

The 4 Horsemen

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MarriageHelper

The 4 Horsemen

This particular week we will be talking about something that so many people do and that they don't realize just how bad it is. Gottman refers to these things we're going to be talking about as The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. If somehow you were to get into Gottman's love lab at the University of Washington, because of your marriage difficulties, they would put you in an apartment and on one end of that apartment there's a big two-way mirror, on the other side there are graduate students and researchers and cameras and all kinds of recording devices. Of course, they can't see you when you go to the bathroom or to the bedroom, but they can watch you. And as they watch couples and find out where their hot buttons are, meaning what is it that if you bring this up is going to result in an argument pretty quickly, then they will actually do something where they get into an argument with each other by bringing up those hot buttons and then they're going to watch what you do when you get into this conflict. The things that they call The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse often come up. And in just a few moments I'm going to share with you what they are.

What they discovered is that couples that rapidly go into The Four Horsemen wind up having a very high likelihood of divorcing. On the other hand, couples that do not rapidly go into the Horsemen, actually decrease their likelihood of divorcing. So when I go through this particular session called The Four Horsemen, no matter how bad your marriage is, I want to make sure that you understand what we're talking about. And if you discover that any you are using any of these Four Horsemen that you stop them now. If your marriage is bad, stop them now, because just stopping these can actually decrease the likelihood that you're going to divorce each other. So, it works. It works for everyone, no matter how good or how bad your relationship might be, because people, it seems by nature, wind up doing these things. Now, as I explain each of the Four Horsemen that Gottman talks about in his research, we also will ask you to complete a profile after each one, just see if this is something that you actually do. And as you complete these profiles, remember to be honest. Now, being honest with yourself is crucially important.

1. Criticism

As we talk about the Four Horsemen, the first one is criticism. Now, he points out that criticism is different than a complaint, because a complaint focuses on a specific behavior. We have a right to complain, I can complain that you don't talk to me as much as I wish for you to—that's a complaint. It might better if you say that a little differently, though, like 'I wish you talked to me more'. And if you focus on a specific behavior, then you can deal with this specific behavior. But criticism is different because it focuses on the person. So, for example, let's say that one of you has a habit of not completely closing the closet doors. I use that illustration because I ran into a lot of couples where this becomes a bone of contention, that one of them for whatever reason, never completely shuts the closet door and it seems somehow just to drive the other one mad.

"So, let's say then that your spouse is not doing that. You can complain 'I wish you would close the closet doors' or 'Look, there's the closet door that you haven't closed all the way that makes me unhappy. Would you please close it?' Those focus on specific behavior 'I don't like what you did', 'I don't like what you're doing. I'm asking you, if you will, to do it another way.'

Now, what turns that into criticism is when you include blame and general character assassination like 'Didn't your mother bring you up right? Were you born in a barn? How did you ever learn your manners? How did you ever think you could live with another person with the way that you think only about yourself?' Any of those kinds of things now no longer is focusing on a specific behavior, but it's actually attacking the other person's character. So, to turn a complain into a criticism, just make it this: 'What is wrong with you?' Sometimes I hear people say that very exact phrase to another person - 'What is wrong with you?' Listen, that is a criticism and that always is attacking the other person's character and personality, it's blaming them and it's never going to work out well. So just that phrase in and of itself is really, really bad. But you may not use that exact phrase. As a matter of fact, you may say it in such a way where you imply that very strongly without saying those words. Again, like 'Were you brought up in a barn? Didn't your mother teach you better? Can't you ever learn how to live with somebody else?' All those kinds of things are still saying there is something wrong with you - 'What is wrong with you?' And I don't care who a person is, nobody likes their character being assassinated, nobody likes to be blamed like that. Because, you see, we talked way back in the first video that the three premier reasons that people want a divorce is because they feel unloved or disliked or disrespected. And when you use criticism towards another person, you are doing the ultimate disrespect-I'm not treating you like you're a person of good character, I'm not treating you like you're my equal, I'm not treating you like a person who did something I'm unhappy with but it's still you and you're okay in and of yourself-it's saying to you, "I do not respect you". Now, if you do that, you're really going to hurt the other person and you are inevitably going to hurt the relationship. If you're already in a situation where your marriage is not good, you know for a fact that this is bad.

