



HOW GOTTMAN PREDICTS RELATIONSHIP ENDINGS: THE CLUES TO A COUPLE'S FUTURE BREAKUP ARE IN THE WAY THEY ARGUE

THE FIRST SIGN: HARSH STARTUP

The most obvious indicator that a discussion (and the marriage or relationship) is not going to go well is the way it begins. When a discussion leads off with criticism and/or sarcasm, a form of contempt — it has begun with a “harsh startup.”

The research shows that if your discussion begins with a harsh startup, it will inevitably end on a negative note, even if there are a lot of attempts to “make nice” in between. Statistics tell the story: 96 percent of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the *first three minutes* of the fifteen-minute interaction! A harsh startup simply predicts failure. So if you begin a discussion that way, you might as well pull the plug, take a breather, and start over.

THE SECOND SIGN: THE FOUR HORSEMEN

A harsh startup sounds the warning bell that the couple may be having serious difficulty. As the discussion unfolds, Gottman continues to look out for particular types of negative interactions. Certain kinds of negativity, if allowed to run rampant, are so lethal to a relationship that Gottman calls them the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. Usually these four horsemen clip-clop into the heart of a marriage or relationship in the following order: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Horseman 1: Criticism. You will always have some complaints about the person you live with. But there's a world of difference between a complaint and a criticism.

A complaint only addresses the specific action at which your spouse or partner failed. A criticism is more global — it adds on some negative words about your mate's character or personality. Some examples are:

“I'm really angry that you didn't sweep the kitchen floor last night. We agreed that we'd take turns doing it” is a complaint — it focuses on a specific behavior.

“Why are you so forgetful? I hate having to always sweep the kitchen floor when it's your turn. You just don't care” is a criticism.

Criticism throws in blame and general character assassination. To turn a complaint into a criticism, add the line: “What is wrong with you?”



Usually a harsh startup comes in the guise of criticism. For instance:

Complaint. There's no gas in the car. Why didn't you fill it up like you said you would?

Criticism. Why can't you ever remember anything? I told you a thousand times to fill up the tank, and you didn't. (*Criticism. She's implying the problem is his fault. Even if it is, blaming him will only make it worse.*)

The first horseman is very common in relationships. If you find that you and your spouse or partner are critical of each other, don't assume you're headed for a break-up. The problem with criticism is that when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way for the other, far deadlier horsemen.

Horseman 2: Contempt. Sarcasm and cynicism are types of contempt. So are name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. In whatever form, contempt — the worst of the four horsemen — is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust. It's virtually impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message you're disgusted with him or her. Inevitably, contempt leads to more conflict rather than to reconciliation.

Often a person's main purpose is to demean her or his partner or spouse. Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner. You're more likely to have such thoughts if your differences are not resolved. As disagreeing persists, complaints turn into global criticisms, which produces more and more disgusted feelings and thoughts, and finally you are fed up with your spouse, a change that will affect what you say when you argue.

Belligerence is just as deadly to a relationship. It is a form of aggressive anger because it contains a threat or provocation. Incidentally, couples who are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illnesses (colds, flu, and so on) than other people.

Horseman 3: Defensiveness. When conversations become so negative, critical, and attacking, it should come as no surprise that you will defend yourself. Although this is understandable, research shows that this approach rarely has the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner. You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't *me*, it's *you*." Defensiveness just escalates the conflict, which is why it's so deadly.

Criticism, Contempt, and Defensiveness don't always gallop into a home in strict order. They function more like a relay match — handing the baton off to each other over and over again, if the couple can't put a stop to it. The more defensive one becomes, the more the other attacks in response. Nothing gets resolved, thanks to the prevalence of criticism, contempt, and defensiveness. Much of these exchanges are communicated subtly (and not so subtly) through body language and sounds.



Horseman 4: Stonewalling. In marriages or relationships where discussions begin with a harsh startup, where criticism and contempt lead to defensiveness, which leads to more contempt and more defensiveness, eventually one partner tunes out. So enters the fourth horseman.

