

## Marriage Doc #2 ~ How To Predict Divorce

In his research Gottman was able to determine that marriages fail not because people argue but because of the way in which they argue. How conflict begins, turns out to be the best way to predict divorce. When the conversation quickly becomes negative, accusatory, sarcastic, critical, contemptuous or condescending, this is known as harsh start up and the harsher the start up the worse the conversation is going to get. Discussions that start harshly will inevitably end up on a very negative note. Gottman boasted that 96% of the time he could predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first three minutes of that interaction.

So it's really harsh start up that simply dooms the conversation to failure. If it starts that way, you need to learn how to just pull the plug, take a breather and start over. Gottman also identified that there are four types of negative interactions that are so lethal that he nicknamed them the four Horsemen of the apocalypse.

But first word about complaints. Complaints are a necessary part of living together. And there's a world of difference between a complaint and a criticism.

So here are the Horsemen:

The first one is criticism. While a complaint only addresses the specific action about which your spouse may have failed, a criticism is more global, it adds negative words about your mate's character or personality. So a complaint might be ~ I'm really upset that you didn't sweep the kitchen floor last night. We agreed we would take turns doing that. A criticism about that same thing might be: Why are you so forgetful? I hate having to always sweep the kitchen floor. You just don't care.

The second horseman is contempt. Contempt would be sneering, sarcastic, condescending or cynical remarks, name-calling, profanity, eye rolling, mockery, hostile humor things ~ like that. It is virtually impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message that you are disgusted with him or her. Contempt is fueled by a long simmering negative thought processes, or perspectives, about your partner.

The third horseman is defensiveness. Defensiveness is really just a way of blaming your partner. You're simply saying the problem isn't me it's you.

The fourth horseman is stonewalling disengagement, turning away, shutting down ~ no eye-contact, no head nodding, no verbal responses, you act like you just don't care at all about the conversation and you walk away. This is actually, as the horsemen go the worst one. This is the most damaging form of communication.

What happens with this kind of communication is that the body begins to flood, and we're talking about flooding with stress hormones. Adrenaline and cortisol epinephrine. It's known as diffuse physiological arousal or better known as fight or flight. So when the negativities gets so overwhelming your partner being shellshocked. A way to know if you're getting into DPA is when your heart rate reaches above 100 bpm as a general rule.

So if we're approaching that level of arousal we should shut down the conversation, pull the plug on going any further. A simple way to see if you should continue the conversation is to stop and check your pulse, and with something like an Apple Watch or a Fitbit it's pretty easy to do. I have both, it takes just a moment to see where your heart rate is. And as a general rule if you're approaching 100 bpm, I would say if you're north of 90, you should pull the plug and calm yourself down before you proceed further. In fact Gottman, during his marriage sessions,

would have clients wear heart rate monitors. These would beep when the heart rate approached 100 bpm and they would stop calm down and start the conversation again.

Now flooding leads to problems for a couple of reasons. At least one partner feels emotionally distressed when dealing with the other partner. Secondly the physiological response makes it virtually impossible to have a productive discussion, it simply shut down our ability to process information. Creative problem-solving goes out the window. What is happening is you're only left with the most reflexive, and the least intellectually sophisticated, responses in your repertoire because of fight or flight. What's really happening, is that your prefrontal cortex is shutting down. And giving way to your limbic system, which is the part of your brain that handles fight or flight. And when the limbic system engages, your ability to think and reason is literally shut down. And one might ask why is that? It's real simple when you're in a situation that requires that kind of fight or flight response, it's only smart to shut down your thinking. Basically get out of danger ~ think about it later. But of course if we're trying to have a conversation we don't need that kind of response happening in the body. So when you reach that state, any chance of resolving the issue is pretty much gone. And most of us are able to get there very quickly.

It's also good to know that every couple has conflict. Every couple experiences at least some of the four Horsemen. The biggest difference lies in some thing called repair attempts. These are the attempts to back things down, back off and say something like: "Let's start this conversation over. Hey maybe I said something I shouldn't have said, maybe I should say it differently, let me try again." And if those attempts are successful then we can get back on track and continue with the conversation. But when they fail, when one partner simply overruns the repair attempt, then the Conversation is usually doomed to failure. Gottman indicated that a crucial factor in the health of a marriage is whether or not repair attempts succeed. These attempts to de-escalate the situation 'put the brakes on', so that flooding can be prevented. Emotionally intelligent marriages have a wide variety of successful repair attempts. Each person has their own approach, their style. Things like: 'Hey can we calm down, hey we're getting a bit off track, hey could we maybe start that over again'. And whether or not that repair attempt is successful really has little to do with how eloquent the actual repair attempt is, it has everything to do with the willingness to accept the attempt.

This really hinges on the climate of the relationship itself. So if the relationship is negative to begin with, there's probably less of a willingness to accept the attempt. This goes back to the 5:1 ratio. We want to keep the climate of the relationship as positive as possible, that is a major function of maintaining the 5:1 ratio ~ to promote the willingness to except the attempt. Ironically there are actually more repair attempts in troubled marriages than in healthy marriages, but less successful ones. So what predicts the success of a repair attempt? Well, it's the degree to which the relationship has what we call positive sentiment override. So if our feelings, memories, thoughts and perspectives are positive, we have PSO positive sentiment override. If we have negative memories, then of course it's a negative sentiment override. So couples who are deeply entrenched in a negative view of their spouse, or marriage, literally rewrite their past from this negative viewpoint and they predict the future from that negative viewpoint.

All couples, I believe, enter marriage with high hopes and high expectations. And happy marriages couples look back on those early days with a lot of fondness. Great memories. When the marriage is not going well, history literally gets re-written for the worse. Some people ultimately leave a marriage by physically divorcing. Others do so by just living parallel lives. Whatever the route, there are usually 4 final stages to the death of a relationship the first stage is marital problems are finally seeing as severe. They both agree we are in trouble. In stage 2 talking things over becomes useless. In stage 3 the couple begins living parallel lives. Stage 4 - loneliness sets in. In this last stage affairs become highly likely. We have to remember that

usually an affair is a symptom of a dying marriage not the cause. The warning signs were there if only they had known what to look for.

But here's the good news. It's not over until it's over. Even a marriage that is about to hit bottom, can be revived with the right kind of help. Sadly, many marriages at this stage get the wrong kind of help. They get advice about simply negotiating their differences or agreeing to disagree, or practicing some speaker listener skill. Those things aren't bad in and of themselves, but they're really not key to reviving a marriage. The key to reviving marriages is not how to handle disagreements, but how you are with one another when you're not fighting. Again we go back to the 5 to 1 ratio. What are you doing when you're not having a conflict? Are you putting positivity back into the relationship? Are you making that a priority? The secret of a great relationship is to strengthen that foundation by adding positivity, every chance we get.