Exercise

So, we have an exercise for you. It's pretty brief, it won't take you but just a minute or two to do. But go through there and check each of those as applicable to you that you know, "this is what I do". Now, again, be honest with yourself, pause and then pick back up after you're done.

So how did you score? When I'm doing this in my live workshop, this 3-day intensive workshop called Marriage Helper 911, as I go around the room looking at the people there (and we limit the number of couples who can be in that workshop, you understand), as I go around looking at them here I'll say, "Okay, how many people scored more than half of those that you do them?" And nearly every hand in the room will go up that, "I didn't realize how much I did this, I didn't realize that I really was hurting the other person as badly as I am". Now, if that's the case, you know that you actually use criticism. Remember that because it's important for you to know.

2. Contempt

Now, the second Horseman is called contempt. Gottman says it's the worse of the Four Horsemen because it conveys disgust. It includes things like sarcasm. Now, let me stop and mention something here called male humor. Sometimes, again, this is if I'm speaking to a large audience somewhere, I'll say, "Guys, have you ever been absolutely hilarious and your wife didn't get it?" Most people then laugh and the husbands nod their heads and wives kind of shake their heads in the different direction, not nodding like 'yes', but shaking it like 'oh, no'. Male humor can be awfully sarcastic. It can be vicious, sometimes it can be mean, because it's the way men in America tend to have humor with each other. But it doesn't work very well when aimed at your wife. I'll give you an example. One Sunday morning I was invited to actually speak for a church. Now, this particular church had about 1,000 in the auditorium Sunday morning, it was the first Sunday of that given year and I was invited to be a special speaker. My wife had gone with me. In that area, there had been a Bowflex commercial that had been playing all during the Christmas holidays (this was several years ago) and in that Bowflex commercial, there was a woman who was a 50-year-old grandmother and in the commercial she was wearing a bikini. She was a very attractive 50-year-old grandmother and she had quite a body for her age that she was showing off wearing that bikini. Well, when I started my speech that day, I thought I would be funny, but I ended up using what's called male humor. I said, "How many of you people have seen that Bowflex commercial with the 50-year-old grandmother in the bikini?" And most hands went up. And I said, "Well, I just ordered the Bowflex. Wait 'til you see how my wife looks like a year from now!" Every man in the audience laughed. Most every woman looked at her husband and said, "He's a dead man". When it was over and we went to leave, Alice and I were in our car and started to drive away and she looked at me and she said, "The joke you made about the Bowflex..." And I said, "That was really fun..." Because when I saw the expression on her face and she didn't think it was funny at all, she said, "I felt disrespected, I felt that you were treating me with contempt, I felt that you were saying to these people that I'm ugly, that I'm fat, that I'm out of shape, it really put me down. It made it sound like you were disgusted with the way I look now." Now, of course, my first inclination was to explain, "No, honey, that was not my intent at all, it was just humor and let me explain to you why it was funny." But if I had done that, it would've been showing her even more disrespect.

Because she was telling me how she felt and she wanted me to hear how she felt, so rather than trying to explain to her that she shouldn't have felt that way or that I did not intend for her to feel that way, my job at that point was to start indicating true respect to her, which was to listen, to understand and to tell her know, "I see that you're hurt, I didn't realize I was going to hurt you, but I did, I take full responsibility, I am so sorry, please forgive me." Now, interestingly, Gottman says that when you do something negative like that, that his research indicates that for any negative thing you do to hurt your spouse, it will take at least five positive things to offset it. And so I know, "Okay, for the next day or so, I need to be very positive about several things to make up for the hurt that I caused her". Because I indicated to her contempt whether intended to or not. Sarcasm does that. Cynicism, name calling, eye rolling, sneering, mockery, hostile humor, anything that puts the other person down, anything that in any way can be viewed by the person as showing disrespect, showing you're indicating, "I'm disgusted with you as you are now". And because it conveys, it is the ultimate disrespect. And as Gottman said, it is the worst of the Four Horsemen because it really tears that other person up. It's like, "Not only do you not like me, not only do I not feel that you love me and not only do I feel that you don't respect me, I actually feel like it's far beyond you disrespecting me, you're disgusted by me. Now, if I feel that way, what do you think I'll do with my wall? You think I'm going to take yet another brick and hand it to you and let you see more about who I really am or do you think because I now feel that I disgust you that I might want to put another brick up?" Maybe not just a brick higher, but a brick thicker, because it's like, "If I disgust you, I really don't want you to see who I am."