Think of the husband or boyfriend who comes home from work, gets met with a barrage of criticism from his wife or girlfriend, and hides behind the newspaper. The less responsive he is, the more she yells. Eventually he gets up and leaves the room. Rather than confronting his partner, he disengages. By turning away from his partner, he is avoiding a fight, but he is also avoiding his marriage or relationship. He has become a stonewaller. Although both men and women can be stonewallers, this behavior is far more common among men.

During a typical conversation between two people, the listener gives all kinds of cues to the speaker that he's paying attention. He may use eye contact, nod his head, say something like "Yeah" or "Uh-huh." A stonewaller doesn't give you this sort of casual feedback. He or she tends to look away or down without uttering a sound. She or he sits like an impassive stone wall. The stonewaller acts as though he or she couldn't care less about what you're saying, if the person even hears it at all.

Stonewalling usually arrives later in the course of a marriage or relationship than the other three horsemen. That's why it's less common among newly coupled partners than among couples who have been in a negative spiral for a while. It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable "out."

THE THIRD SIGN: FLOODING

Usually people stonewall as a protection against feeling *flooded*. Flooding means that your spouse's or partner's negativity — whether in the guise of criticism or contempt or even defensiveness — is so overwhelming, and so sudden, that it leaves you shell-shocked. You feel so defenseless against this sniper attack that you learn to do anything to avoid a replay.

The more often you feel flooded by your partner's or spouse's criticism or contempt, the more hypervigilant you are for cues that your spouse is about to "blow" again. All you can think about is protecting yourself from the turbulence your partner's onslaught causes. And the way to do that is to disengage emotionally from the relationship.

A marriage's or relationship's meltdown can be predicted by habitual harsh startup and frequent flooding brought on by the relentless presence of the four horsemen during disagreements. Although each of these factors alone can predict a divorce, they usually coexist in an unhappy marriage or relationship.



THE FOURTH SIGN: BODY LANGUAGE

Even if you could not hear the conversation between a stonewaller and the partner, you would be able to predict their divorce simply by looking at the stonewaller's physiological readings. When couples are monitored for bodily changes during a tense discussion, you can see just how physically distressing flooding is.

One of the most apparent of these physical reactions is that the heart speeds up — pounding away at more than 100 beats per minute — even as high as 165. (In contrast, a typical heart rate for a man who is about 30 is 76, and for a woman the same age, 82.)

Hormonal changes occur, too, including the secretion of adrenaline, which kicks in the “fight or flight response.” Blood pressure mounts. These changes are so dramatic that if one partner is frequently flooded during marital discussions, it's easy to predict that they will divorce.

Recurring episodes of flooding lead to divorce for two reasons. First, they signal that at least one partner feels severe emotional distress when dealing with the other. Second, the *physical* sensations of feeling flooded — increased heart rate, sweating, etc. — make it almost impossible to have a productive, problem-solving discussion. When your body goes into overdrive during an argument, it perceives the current situation as dangerous.

When a pounding heart and all the other physical stress reactions happen in the midst of a discussion with your mate, the consequences are disastrous. Your ability to process information is reduced, meaning it's harder to pay attention to what your partner is saying. Creative problem solving goes out the window. You're left with the most reflexive, least intellectually sophisticated responses in your repertoire: to fight (act critical, contemptuous, or defensive) or flee (stonewall). Any chance of resolving the issue is gone. Most likely, the discussion will just worsen the situation.

MEN AND WOMEN REALLY ARE DIFFERENT

In 85 percent of marriages or relationships, the stonewaller is the husband. The reason lies in our gender. Any nursing mother can tell you that the amount of milk she produces is affected by how relaxed she feels, which is related to the release of the hormone oxytocin in the brain. A woman is more able to quickly soothe herself and calm down after feeling stressed.

In contrast, a man's adrenaline kicks in quite readily and does not calm down so easily. The male cardiovascular system remains more reactive than the female and slower to recover from stress. For example, if a man and woman suddenly hear a very loud, brief sound, like a blowout, most likely his heart will beat faster than hers and stay accelerated for longer. The same goes for their blood pressure — his will become more elevated and stay higher longer.



When male subjects are deliberately treated rudely and then told to relax for twenty minutes, their blood pressure surges and stays elevated until they get to retaliate. When women face the same treatment, they are able to calm down during those twenty minutes. Interestingly, a woman's blood pressure tends to rise again if she is pressured into retaliating. Because relational confrontation that activates vigilance takes a greater physical toll on the male, it's no surprise that men are more likely than women to attempt to avoid it.

