

Contempt is deadly

One of the worst poisons that can kill a relationship is our second emotional "horseman of the apocalypse", contempt. Research has found contempt is the single best predictor of divorce.

Contempt is different from and more damaging than criticism because it springs from a deliberate attempt to dominate your partner by belittling them or treating them with disdain. It may involve eye-rolling, sneering, insults, name-calling, mocking and sarcasm.

Your partner will feel humiliated and unloved, and that they lack your respect. It's difficult to find enough good will to withstand contempt – a nasty emotional cocktail.

Each step along the road to full-blown contempt has recognisable indicators, so you can change your ways before it is too late.

Most couples disagree at some point, but if after an argument you no longer feel admiration for your partner, find it difficult to remember their positive aspects or feel they have severe personality deficiencies, you should regard these as warning signs.

If you lose respect for your partner or believe your partner is hopeless at compromise, you are well on your way to contempt.

The nasty underlying effect of contempt is that it deters partners from trying to connect with each other. They turn away from rather than towards each other, and that causes feelings of rejection and distance.

However, if you are prepared to examine your behaviour and realise you are starting to develop some habits of contempt, you can turn yourself around.

If an argument is getting out of hand, call time out to discuss a way of ending it.

Be aware of your facial expressions and body language so you don't start to show contempt, and stop yourself from deliberately trying to hurt your partner with words.

Try to focus on your partner's positive qualities – they are, after all, what attracted you in the first place.

Don't bring up negative behaviours when you are hot and bothered, and try to find ways to turn to your partner rather than away from them.

If this all seems too hard, get help from an experienced counsellor at an organisation such as Relationships Australia Victoria.

Survival tips

- **Be aware that contempt is a relationship killer**
- **Watch your body and verbal language. Eye-rolling and name-calling are contemptuous**
- **Tell your partner your complaints, don't let them fester. Focus on the behaviour, not the person**
- **If you can't reverse contemptuous behaviour, get some professional counselling before it's too late.**