Exercise

Now, there's a contempt exercise. It will just take a minute or two to complete that. But, again, be extremely honest with yourself.

So how did you do? Did you have more than you thought you would? Again, when I do this in the workshop with marriages in crises, of course, I realize that people in crises are a unique group, so I'm not saying the whole world is like this. But when I say, "How many of you marked at least half of those saying that you actually did it?" Inevitably, I'll have some people and sometimes it's just like some really sweet, gentle, kind woman that you look at and think, "she must be a saint" who raise their hand and say, "Oh, I didn't just mark half of them. I think I checked every one of those. I have used this against my husband." And other people would be shocked to think that she would do that, because you look at her and go "Wow, she's just so sweet!" But it's not just women, it's men, obviously. Everybody can do this kind of thing, but when you do them, you cause great pain to the other person. Now, I've already pointed out to you, according to Gottman's research, people who do these Horsemen and bring them up early in their conflict or use them quite a bit, dramatically increase the likelihood that they're going to divorce. But people who just stop doing these, even if they haven't fixed anything else, they just stop these four (two of which we already talked about) if they just stop these four, dramatically reduce the likelihood of divorcing.

3. Defensiveness

So let's flip to the third Horseman. It's called defensiveness. Now, this is a way of blaming your partner like, "The problem isn't me, it's you". Or another way to say it is, "What's wrong with me?! You're asking what's wrong with me? The real question is what's wrong with you?" And so, rather than dealing with what's really going on, you actually attack the other person and that becomes your defensiveness of yourself "I defend me by attacking you". And it always escalates the conflict. That's what makes it so deadly. Because now, wherever you were in that conflict, let's say you were at a 3 on scale of 10, it's going to immediately go to a 4 and if that continues, then it's going to ease up to a 5 and then a 6, it can shoot all the way up to the 7s and 8s and 9s, sometimes it even reaches a 10. It's going to be really, really bad, because no longer is anyone, neither you or your partner trying to figure out how to solve this, now all you're doing is hurting the other person by saying, "I just got hurt and I'm going to hurt you. What you said offended me and I'm going to offend you." And you get into this dance. Picture it as a circle, if you will. It doesn't really matter where you come in that circle, once you get in it, you just keep going into that same circle and the dance you do becomes ultimately destructive. And so, defensiveness doesn't help things at all.

Let's say that one of you actually sometimes might even not be doing one of the Horsemen, but just gives a complaint. But the other becomes defensive like, "Well, maybe I'll leave the closet door opened, but you--you never put your dirty underwear in the hamper like you're supposed to do." Defensiveness always works badly because it is an attack. Even if you think you're just defending yourself, it's always an attack on the other person.

Exercise

So, on page 20, we have an exercise for you. Again, be very, very honest. So take some time to complete it and then come back.

So how did you do on the defensiveness? Did you have at least half of them marked? Now, you understand that in any of these you may not have any marks at all, you may be going "Wow! I really did well here. I marked one or only one or two on the defensiveness scale. I feel really good about myself." But understand that it's not having all the Four Horsemen to make things bad, it can just be doing one of the Horsemen that makes things bad. And so, if you wind up having a pretty good score in the sense that you didn't mark some things on one of them, like this one, but you also had a whole lot of them marked on another, it's still bad. Understand these are things you need to stop.