It's a biological fact: Men are more easily overwhelmed by marital conflict than are their wives or girlfriends. During relational stress, men have a greater tendency to have negative thoughts that maintain their distress, while women are more likely to think soothing thoughts that help them calm down and be conciliatory. Men, generally, either think about how righteous and indignant they feel ("I'm going to get even," "I don't have to take this"), which tends to lead to contempt or belligerence. Or they think about themselves as an innocent victim of their partner's wrath or complaint ("Why is she always blaming me?"), which leads to defensiveness.

While these rules don't hold for every male and every female, Gottman has found that the majority of couples do follow these gender differences in physiological and psychological reactions to stress. Given these dissimilarities, most marriages and relationships (including healthy, happy ones) follow a comparable pattern of conflict in which the wife or girlfriend, who is constitutionally better able to handle the stress, brings up sensitive issues. The male partner, who is not as able to cope with it, will attempt to avoid getting into the subject. He may become defensive and stonewall or even become belligerent or contemptuous in an attempt to silence her.

Just because your marriage or relationship follows this pattern, it's not a given that a divorce is in the offing. You'll find examples of all four horsemen and even occasional flooding in stable marriages or relationships. But when the four horsemen take up *permanent* residence, when either partner begins to feel flooded routinely, the relationship is in serious trouble.

Frequently feeling flooded leads almost inevitably to distancing yourself from your partner. That in turn leads you to feel lonely. Without help, the couple will end up divorced or living in a dead marriage or relationship, in which they maintain separate, parallel lives in the same home. They may go through the motions of togetherness — attending their children's plays, hosting dinner parties, taking family vacations. But emotionally they no longer feel connected to each other. They have given up.

THE FIFTH SIGN: FAILED REPAIR ATTEMPTS

While it takes time for the four horsemen and the flooding that comes in their wake to overrun a marriage or relationships, divorce and breakup can so often be predicted by listening to a single conversation between newlyweds. By analyzing any disagreement a couple has, you get a good sense of the pattern they tend to follow. A crucial part of that pattern is whether their repair attempts succeed or fail.



Repair attempts are efforts the couple makes (“Let’s take a break,” “Wait, I need to calm down”) to deescalate the tension during a touchy discussion — to put on the brakes so flooding is prevented. Repair attempts save marriages or relationships because they decrease emotional tension between spouses and because, by lowering the stress level, they also prevent your heart from racing and making you feel flooded.

When the four horsemen rule a couple’s communication, repair attempts often don’t even get noticed. Especially when you’re feeling flooded, you’re not able to hear a verbal White flag. In unhappy marriages or relationships, the more contemptuous and defensive the couple is with each other, the more flooding occurs, and the harder it is to hear and respond to a repair. And since the repair is not heard, the contempt and defensiveness just get heightened, making flooding more pronounced, which makes it more difficult to hear the next repair attempt, until finally one partner withdraws. The failure of repair attempts is an accurate marker for an unhappy future.

The presence of the four horsemen alone predicts breakup with only an 82 percent accuracy. But when you add in the failure of repair attempts, the accuracy rate reaches into the 90s. This is because some couples who trot out the four horsemen when they argue are successful at repairing the harm the horsemen cause. Usually when the four horsemen are present but the couple’s repair attempts are successful, the result is a stable, happy marriage or relationship.

In fact, 84 percent of the newlyweds who were high on the four horsemen but repaired effectively were in stable, happy marriages and relationships six years later. But if there are no repair attempts — or if the attempts are not able to be heard — the marriage or relationship is in serious danger. Gottman can tell 96 percent of the time whether a relational discussion will resolve a conflict, after the first three minutes of that discussion.

In emotionally intelligent marriages and relationships a wide range of successful repair attempts can be heard. Each person has his or her own approach. Whether a repair succeeds or fails has very little to do with how eloquent it is and everything to do with the state of the marriage or relationship. In marriages or relationships in which the four horsemen have moved in for good, even the most articulate, sensitive, well-targeted repair attempt is likely to fail abysmally.

