

The Gottman Method Reference Guide

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COUPLES HANDOUT

1. The Four Horsemen of Relationship Breakdown

Drs. John & Julie Gottman identified four destructive communication patterns that predict relationship distress with over 90% accuracy. Every Horseman has a direct research-backed Antidote.

1. Criticism



Attacking partner's personality or character rather than a specific behavior.

"You NEVER think about anyone else! You're so selfish!"

Antidote: Gentle Start-Up



Use "I" statements, state how you feel, and express a positive need clearly.

"I feel overwhelmed when dishes sit. Could you help clear them?"

2. Contempt (#1 Divorce Predictor)



Expressing superiority through sarcasm, eye-rolling, mockery, or name-calling.

"You're tired? Try running a real household for once."

Antidote: Build Culture of Appreciation



Express gratitude daily and focus on your partner's positive traits.

"I know we're both stressed. I appreciate your hard work."

3. Defensiveness



Warding off attacks by playing the victim, making excuses, or counter-attacking.

"I wouldn't forget if you didn't nag me about everything!"

Antidote: Take Responsibility



Accept even a small fraction of the blame or validate their perspective.

"You're right, I dropped the ball on that. I'm sorry."

4. Stonewalling



Shutting down, withdrawing completely, and giving the cold shoulder.

Turning away, silent treatment, refusing to respond.

Antidote: Physiological Self-Soothing



Call a 20-minute break to lower heart rate below 100 BPM before returning.

"I'm overwhelmed. I need 20 min to walk, then let's talk at 8:00."

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2. Repair Attempts Mid-Argument

A repair attempt is any statement or gesture that prevents conflict from spiraling out of control. It is the "secret weapon" of emotionally healthy couples.

1. "I Feel"

"I'm starting to feel defensive right now."

2. "I'm Sorry"

"That came out harsher than I meant."

3. Get to "Yes"

"I agree with part of what you're saying."

4. Stop Action

"Can we take a breath and slow down?"

5. Humor / Touch

Light gentle humor or holding hands.

6. Appreciation

"I love you and want to figure this out."

The 100 BPM Flooding Rule

When heart rate exceeds 100 BPM, the body enters fight-or-flight mode and the prefrontal cortex shuts down. Productive discussion becomes biologically impossible. **Always call a 20-minute break** to engage in calming distractions (reading, walking) before returning.

3. How to Accept a Repair Attempt

What Accepting Means:

- Stepping out of fight mode to lower conflict temperature.
- Low-threshold validation: *"Thanks for saying that. I'm still hurt, but I hear you."*
- Releasing physical tension (uncrossing arms, unclenching jaw).

What It DOES NOT Mean:

- Conceding or agreeing with everything said.
- Instant forgiveness or pretending you aren't upset.
- Burying your feelings or letting them off the hook.

4. The Emotional Bank Account

Positive Sentiment Overriding

High Account Balance: Built by daily micro-deposits (listening, hugs, appreciation). Repairs mid-argument are naturally viewed as sincere and genuine.

Negative Sentiment Overriding

Low Account Balance: Caused by unaddressed withdrawals. Repairs mid-argument are viewed with suspicion as fake or manipulative.