

# Relating Through Difference

By Joe & Melody Cheal

Countering the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in Relationships.

“ Successful couples seek the positive in one other and in each other’s positions, perspectives and personality ”



## The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

A couple sit and discuss an issue which has been causing friction between them. As to the content of the issue, you might add your own example here. Perhaps he isn't doing his fair share around the house. Perhaps she is spending a lot of time with her friends. In this instance, the couple are in the honeymoon phase of their relationship and what they probably don't realise is that how they go about exploring this issue will likely determine the status of their relationship in five years time.

In an extraordinary series of studies John Gottman, a social psychologist, has been

able to consistently predict the long term condition of a couple's relationship. By observing just five minutes of how the couple interact when discussing an issue, Gottman and his team have a 91% success rate at predicting whether the couple will still be together in five years time.

It appears that one of the most critical factors in a successful relationship is how a couple handles difference (e.g. of opinion, perspective and/or personality). In his book, *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail*, Gottman (\*1) highlights a series of behaviours that appear when a relationship is less likely to succeed in the long term. He calls these

the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse': stonewalling, defensiveness, criticism and contempt.

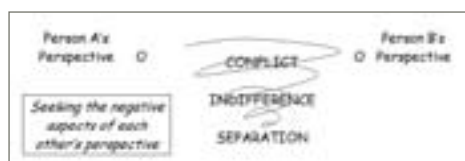
Stonewalling is about avoidance; certain topics become off limits so we don't talk about them. Defensiveness is linked to apprehension; not taking responsibility and by implication wanting to blame someone else. Criticism is about antagonism; attacking the other party overtly. Defensiveness and criticism are usually two sides of the same coin, where one side wants to attack and the other side parries. Contempt is about aversion and is considered to be the worst and most poisonous horseman. Here we

## “Gottman and his team have a 91% success rate at predicting whether the couple will still be together in five years time”

are in the realms of insults, name-calling, sarcasm, hostility and cynicism; and according to Gottman the body language of contempt includes sneering and eye rolling. As an aside, if all this sounds like classic teenager-to-parent behaviour, is it possible that they are going through a phase of psychologically ‘divorcing’ from their parents in a quest for independence?

If the four horsemen are in place, there appears to be a degree of ‘learned helplessness’ that may set in which creates a new level of stonewalling and avoidance. Here, either one of the couple (usually the male apparently) will tend to avoid issues by shutting down completely or leaving the scene. It is as if they are caught in a double-bind of ‘damned if I say anything, damned if I don’t’. And so the couple move from difference to indifference.

In simple terms, in the face of difference, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ride in when the couple can only see the negative of each other’s perspectives/personality. And so they spiral down in conflict, indifference and then perhaps divorce.



### Successful Couples and the Counter Horsemen

Do successful couples argue? Of course they do, but Gottman also found that successful couples tend to have a ratio of at least five good experiences to one bad. Good experiences might include positive interactions like hugs, cuddles, a genuine “I love you”, kind words, compliments, gifts, doing things together and talking about joint interests.

Something that Gottman alludes to but does not pull together into a model (like the ‘Four Horsemen’) is the positive spin. What is the model for successful couples? How do they handle difference?

According to Steve Andreas (\*2), “Fritz Perls

used to say that: ‘Contact is the appreciation of differences’ – in contrast to seeing differences as bad.” In our own workshops, we have introduced the four counter-horsemen of awareness, acceptance, appreciation and admiration. As well as providing a direct counter for each of Gottman’s horsemen, these act like levels that couples transcend as they face and resolve their differences.

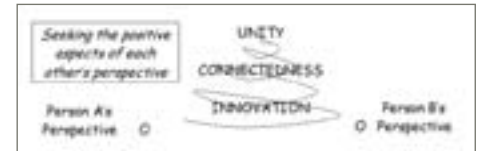
The first level, awareness is about acknowledging that there is an issue and being prepared to discuss it rather than avoiding it. The second level, acceptance is about staying open to our partner’s perspective and knowing that it is more productive to listen than it is to get defensive. The next level, appreciation is about valuing the fact that our partner can be and do different things to us and instead of criticising them, we understand that this is useful to the relationship. We may even praise the fact that they do certain things better than we do ourselves. The final level, admiration, is where we see our difference as a part of relationship excellence. We seek to find integration between opposing positions and to create synergy rather than contempt.

In “The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work”, Gottman (\*3) suggests that: “fondness and admiration are antidotes for contempt. If you maintain a sense of respect for your spouse, you are less likely to act

disgusted with him or her when you disagree. So fondness and admiration prevent the couple from being trounced by the four horsemen.”