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4. Stonewalling

So let's look at the fourth one. It's called stonewalling. When Alice and I were a young couple, we had another couple who were friends of ours who were also a young couple. And she tended to be volatile and so, she would often start into arguments with him. Now, back then, when I didn't know any better, I thought his reaction was awesome. Because what he did was rather than arguing back, he just looked down and it was like, "Okay, I'm not going to fight." "Wow! That is so mature! Look what he's doing, look how he's handling that!" But if I had been paying attention, I would've noticed that it just escalated what was happening. Because when he was looking down or away as he was not paying attention to her, he may have been saying, "I'm not going to get into this", but because she felt totally neglected, like "You're not responding to me at all", she became more intense. So stonewalling that when I was a young man I thought, "Wow, that's a good thing", it's not a good thing at all. It's really a very bad thing. It happens when one partner just tunes out. So here she may look away or down without uttering a sound, what's really happening is the stonewaller is acting as if he or she couldn't care less about what the other person is saying. So does it help? No. So can you look at this person and say, "How mature, you're not participating in this?" No. They are participating, but the way they're participating is done in such a way that it's escalating the intensity of the other person who's saying, "You may be ignoring me now, but you cannot ignore me forever and so, I'll get louder or I'll get more intense or maybe I'll do some other things to get your attention, but I am going to be paid attention to." And so, things escalate.

Exercise

What about you? Complete the exercise on page 21.

So, how did you do on the stonewalling quiz? Now, you may rate very high. As a matter of fact, you might actually look back and go, "I didn't rate very high on the other three, but I'm really high on this one." Remember what I said just a few minutes ago: You don't have to rate high on all four of them for this to be very bad for a relationship. Rating high on any of them makes the relationship bad. Well, let's say you just rated about halfway on a couple of them--that's still not good. What you really want to do is to get down to where you're only checking one or two or maybe none at all under each of these things, which means that you have to learn how to control what you do. And you need to be able to look at the other person and see what she or he is doing and then judge your own reaction to this. Like, "Am I about to be contemptuous? Am I about to do something that's stonewalling or defensiveness? And if I am, I need to stop doing that, because it's not going to make things better, it's just going to make things worse."

Flooding

Now, let me tell you about one other thing that's not part of the Four Horsemen, but something that the Four Horsemen can lead to. It's called flooding. Now, again, remember, flooding is not one of the Horsemen, we've already talked about the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. This is a physiological reaction. What it means is that you get more and more intense. And as you get intense, adrenaline gets dumped into your body. Your body actually begins to change and your mind begins to change. So flooding is a physiological reaction that's affecting both the mind and the emotions as well. It means that you're about to get out of control, that you won't be able to help having the reactions that you're about to have. You're going to get into what's called a fight or flight syndrome. And by the way, you may have heard about the fight or flight syndrome, they say it goes all the way back to early men and they talk about some cavemen, for example, and here comes the tiger and when the cavemen sees it, it would be either, "I got to pick up my club and fight for my life or I've got to run like crazy, but either way, I got to have the adrenaline surging in my body to get me extra strength and vitality so I can kill this animal that's about to kill me or get away from this animal that's chasing me" – into what's called the fight or flight syndrome. What happens is that you really are having some things happening inside your body that gets you ready to fight.

Now, believe or not, there's a third "F" that happens to some people. It's called freeze. So it's fight or flight or freeze. You've seen people that are so overwhelmed by a situation that they don't fight and they don't run, they just completely become immobile, they don't know what to do, they don't know what to say, they don't know where to go, they just stop. You may have had those kinds of nightmares where in your nightmare some terrible thing was coming at you and you were not able to run, you were not able to scream, you were not able to do anything in the nightmare. That's the "F" that's the freeze. Now, when this happens, somebody is going to do something really, really dumb. And you notice on the screen there it says it's more pronounced in men. That does not mean that women don't do it. Women do. As a matter of fact when my wife and I were very young (and my wife's a wonderful woman, so please don't get this illustration as anything negative toward her), I remember once we were having an argument and I could tell that she was beginning to get overwhelmed, that her adrenaline was getting higher and higher that she was becoming very nervous, very agitated and she just wanted the argument to stop. But I was young and headstrong and I was convinced that she was going to understand what I was trying to say, I was going to get it through her somehow someday and so, I just kept arguing and pushing and arguing. When she left the room, I followed her, I kept at her until finally she exploded. Now, back in those days it made me very angry because I thought, "Look what she just did!" She actually picked up some valuable object that we had and she threw it and it broke and I was furious at her. From this perspective in life, I realize that the problem wasn't really with her, it was with me.

