

Save Your Marriage Part 1

Harness your sabotaging reactions!

If you want your relationship to survive, there are some “don'ts” that research has shown must be avoided at all costs.

You are no doubt aware, that certain of your own behaviours have the potential to create conflict in your relationship, and that other behaviours have the effect of enhancing it.

This article deals with the former – actions that research has shown will start the time-bomb towards destruction ticking. So – save your marriage. Become wise to those marriage busting, love destroying, relationship sinking styles of reacting.

Predictors of divorce

John Gottman and his associates have extensively researched the communication patterns of couples, and have identified with what they call the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.' (This expression comes from the Bible where it refers to allegorical figures representing war, famine, death and an uncertain fourth disaster.) Their research with newly married couples showed that anger, disagreements and in fact conflict in general were not predictors of divorce, but the use of any of the Four Horsemen was. Videotaped in a university laboratory, more than 650 couples, many studied for as long as 14 years, provided the research team with vast volumes of evidence as to the impact of communication styles on relationships.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are contempt, criticism, defensiveness and stonewalling. Each is so powerful, and so essential to avoid, that further explanation is required.

Before discussing the details, however, every partner must accept that their style of conflict is usually a homegrown affair beginning in childhood, and that it is therefore a reactionary process. We don't decide to be defensive for example, we're programmed to be. Therefore, to get on top of this or any other habitual response to conflict, we must come to grips with what we

do, how useful that is, and what we can do differently when the old habit emerges and wants to run its course.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse explained

Contempt is a way of communicating, non-verbally, something like “O my god, here he goes again,” or “haven't I heard all of this rubbish before.” Usually associated with a rolling of the eyes and looking up at the heavens in mock despair, contempt implies that one's spouse is inferior, undesirable, or in some way a hopeless case. Patronizing behaviour, in which one talks down to one's spouse could be considered a close relative of contempt, because it too implies a superior position, the partner being judged “not good enough.” Since “I am not good enough” is a common childhood script for many people, any behaviour which implies that the other is deficient in some way will undermine self-esteem and empowerment.

Criticism is a judgmental process that places an evaluation on the spouse's behaviour. It too implies the superior position taken by the critic. Commonly criticism is the choice of those who think they know best, the 'right' way. I consider that blame is a first cousin to criticism.

Such a position overlooks the flawed thinking that anyone's perspective can be superior to anyone else's. Being informed, knowledgeable, or even 'right' is no proof of superiority, because we make our decisions based on many things, not least that which best suits our personality, character, predisposition or need. Since these are all unique, one person's perspective can never be proven to be superior to another's.

Defensiveness is a position taken to defend oneself against potential attack, but may feel more like a desire to hide from conflict. I know this pattern well, because it is one I can slip into if I allowed myself to do so. The problem with being defensive, is that the process of closing up shop means that conflict can never be cleared or even discussed. The other person feels shut out, and can also be left feeling 'wronged' because negotiation and open discussion is not permitted. Defensiveness closes the book on communication, and is often used by people who don't know quite what to say or do when conflict arises, so is used as a way to keep safe. Quite obviously, no relationship can survive such trench warfare, where

little gets resolved, and one person at least is remaining invisible to the other.

Stonewalling is resistance in which one refuses to listen to one's partner, especially any complaints. It has some similarities to defensiveness. It is another strategy for closing down, and keeping oneself safe. Stonewalling can also become a way of preventing any discussion, but some people are able eventually, after a time resisting, to engage in discussion once the emotional temperature of the conflict has settled down. In fact, stonewalling is often used when a way forward through open communication is territory unknown. Stonewallers often close down in order to escape vitriolic comments, or rage, but in doing so may not express or discuss their own feelings.

After further research, Gottman and his team added belligerence to the list. Like criticism, belligerence is a preferred strategy for those who like to lash out with their tongue. It is a way of taunting one's spouse with provocative comments that challenges the spouse's power and authority, and shows a determination to behave as one wants no matter what the spouse wants or suggests.

Any of these five characterize unhappy marriages, and indicate impending divorce. They are all basically strategies for throwing one's toys out of the cot, but in doing so, each is undermining the self-esteem and emotional strength of the partner. Whenever a person is being denigrated by one's spouse, the clock is ticking on how long they can continue to be undermined by the person who should be most supportive and empowering. Read the article on supportive communication to discover alternative communication strategies to these predictors of disaster.

Sadly, not only do these unhelpful strategies take toll of your marriage, but they also take toll of your body and mind. Unhappily married people raise the likelihood of getting sick by 35%, and shortens life span by an average of 4 years. The stress contributes to higher blood pressure, heart disease, as well as psychological problems such as depression and substance abuse.

In my experience, it is usually some roadblock to open and constructive communication that brings couples to therapy. Where each is willing and able to talk through the tough stuff, while remaining respectful of each

other, problems in the relationship are easier to resolve and heal. If you are motivated to make changes, they are usually do-able.

Read many more excellent articles about relationships from the developer of Emotionally Focused Therapy, Dr Sue Johnson. Read her blog at <http://blog.holdmetight.net/>