



## ‘The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse’

### Are They Stampeding Your Relationships?

In our earlier years of marriage, Susan and I had a lot of conflict and stress. I was working in the chemistry department at ASU juggling a full time job with going to graduate school. Susan also had a lot of stress caring for our first child and working full time at the Arizona State Mental Hospital. We seemed to always be upset with each other. When my patience wore thin I would blow up at Susan with anger and insults. Her response – the cold shoulder. On her part, she seemed routinely irritable and had a sharp tongue. My response to her criticalness was to defend with excuses and explanations. Little did either of us realize that we were practicing the exact behaviors that doom a marriage.

Psychologist John Gottman is renowned for his ability to predict, with 94 percent accuracy, which couples will stay married and which will divorce. In his book titled *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, he lists four key attributes that doom a marriage. He calls them ‘The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse’. Susan and I had all four! Thankfully, we will soon celebrate our 45<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary - only because through God’s grace we finally recognized and challenged the destructive behaviors. Here are Gottman’s Four Horseman.

- 1. Being Critical.** Gottman’s research with over 2,000 couples found that women are more likely to complain about and criticize their spouse. This is the exact opposite trait prescribed by the Scriptures where the admonition in Ephesians 5:33 is “let the wife see to it that she respect her husband”. Criticalness shows itself most often through the critical spouse’s negativity, frequent correction, complaint, bossiness or nagging. His research shows that marital harmony requires a 5 to 1 ratio of positive affirmations to criticisms. Anything less damages the relationship.
- 2. Contempt.** Name-calling, verbal insults, hostile humor, mockery and hostile body language (sneering, rolling your eyes, etc.) are all hurtful, un-biblical behaviors that

convey anger, disgust and contempt. I tended to follow the pattern of my father - who didn't criticize or say much but would instead give in to angry blow ups. When angry I often said things I regretted in my calmer moments. Typically, contemptuous behavior comes from suppressing feelings for too long and then spilling them all out at once. This can often result in verbal abuse. James 4:26 reminds us to 'be angry but sin not.'

- 3. Defensiveness.** When a spouse is criticized the frequent response is to become defensive. It's easy to see why this happens. If you are being bombarded with critical comments or insults, the natural inclination is to defend yourself from attack. As Gottman says "the fact that defensiveness is an understandable reaction to feeling besieged is one reason it is so destructive - the "victim" doesn't see anything wrong with being defensive. But defensive phrases...tend to escalate a conflict rather than resolve anything." And they keep the defensive partner from taking responsibility for his or her complicity in the conflict.
  
- 4. Stonewalling** often happens once a conflict starts. The stonewaller removes himself by turning a cold shoulder to the spouse and becoming stony silent, oftentimes leaving the room and stopping all communication. While the stonewaller may claim they are attempting to not make things worse, they fail to realize that withdrawal and turning a cold shoulder is itself a very powerful act of rejection. Gottman's research found that it conveyed "disapproval, icy distance, and smugness". Additionally, withdrawal is the most destructive style of resolving conflict. It not only makes resolution impossible, it breaks off any meaningful relationship. Men, more commonly than women, stonewall their partner.

Now for the good news . . . couples can change any one of these four negative patterns of interaction and create new ways of relating that enhance the marriage. The first step is RECOGNITION. Susan and I didn't fully realize what we were doing that so damaged our relationship. Sure, we knew it wasn't working right but we weren't able to specifically label, understand and describe our negative contribution. With recognition comes an increased ability to control self and modify behavior.

The second step in change was one of OWNERSHIP. Until I was able to fully see my negative contribution and stop blaming Susan, change was impossible. If a person owns his or her need to change and stops blame-shifting or waiting for the other to change, then personal and relational growth can happen and usually does. "...first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly..." Matt. 7:5

For further tips on change I suggest you pick up Gottman's book. He offers some very helpful strategies.

Gottman, John Ph.D., *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail . . . and how you can make yours last*, Simon and Schuster, New York, New York, 1994.