GOTTMAN-INFORMED RELATIONSHIP TOOLS

The Four Horsemen of Conflict

Notice the pattern. Replace it with a repair.

The Gottman Institute describes four destructive communication patterns: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. Recognising them can help couples interrupt conflict and practise more constructive ways of communicating.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- Recognise the four patterns in everyday conversations
- Learn the associated antidotes
- Practise original, respectful replacement phrases

Take your time

You can read this guide in one sitting or return to the exercises whenever you need them. No worksheet needs to be completed perfectly.

UNDERSTAND

What this can look like

1. Criticism -> a gentle start

Criticism attacks character rather than describing a specific problem. Replace “you are so selfish” with a clear account of the situation, what you feel and what you need.

2. Contempt -> respect and appreciation

Contempt uses ridicule, hostile sarcasm, disgust or superiority. It can deeply damage emotional safety. Practise respect, genuine appreciation and curiosity - without pretending serious harm is acceptable.

3. Defensiveness -> own your part

Defensiveness shifts blame or dismisses concerns. Notice any part of the situation you can genuinely own while also allowing yourself to express your perspective and limits.

4. Stonewalling -> a planned pause

Stonewalling can follow emotional flooding, when someone shuts down or stops responding. Rather than disappearing, name the need for a pause and give a clear plan to resume. A pause must never be used to punish or control.

Notice with curiosity

These are explanations, not labels or tests. You do not need to recognise yourself in every example for the guide to be useful.

PRACTICAL TOOLKIT

Three things to try

Start gently

Use a sentence like: “When the plan changed at the last minute, I felt overwhelmed. Can we decide together how to handle changes next time?”

Make repair attempts

Try: “I spoke harshly just now. That was hurtful. I want to try again more respectfully.” Appreciation, humour and affection are only helpful when welcome and safe.

Plan a regulating break

If flooded, ask for a break, do something calming that works for your body, then return at a stated time. Gottman materials commonly suggest at least 20 minutes to settle.

An important reminder

This educational resource is inspired by Gottman Institute concepts and is not an official Gottman publication or a substitute for therapy. Abuse, coercion, intimidation and safety concerns require a safety-focused approach, not shared responsibility for harm.

IN REAL LIFE

Words and actions to practise

Criticism

Instead of “You never make time for us”, try “I have missed spending time together. Could we plan an evening this week?”

Defensiveness

Instead of “You also forget things”, try “I forgot our agreement. I can put a reminder in my calendar.”

Stonewalling

Instead of walking away silently, try “I am overwhelmed and need a break. I will come back in half an hour.”

Start smaller than you think

Choose one example that feels safe, doable and relevant. Practising a small change consistently can be more useful than attempting everything at once.

REFLECTION & PRACTICE

A few gentle questions

1. Which pattern appears most often when I feel threatened or overwhelmed?

2. What need or fear might be underneath it?

3. What is one realistic replacement phrase I could practise?

Permission to pause

You can reflect privately, talk through a question with someone safe, or leave it unanswered. There is no “correct” response.

BRING IT TOGETHER

Small steps are still progress

Criticism

to Gentle start

Contempt

to Appreciation

Defensiveness

to Ownership

Stonewalling

to Calming pause

TRY THIS WEEK

1. Notice one pattern without shaming yourself or your partner.
2. Practise one gentle start-up for a manageable issue.
3. Share one specific appreciation.
4. Try a planned pause and repair if conversation escalates.

Keep safety in view

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FURTHER READING & REFERENCES

Gottman Institute, Four Horsemen
https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-recognizing-criticism-contempt-defensiveness-and-stonewalling/

Gottman Institute, Antidotes
https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-four-horsemen-the-antidotes/