

Contempt is the great destroyer

Contempt is the sulphuric acid of human relationships. So says American relationships guru John Gottman, who defines the four main stumbling blocks to happy and healthy couples as – criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

Contempt is likely to have the most devastating effect.

People who are excellent at relating well to each other tend to have no contempt in their relationships.

They might criticise each other, they might be defensive, they even stonewall at times and may have unresolved issues, but they are never contemptuous of each other.

So how do we define this poison in human relationships?

Contempt is putting yourself on a higher level than your partner and belittling or humiliating them.

Sneering, mocking, withering sarcasm, rolling your eyes and curling your lip all send the message you consider them not worth bothering with.

If they are on the ball, they will rightly get the message you just want to humiliate them.

Contempt can kill good relationships because it erodes your faith that your partner respects and values you. You have trusted them to accept your “failings” as a sign that you are worth their trouble. Instead, your partner launches a deadly attack on your self-esteem.

Contempt leads to danger in the relationship: you can't be confident your partner won't break the rules and try to destroy you.

So after a while it makes sense to protect yourself by shutting down emotionally or going away so they can't affect you.

While this all sounds pretty nasty – and it is – there is a way out if you feel you have been guilty of contempt.

The antidote is to make sure you are aware of your level of anger and don't let it get out of control or say things you'll regret later.

Don't fight dirty – take responsibility for what you say. Take time out and calm yourself so you don't fall into the trap of becoming contemptuous of your partner.

Partners are at risk of being contemptuous when they feel the love and admiration between them is failing.

If you feel your partner doesn't love and admire you any more, then there's not enough “currency” being deposited in your “emotional bank account”.

And you're probably not making enough positive emotional deposits in your partner's account.

It's time to look at rebuilding the love and admiration you once felt so that you can step back from the danger of being contemptuous.

This might be achieved through such little things as generously acknowledging your partner's point of view, or complimenting them on something they do well.

They may be small gestures, but they add up to a sizeable emotional bank account that will help you avoid contempt.

If this sounds too difficult, seek some couples' counselling or take a training course on changing the way you react to each other.

If you are on the receiving end of contempt, make it clear that such comments are just not acceptable. Then walk away and take time out so your partner no longer has a focus for their abuse. Return later when you are safer.

Let them know what contempt does to you and suggest you both agree to ban this weapon.

Focus instead on building love and admiration between you, so you never feel tempted to use contempt when you have those clashes that are an inevitable part of healthy relationships.

Survival tips

- **Build respect and affirm each other in public and private; say often what you admire and appreciate about each other**
- **Take responsibility for lowering your own emotional reactions**
- **Tell your partner you won't listen unless they say it without contempt.**