

The Four Habits That Hurt



And what to do instead. Read this one together when things are calm.

Researchers who watched couples talk through disagreements kept seeing the same four habits in relationships that were struggling. John Gottman nicknamed them the **Four Horsemen**. Each one has a simple antidote.

THE HABIT	WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE	THE ANTIDOTE	TRY INSTEAD
Criticism Attacking who your partner is, not what they did.	<i>"You always leave a mess. You only think about yourself."</i>	Gentle startup	<i>"I'm stressed about the kitchen. Can we clear it together before bed?"</i>
Contempt Acting superior: mocking, sarcasm, eye rolls, name calling.	<i>"Wow, great job. Really impressive." (eye roll)</i>	Build appreciation	<i>"I know this week was a lot. Thank you for getting the kids."</i>
Defensiveness Excuses, counter complaints, "it's not my fault."	<i>"Well, you forgot last month, so don't start."</i>	Take responsibility	<i>"Fair. I did forget. I'll set a reminder."</i>
Stonewalling Shutting down: silence, staring at a phone, leaving without a word.	<i>(Says nothing. Turns on the TV.)</i>	Self soothe, then return	<i>"I'm overwhelmed. Can we pause for 30 minutes? I'll come back."</i>

Complaints are fine. A complaint is about one thing your partner did. Criticism turns it into a verdict on who they are. Aim for the complaint.

Safety first. These tools are for couples who feel safe with each other. They are not for relationships with abuse, threats, fear of a partner, or coercive control. If that is happening, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline: call 1-800-799-7233, text START to 88788, or visit thehotline.org. In an emergency, call 911.



WHERE'S THE EVIDENCE?

- Across 64 studies, hostile conflict went with lower satisfaction; warmth and problem solving went with higher. **(Woodin 2011)**
- Couples with more defensiveness, stubbornness, and withdrawal were more likely to consider or start separating. **(Gottman & Levenson 1992)**
- Similar patterns held in gay and lesbian couples. These are observed links; the antidotes are rarely tested on their own. **(Gottman et al. 2003)**

The 5 to 1 Idea



More warmth than harshness, especially when you disagree.

5 : 1

In lab studies, couples who stayed together tended to show far more positive moments than negative ones **while discussing a disagreement**. John Gottman's well known rule of thumb is about five positives for every negative during conflict.

It is

A picture of the mood in stable couples while they disagree: many more warm moments than harsh ones.

It is not

A scorecard. Don't count your partner's moves or keep a tally.

It is not

A trade. Five compliments don't cancel out cruelty.

It is not

A ban on conflict. Complaints, disagreement, even loud debates can be part of a healthy relationship.

SMALL POSITIVES YOU CAN BRING TO A HARD TALK

- ☐ A little humor that lands well
- ☐ "That makes sense."
- ☐ Eye contact, nodding, a soft voice
- ☐ A gentle touch, if welcome
- ☐ "You're right about that part."
- ☐ A curious question: "What worries you most?"
- ☐ Thanks for something specific
- ☐ Staying in the room, calmly

One positive move I'll try in our next disagreement



WHERE'S THE EVIDENCE?

- Stable couples came in different styles, from calm to loud, but differed from unstable couples in their mix of positive and negative emotion. **(Gottman 1993)**
- Couples who later separated showed more negative and less positive emotion during conflict. **(Gottman & Levenson 1992)**
- The exact 5 to 1 figure comes from small observational studies and later writing. It has not been tested as a target, so treat it as a rule of thumb. **(Gottman 1993)**



Four Basics to Stick To

Small habits, used often, do more than big talks once a year.

1 • Start soft

Open with how you feel and what you need, not a charge sheet. Try: "I feel ___ about ___. I need ___." Keep it short and about one thing.

2 • Repair early

A repair is any move that keeps a fight from spiraling. "Can we start over?" "That came out wrong." "We're on the same team." Just as important: accept your partner's repair, even if it's clumsy.

3 • Turn toward bids

A bid is a small reach for connection: "Look at this," a story about your day, a sigh. You can turn toward (respond), away (ignore), or against (snap). Turning toward, even briefly, adds up.

4 • Break when flooded

Racing heart, can't think, want to yell or leave? Say so, name when you'll be back, and take at least 20 minutes. Walk, breathe, put on music. Don't rehearse the fight. Then come back and finish.

How the first few minutes go matters. The tone a conversation starts with tends to be the tone it ends with. If it starts harsh, pause and start again.