Successful couples seek the positive in one other and in each other’s positions, perspectives and personality. When faced with difference they seek synthesis and synergy and by doing so spiral upwards through innovation, connectedness and unity.

According to Michael Hall (\*4), synergy is part of the self-actualisation process which “operates as an integrative process of opposites and polarities.” As we self-actualise, distinctions and differences disappear. The relationship becomes greater than the sum of its parts and together, we can achieve things we could never have achieved independently.



On one level, it is as simple this... when we see the negative/disadvantages of each other’s position, we will likely fall into conflict. When we see the positive intentions/advantages, we transcend from (i.e. ‘end the trance/illusion of’) difference into innovation and connection.

Gottman’s Horseman	Behaviours	The Counter Horsemen	Behaviours
<b>Contempt (Aversion)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eye rolling</li> <li>• Sarcasm</li> <li>• Insults</li> </ul>	<b>Admiration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show interest &amp; respect</li> <li>• Encourage &amp; extol virtues</li> <li>• “Difference is excellence”</li> </ul>
<b>Criticism (Antagonism)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criticising</li> <li>• Attacking</li> <li>• Generalising (eg. always, never)</li> </ul>	<b>Appreciation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback &amp; praise</li> <li>• Show support</li> <li>• “Difference is useful”</li> </ul>
<b>Defensiveness (Apprehension)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making excuses</li> <li>• Defending oneself</li> <li>• Countering (yes, but)</li> </ul>	<b>Acceptance</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stay open</li> <li>• Listen</li> <li>• “Difference is okay/good”</li> </ul>
<b>Stonewalling (Avoidance)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Topics become ‘off limits’</li> <li>• Changing subject</li> <li>• Withdrawing and ignoring</li> </ul>	<b>Awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage in dialogue</li> <li>• Acknowledge difference</li> <li>• “There is difference”</li> </ul>

### ► Applications

In terms of practical applications, when you are faced with difference, you might explore the following steps:

- 1) Seek to hold a positive internal representation of your partner (e.g. that they are resourceful, loving and loveable).
- 2) Get clear about what they really want. Listen to your partner's position and seek the positive intentions (benefits): What would they get by achieving their goal?
- 3) Reflect the positive aspects back to them (in part to demonstrate understanding).
- 4) Be clear about what you really want. Put forward your position and the positive intentions (benefits) of your own position: What would you get by achieving your goal?
- 5) Then (rather than trying to make one side better than the other) seek a solution that accounts for the positive aspects of both positions.



The four horsemen of the apocalypse and the counter horsemen are also relevant within a work environment. Dysfunctional relationships and teams follow the same

model through avoidance, apprehension, antagonism and aversion. However, high performing teams seem to work the other way. Team members seek to discuss issues,

welcoming difference and diversity as roads to innovation and progress. As they spiral upwards through the levels, they accept, appreciate and then admire differences in the team. When you hear someone from a high performance team talking about a fellow team member it is usually respectful and complimentary.

## “Admiration is where we see our differences as part of relationship excellence”

And so we might consider a 'high performance' relationship one in which couples will talk about their partner in very positive ways, openly discussing what they appreciate and admire (particularly when their partner is not there). How many couples do you know who do this? As long as this is done with an awareness of the audience (i.e. not overly sycophantic!) it provides a refreshing change from those that moan about their supposed loved ones.

Listen to yourself when you talk to and about your partner. Notice your body language when you are with them. As long as it is ecological to do so (i.e. doesn't harm you or others in any way), seek to find the positives in who they are, what they do and what they want. What do you appreciate in your partner? What do you admire about them?

And, of course, remember to tell them from time to time! ■



### References

- \*1) **Gottman, J.M.** (2007) "Why Marriages Succeed or Fail" Bloomsbury
- \*2) **Andreas, S.** (1991) "Virginia Satir: The Patterns of Her Magic" Real People Press (p.53)
- \*3) **Gottman, J.M.** (1999) "The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work" Three Rivers Press (p.65)
- \*4) **Hall, L.M.** (2007) "Unleashed!" NSP (p.203)

### About the Authors

**Joe and Melody Cheal** have been working with NLP since 1993 and married since 1994. As well as being Master Trainers of NLP, they are also partners in the GWiz Learning Partnership [www.gwiztraining.com](http://www.gwiztraining.com) transforming people and businesses through the fields of personal, professional, leadership and organisational development.

Joe holds an MSc in Organisational Development and Neuro-linguistic Technologies and a degree in Philosophy and Psychology. He is also the editor of Acuity.

Melody holds an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and a degree in Psychology.