

Critical analysis

The image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is a vivid one, and they can destroy relationships.

American marriage expert John Gottman identified these “four horsemen” as Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Stonewalling.

In this article, we’ll deal with the first horseman. Criticism rears its ugly head in personal conflict as soon as we diverge from the substance of the complaint and start on the “you always” or “you never”, followed by a negative comment. You are stepping away from the fact your partner has stumbled on this occasion and you are damning them for life like this.

Criticism can stem from the fact that one partner feels their needs and cause for complaint have not been heard or heeded, so the door is open to focus on the partner’s perceived deficits. Everyone is occasionally critical of their partner, but when this criticism becomes the ongoing means of communication, you have a problem. So how do we stop criticism from dictating our communication style?

Be very selective about what you criticise. For a relationship to survive criticism there needs to be a balance of five positive comments to withstand one negative comment. So if you put the effort into building your relationship credit account with enough positive comments, it can withstand the occasional negative onslaught.

Try to take a gentle approach when starting a discussion about something your partner does that upsets you; don’t plunge right in. If you do get into an argument, stop it from really exploding into all-out war by being prepared to get off your high horse and apologise for your part in it.

Suggest a compromise or use humour to defuse the situation and try to get yourselves on to a more positive track.

If you are trying to tackle an issue and your partner seems deaf, remember they may be feeling overwhelmed or threatened, so give them a break and return to the subject later, rather than bash your head against a brick wall.

Don’t get caught up in the “tit for tat” scenario, because all that happens is you both try to get the last word and the argument spins out of control. Sometimes you need to concede an argument so the relationship can continue to thrive.

Most successful relationships involve both partners giving lots of loving kindness to each other to withstand the slings and arrows of fortune.

Survival tips

- **It takes five positive comments to withstand one negative comment**
- **Start gently when bringing up a complaint**
- **Be prepared to apologise or suggest a compromise early in an argument to stop it escalating beyond the point of no return**
- **Don’t get caught up in the “tit for tat” cycle in arguments.**