

Deposit love and bank on bliss

If we look at what causes relationships to break down, criticism is a major corroding influence over a period of time.

US researcher John Gottman has delved into how relationships end up on the slippery slide to complete breakdown.

Calling the process the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, he names the four horsemen: Criticism, Contempt, Defensiveness and Stonewalling. If any of these four play a role in your relationship, you are heading for problems.

Let's see how the first – Criticism – affects our relationships and how we can prevent it from taking over.

Criticism is anything that leads you to directly have a go at your partner's personality, as distinct from complaining about what they do. It's the difference between saying: "I don't like the way that you always talk about yourself and never talk about me" and saying "You are so insensitive and selfish that you don't ever think about me". The first statement is a complaint about your partner's behaviour, but the second is a criticism of who they are.

When you make a statement like the second one, you are telling your partner that they have a flaw in their personality which they have to fix – you are telling them to change something about what they are, not what they do. And that can be very hard to hear. The big problem with about giving criticism is that it often leads to an escalating situation.

Being attacked with criticism usually leads to a very defensive response and it's not long before what started as a mild skirmish develops into a war.

The antidote to criticism is to complain rather than criticise. If you are annoyed about something, comment on the behaviour, rather than the person. Say "I've got a complaint and I want to get it off my chest", rather than storing up all your resentment until it explodes into a mass of criticism.

If you are on the receiving end, moderate the criticism so it doesn't have so much power to hurt you. Think about why your partner is being critical. Have they had a bad day or is there something underlying that's bugging them?

Avoid saying horrible things in return and accept responsibility for some of the criticism but protest about the rest. If you do this, you are taking some control and changing the game so that while the criticism still has some negativity, it doesn't escalate. It's fine to defend yourself as long as you don't become negative, because this can lead to both of you becoming more emotional, and just plain nasty.

The good news is that you can change negative behaviour patterns like criticism. If you take the time to build a loving relationship and have this as a firm foundation, the relationship can withstand a certain amount of negative impact.

It's like having a bank account: if you make lots of small deposits it leads to a large amount that can stand some withdrawals and still stay in the black.

In relationship terms, if you have invested in lots of little positive experiences, like smiling, and making sure you turn to face them when they are talking to you they feel valued and that emotional bank balance will grow strong and healthy.

So when you have the inevitable disagreement, your relationship has enough positive "deposits" to withstand the occasional dramatic negative "withdrawal".