REPAIR MENU

- ☐ "Can we slow down?"
- ☐ "I'm sorry. Let me try again."
- ☐ "I see your point."
- ☐ "Can I get a hug first?"
- ☐ A shared joke or a smile

TURNING TOWARD, QUICK WAYS

- ☐ Look up from the phone
- ☐ "Tell me more."
- ☐ "Oh no, then what?"
- ☐ A touch on the shoulder
- ☐ "Want help with that?"

Our soft start line

In our own words

Our break signal

A word or gesture that means "pause"



WHERE'S THE EVIDENCE?

- In 124 newlywed couples, the first 3 minutes of a conflict talk predicted divorce over 6 years. **(Carrère & Gottman 1999)**
- Playful, warm everyday moments went with more humor and affection during later conflict (correlational, 49 couples). **(Driver & Gottman 2004)**
- Distressed couples showed more linked physical arousal during conflict. That a 20 minute break helps comes from clinical writing, not trials. **(Levenson & Gottman 1983)**

Our Agreements

Fill this in together. Post it where you'll see it.



Our names: _____

Date: _____

WE AGREE TO

- | | |
|--|---|
| ☐ Complain about the behavior, not the person | ☐ Offer repairs, and accept them |
| ☐ No name calling, mocking, or eye rolls | ☐ Turn toward each other's bids |
| ☐ Own our part, even a small piece | ☐ Take a break when flooded, and come back |
| ☐ Start soft, one topic at a time | ☐ Say the good things out loud |

When one of us is flooded, we'll say

We'll come back within

At least 20 minutes, no more than a day

Our repair phrases

Words we've agreed not to use

Ways we'll turn toward each other each day

Three things we appreciate about each other

Our weekly check in

Day and time

Signed

Both of us

For couples who feel safe with each other. If there is abuse, threats, or fear of a partner, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or visit thehotline.org.

Where's the evidence?

The short, honest version.



BOTTOM LINE

The conflict patterns in this packet are well documented correlates and predictors of unhappiness and breakup in observational research. The skills, and the 5 to 1 ratio as a target, have little stand alone trial evidence.

- **Large meta-analysis.** 64 studies, 5,071 couples: observed hostility related to lower satisfaction (medium effect); withdrawal and distress small; intimacy and problem solving related to higher satisfaction (medium). (Woodin 2011, PMID 21553964)
- **Prospective prediction.** 73 couples over 4 years: more negative and less positive expression, more defensiveness, stubbornness, and withdrawal went with greater risk of dissolution. (Gottman & Levenson 1992, PMID 1403613)
- **Start up.** 124 newlywed couples: affect in the first 3 minutes of a conflict talk predicted marital outcome over 6 years. (Carrère & Gottman 1999, PMID 10526767)
- **Beyond one sample.** In committed gay and lesbian couples, satisfaction and stability related to similar emotional qualities as in heterosexual couples. (Gottman et al. 2003, PMID 14567652)
- **Treatment.** Couple therapy overall: large pre to post gains in satisfaction ($g = 1.12$) across 58 studies. Gottman Method Couples Therapy itself has mainly uncontrolled data, for example 106 gay and lesbian couples, with developer coauthors. (Roddy et al. 2020, PMID 32551734; Garanzini et al. 2017, PMID 28940625)

HONEST LIMITATION

Most findings come from small lab samples, mostly married, opposite sex, and observational, so they show links, not causes. The 5 to 1 ratio and the 20 minute break are not reported in these abstracts and are offered as rules of thumb. Randomized trials of Gottman Method Couples Therapy are limited.

WHEN NOT TO USE IT (YET)

- Any intimate partner violence, threats, or fear of a partner: screen privately and safety plan first
- Coercive control: don't frame it as mutual conflict
- One partner in acute crisis
- As a scorecard to use against a partner

How to introduce it: Read Part 1 aloud together, then have each partner pick one habit of their own to work on. Build Our Agreements in session.

Figures are quoted as reported in each paper's PubMed abstract. This page supports, and does not replace, clinical judgment and supervision. It does not assess or recommend any medication.

References

9 sources, each verified in PubMed.

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How these were checked. Each source was looked up in PubMed on October 26, 2026. Titles, authors, PMIDs, and DOIs come from the PubMed record, and every study figure is quoted from the paper's PubMed abstract. The 5 to 1 ratio and the 20 minute break are rules of thumb from the research tradition and are labeled that way. Look up any item at pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov followed by its PMID.

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