Because when a person gets to that level, when the adrenaline just builds up and up and up, some really interesting things start happening in the brain and in the body. For example, the blood begins to move away from the skin and deeper into the muscles. It's doing that for a couple of reasons. One is so that you have more strength and more power in the muscle itself, but the other is so that if you have a superficial cut during the fight, you won't bleed as much. In other words, you really are getting ready for a physiological battle. Another thing happens, interestingly in the brain. What happens in the brain is it actually gets into a situation where the only thing it's looking for and the only thing it will perceive is danger. So it's not noticing anything else, it's just noticing, "Where is the danger? What's going to hurt me? What do I need to defend myself against? What do I need to run away from? What do I need to fight?" Now, a person in that state is not logical. A person in that state also is not in control of himself or herself any longer. And so, when flooding occurs, nothing good is going to happen. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing good is going to happen. And so, what you want to do is make sure you never get that far. If you do get that far, then you've got to shut down. We suggest ending all conversation for at least two hours and when you restart, do so unemotionally. And notice we said in at least two hours. You've got to give time for the adrenaline to recede.

There's another thing you can do here to help that better. If you work the adrenaline off until the person who's been flooding, the person who's just getting louder and louder and closer to punching the wall or throwing something or screaming or saying things they would regret for many, many years to some, when you stop that, when you say, "okay, let's have a timeout here for at least two hours", then the person who was about to flood or in the process of flooding would actually do better if they go out and go out for a long walk or if they're physically able to go for a run or to get on the treadmill and go as string and fast as they can. Because you actually can burn off some of adrenaline through physical exercise. What you're trying to do here is to do everything you can to get the adrenaline back down. So that's why we say at least two hours. And if in those two hours you still find yourself on the edge of agitation and losing control, then do it even longer than that.

Now, if the other person is thinking, "Wait a minute, I really want to solve this right now, let's get this done today, at the moment, because here we are at the intensity of it and if we let it go now, we may never finish it up. And so, I'm thinking this is just a way that you're getting out of this, so we're going to do it right now." I can understand you're feeling that way, I can understand you're thinking that way. But it is incorrect. Because, remember, flooding is a physiological reaction affecting the body and the mind and the other person loses control.

There is not going to be logical, calm, reasonable discussion here, it is impossible to do. And so, while I might not want to give the other person the timeout because I'm thinking we need to solve this right now, if I don't give the other person the time out, if I don't do that, I'm actually going to push him or her into a state where terrible things are going to be said, somebody's fist is going to go through the wall or something is going to be broken or, unfortunately, sometimes people will end up slapping or hitting or doing other things physically to each other. Now, I'm not trying to justify the flooded person's behavior, but I'm saying if you keep pushing them until they do that, you're causing a terrible damage to the relationship and terrible damage to the other person. So when flooding starts, you have to stop what's going on. Whichever one of you is the calmer at the time is the better one to actually call the timeout. In other words, the person who is not flooding is actually better to be the one to call the timeout. Now, it's quite all right if the person who is flooding says, "I'm about to lose control, we better stop this." If she or he says that, then you should back off, "Okay, I got it. When can we start back?"... "I'm not sure right now, still upset", "okay, just make sure that we will come back and solve this problem." And then you give them as much time as they need. But if the other person is becoming more and more agitated and is not calling for the timeout, then the one who is calmer should be the one who's saying, "I see that this is not going to be good in a few minutes. I realize that I am pushing you too far, so please allow me to ask for a timeout so we can both calm down and come back for this later." As a matter of fact, if you do that, you gain great ground with the other person, because you're showing more concern for him or her, the emotions that are going on inside of him or her than you are for getting your own way in this argument or winning or proving that you are right. And that shows respect. Respect, as we've been talking about all through this series, is essential, is extremely important to do.

Exercise

Now, flooding, we have an exercise for that as well. Right now, do that exercise on page 22.

So how did you do? Have you ever flooded? Now, in doing the flooding exercise, sometimes you're looking back and saying 'How does this apply to me spouse? Have I ever caused him or her or pushed so far that he or she finally had a flooding experience?' If so, be aware of that, look for the signs and help that not to happen again by you being the mature and reasonable one who makes sure that it never gets that far.

Now, I'm going to put you through an exercise here.