

CONFLICT STYLES

Conflict is a natural *and* normal part of personal and professional relationships. It signals that change is trying to happen. When expressed skillfully and productively, conflict often *increases* relationship connection. Unfortunately, few people know how to disagree well, how to “fight right.” Instead, it’s more common to initiate or exacerbate negative conflict by communicating in unproductive and unskilled ways, which potentially damages relationships.

Researcher John Gottman dubs the most common toxic communication styles, the ones deployed most often in everyday life, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.*

Please note: There are far more toxic conflict styles than the following Four Horsemen like verbal or physical abuse, gaslighting, bullying, or other coercive practices. Please seek immediate help from a therapist, legal authorities, or other trained professional to address those challenges. ^

Contempt/Disrespect: Condescending or degrading communication that appears in what you say *or* how you say things, e.g., biting sarcasm, eyerolling. Some people disguise contempt (or criticism) by claiming humorous intent, e.g., “I was *joking!*” or deflecting responsibility, e.g., “you’re so sensitive!” In marriages, contempt is a major predictor of divorce.

Criticism/Blame: Critical communication involves making things personal vs. gently complaining about or neutrally referencing a challenging issue or behavior. Also, blame is sometimes expressed nonverbally, e.g., dissatisfied grunts. Brené Brown’s fun animated video offers more info:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RZWf2_2L2v8.

Defensiveness: Here, you resist accountability for your role in creating or contributing to negative conflict, sometimes by resorting to excuses, and sometimes by reflexively counterattacking. The phrase “having a chip on your shoulder” applies and shows up in what is said—e.g., “I didn’t do it!”—or posture, e.g., crossed arms.

Stonewalling/Silent Treatment: Stonewalling means walking away from conflict or remaining physically present yet refusing to speak or engage about it. This toxic style rests on an unwillingness to productively discuss a contentious issue and manifests as literal or figurative withdrawal.

When you communicate via one or more Horsemen ***style overrides content***. How you speak trumps what you say. Things worsen when you avoid calmly addressing the rupture between you or resist repairing after.* Repair is central to skilled conflict resolution. It enhances relationship satisfaction and positively impacts parenting effectiveness.

Let’s differentiate stonewalling—a refusal to engage—from **flooding**, a physiological response to stress, trauma, or negative conflict. Symptoms of flooding include a “rush” of stress hormones, rapid heartbeat, labored or accelerated breathing, overactive sweat glands, an inability to focus or speak. Flooding sometimes happens in concert with any of the four Horsemen, not just stonewalling. If you or the person you’re talking to floods, take a break and revisit the issue after everyone self-regulates, which takes anywhere from twenty minutes to twenty-four hours for those who flood.

Possible shifts from toxic communication to productive conflict:

- **Name:** Admit your go-to Horsemen—the one(s) you trot out most—and invite others to name theirs.
- **Assess:** Try to discover the underlying goal(s) you’re trying to meet, if unskillfully, through your conflict-style.
- **Create:** Give Horsemen silly names or sing a song about horses to signal their appearance and to invite laughter.
- **Respond:** Agree to call out Horsemen and when called by others pause, take a few breaths, and stop “trotting.”
- **Review:** Revisit arguments, preferably within twenty-four hours, to explore compromising-without-resentment.

*Repair takes many forms, the most common and most effective of which is a *sincere* apology. Some people repair in additional ways, e.g., offering a tender touch or sheepish look, helping with a task, requesting a do-over, admitting that a reaction was unskilled, or another conciliatory effort. A mutually satisfactory resolution—e.g., genuine compromise, agreeing to disagree, increased mutual understanding—also offers repair.

^In addition to the highly toxic communication-patterns listed in this box, [Dr. Ramani Durvasula](#) notes that toxic people possess a combination of traits that render them unable to “fight right,” to engage in conflict productively or respectfully. She offers the acronym C.R.A.V.E.D. as a way to identify them: Conflictual, Rigid, Antagonistic, Victimized or Vindictive (or both), Entitled, and Dysregulated. If you are in relationship with someone with these traits, please seek support for yourself individually in lieu of relationship support, as the latter is not advised.