Ironically, we see more repair attempts between troubled couples than between those whose marriages or relationships are going smoothly. The more repair attempts fail, the more these couples keep trying. What predicts that repair attempts will work? The quality of the friendship between husband and wife and “positive sentiment override.”

THE SIXTH SIGN: BAD MEMORIES

When a relationship gets subsumed in negativity, it’s not only the couple’s present and future life together that are put at risk. Their past is in danger, too. Couples who are deeply entrenched in a negative view of their spouse and their marriage or relationships often rewrite their past.



Gottman says: “When I ask them about their early courtship, their wedding, their first year together, I can predict their chances of divorce, even if I’m not privy to their current feelings.”

Most couples enter marriage or relationships with high hopes and great expectations. In a happy relationship couples tend to look back on their early days fondly. Even if the wedding didn’t go off perfectly, they tend to remember the highlights rather than the low points. The same goes for each other. They remember how positive they felt early on, how excited they were when they met, and how much admiration they had for each other.

When they talk about the tough times they’ve had, they glorify the struggles they’ve been through, drawing strength from the adversity they weathered together. But when a marriage or relationship is not going well, history gets rewritten — for the worse. Now she recalls that he was thirty minutes late getting to the ceremony. Or he focuses on all that time she spent talking to his best man at the rehearsal dinner — or “flirting” with his friend, as it seems to him now. Another sad sign is when you find the past difficult to remember — it has become so unimportant or painful that you’ve let it fade away.

When the four horsemen overrun a home, impairing the communication, the negativity mushrooms to such a degree that everything a partner does — or ever did — is recast in a negative light.

In a happy relationship, if the one person promises to pick up her partner’s dry cleaning but forgets, the partner is likely to think, “Oh well, she’s been under a lot of stress lately and needs more sleep.” She considers his lapse to be fleeting and caused by a specific situation. In an unhappy relationship the same circumstance is likely to lead to a thought like “She’s just always so inconsiderate and selfish.”

In a happy relationship a loving gesture, like a wife greeting her husband with a kiss at the end of the workday, is seen as a sign that the spouse is loving and considerate. In an unhappy marriage the same action will lead the husband to think, “What does she want out of me?”

THE END DRAWS NEAR

When a marriage gets to the point where the couple have rewritten their history, when their minds and bodies make it virtually impossible to communicate and repair their current problems, it is almost bound to fail. They find themselves constantly on red alert. Because they always expect to do combat, the marriage becomes a torment. The understandable result: They withdraw from the relationship.

Some people leave a marriage or relationship literally, by divorcing. Others do so by leading parallel lives together. Whichever the route, there are four final stages that signal the death knell of a relationship.



1. You see your marital problems as severe.
2. Talking things over seems useless. You try to solve problems on your own.
3. You start leading parallel lives.
4. Loneliness sets in.

When a couple gets to the last stage, one or both partners may have an affair. An affair is usually a *symptom* of a dying marriage, not the cause. The end of that marriage could have been predicted long before either spouse strayed. The warning signs were almost always there early on if they had known what to look for.

You can see the seeds of trouble in the following:

1. What couples actually say to each other (the prevalence of harsh startup, the four horsemen, the unwillingness to accept influence).
2. The failure of their repair attempts.
3. Physiological reactions (flooding).
4. Pervasive negative thoughts about their marriage.

Any of these signs suggests that emotional separation, and in most cases divorce or breakup, may only be a matter of time.

BUT IT'S NOT OVER TILL IT'S OVER

As bleak as this sounds, far more marriages or relationships could be saved than currently are. Even a relationship that is about to hit bottom can be revived with the right kind of help. Sadly, most marriages at this stage get the *wrong* kind of help. Many therapists will deluge the couple with advice about negotiating their differences and improving their communication.

Gottman was not able to crack the code to saving marriages until he started to analyze what went *right* in happy marriages.

The key to reviving or divorce-proofing a relationship is not in how you handle disagreements but in how you are with each other when you're not fighting. The foundation is to strengthen the friendship that is at the heart of any marriage.

References

Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). How I predict divorce," in *The Seven Principles for Making Marriages Work* (Chapter Two, 25-46). New York: Three Rivers Press (Random House, Inc.).