Marriage Essentials
The Top 9½ Marriage Busters
Part 1d: Laying down weapons of marital mass destruction (and deploying peaceful alternatives), concluded
Antidotes for defensiveness and stonewalling
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Recap: We started this new series by dealing with *really big* marriage busters, what we call "weapons of marital mass destruction": Four patterns of behavior that will kill a marriage (or for that matter any relationship). If one or more of these are active in your marriage, they must be identified and eliminated *as soon as possible*. In contrast, Scripture describes at length attitudes and behaviors that, when embraced and cultivated, bring life and health to marriages and families.

Dr. John Gottman has carried out research with thousands of married couples, and, based on observing their conversation patterns and physiology while they work through a conflict, can predict with very high accuracy which marriages will or will not survive. He has identified four behaviors that are so destructive to marriages (or any other relationship), that he calls them the "**Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**."

1. Criticism:
Attacking your partner's personality or character, usually with the intent of making someone right and someone wrong:

- Generalizations*:* "you always..." "you never..." "you're the type of person who ..." "why are you so ..."

This is different from a ***complaint***, which is focused on a specific behavior or event and expresses a need or a request. Many couples have never learned how to do a proper complaint, one that focuses on respectfully resolving an issue rather than unleashing criticism on the other person. Unfortunately, criticism is too often the onramp, the gateway, the portal of entry for the next – and far more destructive – of the Four Horsemen.

2. Contempt:
Attacking your partner's sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him/her:

- Insults and name-calling: "idiot, jerk, wimp, fat, stupid, ugly, slob, lazy..."
- Hostile humor, sarcasm or mockery
- Body language & tone of voice: sneering, eye-rolling
- Dr. Gottman describes contempt as the most destructive of the Four Horsemen – the "sulfuric acid" of a relationship.

Previously we described how **contempt cannot be given any place, any quarter, in our relationships with any other person, *especially* our spouse**, because contempt for other people – seeing them as beneath us, even "sub-human," and thus fair game for disrespect, abuse, depriving of rights and possessions, outright injury or murder – is the literal mass-produced product of the

demonic realm. Our world is, and has been, full of horrific, evil deeds arising from contempt, and we reviewed a number of these during our last two sessions.

If contempt is present and identified as such in our life – whether by God's Spirit, a spouse, a friend, a counselor, the police -- it must be faced head-on and eliminated *immediately*. ("Have contempt for contempt").

- **Rebuke it.** When you recognize it, identify it as sin, as offensive to God, and act accordingly. Confess (ideally to a trustworthy person), repent and ask for God's forgiveness.
- **Apologize for it.** After doing business with God, offer an honest apology and request for forgiveness from anyone directly affected.
- **Repair it** if you can.
- **Take measures to avoid it.** If possible, build a mechanism for ongoing accountability (such as with a counselor, pastor or the members of a small group).
- **Don't feed it.** Don't ruminate on it, or rehearse whatever bothers you, or replay a fight in your brain, or (worse) imagine an angry exchange with your spouse or another person.
- **Dismantle the destructive stories** that you tell about a particular behavior that stokes the flames of contempt.
- **Nurture the opposite of contempt.** Cultivate **kindness** while having constructive conversations about issues (complaints) when they arise.

In our last session, we described the qualities of kindness, elements of advanced "graduate level" kindness, barriers to kindness, and cultivation of kindness. *Check the handout from October 23 for details.*

3. Defensiveness: A normal human response to being criticized that can become one of the Four Horsemen.

In a "pre-Horsemen" phase:

- Responding to criticism by **owning and taking responsibility** for anything that might be valid in a criticism, while carefully clarifying what may be misunderstanding or misinformation, can be constructive. (See also pages 4 and 5 of this handout.)
- Conversersely, automatically apologizing or making self-deprecating remarks (*I guess I'm just a total idiot)* in order to avoid an argument and keep some semblance of peace only kicks the problem down the road and settles nothing.

The Horsemen arrive when a person repeatedly does one of more of the following:

- Making excuses and avoiding any legitimate responsibility (for example, arguing that external circumstances beyond your control forced you to act in a certain way) -- "It's not my fault...", "I didn't..."
- Cross-complaining: meeting your partner's complaint or criticism with a complaint or criticism of your own, ignoring what your partner said. ("Well, what about the way you…??")
- Disagreeing and then cross-complaining "That's not true, you're the one who..." "I did this because you did that..."

- Yes-butting: Start off agreeing but end up disagreeing
- Repeating yourself without paying attention to what the other person is saying
- Seeing oneself as a victim -- "It's not fair!"

These kinds of responses typically frustrate the other person, and result in escalation of a conflict's intensity and duration. Hoofbeats are outside the door and ready to enter the room, especially when escalation leads to expressions of contempt (*You are such an idiot!)* or even physical violence.

4. Stonewalling: Withdrawing from a conversation, or the relationship itself, as a way to avoid further conflict.

a. In many situations, stonewalling arises when one person has difficulty putting thoughts and feelings into words – especially then the other person is capable of "outgunning" him or her verbally. This is why "winning" an argument represents a loss for the relationship!

b. In some situations, what may be construed as stonewalling is actually *one of several possible responses to a stressful or threatening situation* that provokes "***flooding***" – a feeling of being physiologically and psychologically overwhelmed. Note that in all of these responses' higher functions (logical, rational thought) may be temporarily taken offline. These include:

- *Freezing* – the "deer in the headlights" reaction. This may be a component of *dissociation* (see below).
- *Flight-or-fight* -- here, stonewalling is the "flight" response to end a threat by withdrawing from it.
    - Adrenaline is flowing. and pulse rate and blood pressure are typically elevated, when this occurs – literally as if confronting an assailant.
    - Dr. Gottman's research indicates that stonewalling is far more common in men (85%) than in women (15%), whereas the other three horsemen occur with equal frequency among women and men.
    - Men also generally take longer than women to resolve this response, because they are physiologically designed to "rise to the occasion" of confronting danger as long as needed to defend self and family from attack. Women are more prone to resolve the physiological response in a shorter period of time, all things considered. (One reason: During childbearing years, the flight-or-fight response in women tends to inhibit of the release of milk, which is needed to nourish an infant.)
- *Dissociation* – literally disconnecting from what is happening to, or going on around, an individual.
    - Examples of mild, common dissociation include daydreaming, becoming absorbed in a book or movie, or "highway hypnosis," all of which involve "losing touch" with awareness of immediate surroundings.
    - More profound dissociation may occur during a situation in which a threat is severe, imminent, and cannot be ended by fleeing or fighting.
    - In young children who are subjected to repeated severe abuse, dissociation is literally a God-given mechanism for escape, but can also lead to significant challenges later in life. (The most severe form of this is dissociative identity

disorder, or DID, in which a person literally has multiple personalities / identities.)

Some important concepts related to stress responses and stonewalling:

- Responses to stressful situations vary enormously depending on:
  - How a person was treated during the first years of life, and especially a person's history of exposure to threat and abuse.
  - How a person may react to triggers – sights, sounds, smells, tone of voice, etc. – that in the past were associated with threat or abuse.
- As with defensiveness, stonewalling – even as an attempt, conscious or not, to sidestep or avoid conflict – tends to aggravate conflict ("*You're ignoring me!!")*, unleashing more of the Horsemen as the intensity of the conflict escalates.

Over time stonewalling can become habitual and evolve into disconnection, icy distancing, and a more deliberate separation, manifested by:

- Stony silence
- Monosyllabic mutterings
- Changing the subject
- Removing oneself physically
- The "silent treatment"

Important note: In these situations, stonewalling could represent a manifestation of **contempt** for the other person.

Table talk: Was defensiveness or stonewalling ever employed by one or both of your parents?

What are some **antidotes** to defensiveness and stonewalling?

On one side: Avoid putting your spouse in a position in which defensiveness and stonewalling are more likely to occur:

- Curtail **any and all** expressions of contempt (choice of words, tone of voice, facial expression, body language).
- Address issues *without criticism* (attacking the other person's character). Use "Teri's incredibly useful four-point basic formula for addressing an issue" (at the end of this handout).
- Avoid "Why" questions, "You statements," and "always" and "never" adverbs. (Twenty demerits for using all three on one sentence: "Why do you always…?")
- Practice soft instead of harsh start-ups. For example…
  - Soft: "I've been missing you lately. I know you're working hard and have had some long hours, but I'm starting to feel lonely. Can we talk about this?"
  - Harsh: "You never have time for me. I might as well be single again."

On the other side: Do some "homework" on yourself, and be intentional about having some important conversations with your spouse that will keep the Horsemen at bay and help create true marital intimacy:

- Be willing to own up and take responsibility for any "sins of commission or omission" that are the basis of complaints (or even criticism) from your spouse. An *honest* apology is good Horsemen-repellent that de-escalates a conflict. This should not be an auto-pilot "I'm

sorry" (when you're really not) that is deployed to end an argument, or an "I'm sorry you're mad at me, but…" non-apology.

- Take an honest look at the list of Horsemen-unleashing defensiveness behaviors on pages 2 and 3 of this handout, and work on eliminating them from your repertoire. At some point, when you and your spouse are having a productive, transparent conversation (and you feel ready to hear it), ask if there are things you have said in the past that sound like these behaviors, and commit to finding better ways to express your feelings in the future.
- If you feel you are being or have been unjustly criticized in a conversation, find a time (when you are both refreshed and not activated) to discuss how this affected you, using the four-point formula. It's okay to keep a list of things you want to address when you are both calm. This is not an unloving "keeping a record of wrongs" (I Cor 13:5) but rather done for the purpose of carrying out a *relational repair.*
- Learn to recognize when you are feeling defensive or starting to feel flooded. Couples should agree on a neutral, non-judgmental signal that can be made by either person to call for a **20 to 30-minute time out** when a conversation is heating up. (We recommend the universal referee's "time out" hand signal.) *This does not mean that the conversation will not continue*. During the time-out, each person seeks to "self-soothe" by doing something that will help calm himself/herself. This could be a walk, a shower, listening to music that one finds relaxing or uplifting, slow breathing, prayer (which can be done during any of these), and so forth. *Twenty to thirty minutes is the amount of time needed for the flight-or-fight physiology to calm down.* (Dr. Gottman's research in the "love lab" has consistently shown that heart rate, blood pressure and the overall tone of a conversation improve when a couple resumes it after a time-out.)
- Spend some time assessing what specifically sets you off, and why. Is it certain words, gestures, tone of voice? Does this remind you of painful incidents in your past? Could you be overreacting to the actual threat level in a given situation? (The smoke-detector analogy: When one of these goes off in your home, the vast majority of the time it's not because of an actual fire.)

Reminder -- Teri's incredibly useful four-point basic formula for addressing an issue:

- This is my observation – an objective description of a specific behavior.
- This is how that behavior makes me feel.
- This is my request (more information, opportunity to process, a change of some type).
- What do you think? (Make sure the other person can restate what has been said, which does *not* mean that he or she necessarily agrees).

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone, *but especially your spouse*.

Romans 12:17-18 (NIV, Reisser Amplified Version)

A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.
The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.
A hot-tempered person stirs up conflict, but the one who is patient calms a quarrel.

Proverbs 15: 1,4, 18 (NIV)