/better/kinder than you" "I'm superior to you" "You are beneath me".

**What to do instead :** To fight contempt, you both have to work hard to actively appreciate each other. Catch your partner doing something you like, and tell them you appreciate them for what they are doing. If you can't change your contemptuous thoughts, feelings and behaviours, statistics say your relationship won't survive.

Your intimate relationship will either thrive or destruct based on these patterns of interaction. Once you can recognise when they 'show up' in your relationship, you can then change how you react and respond to your partner.

However, if these strategies aren't enough, and your relationship is still affecting your life negatively, seeking professional assistance could be useful.

If you would like help in managing your thoughts, feelings or behaviours, please feel free to contact us on 0488 954 195, [amanda@awakenpsychology.com.au](mailto:amanda@awakenpsychology.com.au) or [click here](#)

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