Four habits that damage relationships

And what to do instead.

Researchers who studied couples for decades found four habits that reliably predict trouble. Every couple does some of them sometimes. The aim is to catch them and use the alternative.

The habit	What it sounds like	Instead
Criticism: attacking the person, not the problem	"You are so thoughtless. You never think of anyone else."	A gentle start: "I felt let down when the plans changed. Could we talk about it?"
Contempt: sneering, mocking, eye-rolling, put-downs	"Oh, well done. Brilliant. What a surprise."	Build a habit of appreciation. Say what you value. Describe your own feeling, not their flaw.
Defensiveness: denying, excuses, counter-attack	"It is not my fault. What about the time you..."	Take responsibility for even a small part: "You are right, I should have rung."
Stonewalling: shutting down, going silent, walking off	Silence. Looking away. One-word answers.	Say you are flooded and take a break of at least 20 minutes. Calm down. Come back.

What the research found

- **Contempt does the most harm.** It comes from long-held resentment. The cure is to rebuild respect and say the good things out loud.
- **Stonewalling is usually overwhelm, not indifference.** The body is flooded. A proper break helps both people.
- **How a conversation starts predicts how it ends.** Raising something gently makes a good outcome far more likely.
- **Repair matters more than avoiding every row.** A touch, a joke, "can we start again?"

The habit I fall into most

What I will try instead next time

Based on the research of John Gottman and colleagues, who called these the Four Horsemen.

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Ground rules for arguments

Rules to agree in a calm moment for how you will argue.

Every close relationship has conflict. Agreeing some rules in a calm moment makes it far more likely that rows end in understanding instead of damage. Tick the ones you both agree to.

- [ ] One issue at a time. No bringing up old ones.
- [ ] No name-calling, insults or put-downs.
- [ ] No shouting. If voices rise, we pause.
- [ ] No "always" or "never".
- [ ] We each speak for ourselves: "I feel", not "you are".
- [ ] We take turns, and let each other finish.
- [ ] No threats, including threats to leave.
- [ ] Either of us can call a time out, and we agree when to come back.
- [ ] No arguing in front of the children, by text, or after drinking.
- [ ] We attack the problem, not each other.
- [ ] We look for a solution we can both live with, not a winner.
- [ ] We do not go to bed, or leave, without at least agreeing when we will talk again.

Before raising something

- Is this a good time? Are we both fed, rested and sober?
- What exactly do I want to be different?
- Can I start gently?

Afterwards

- Say what you appreciated about how the other person handled it.
- Repair: a hug, an apology for your part, a cup of tea.

Other rules we agree to

Agreed by, and date

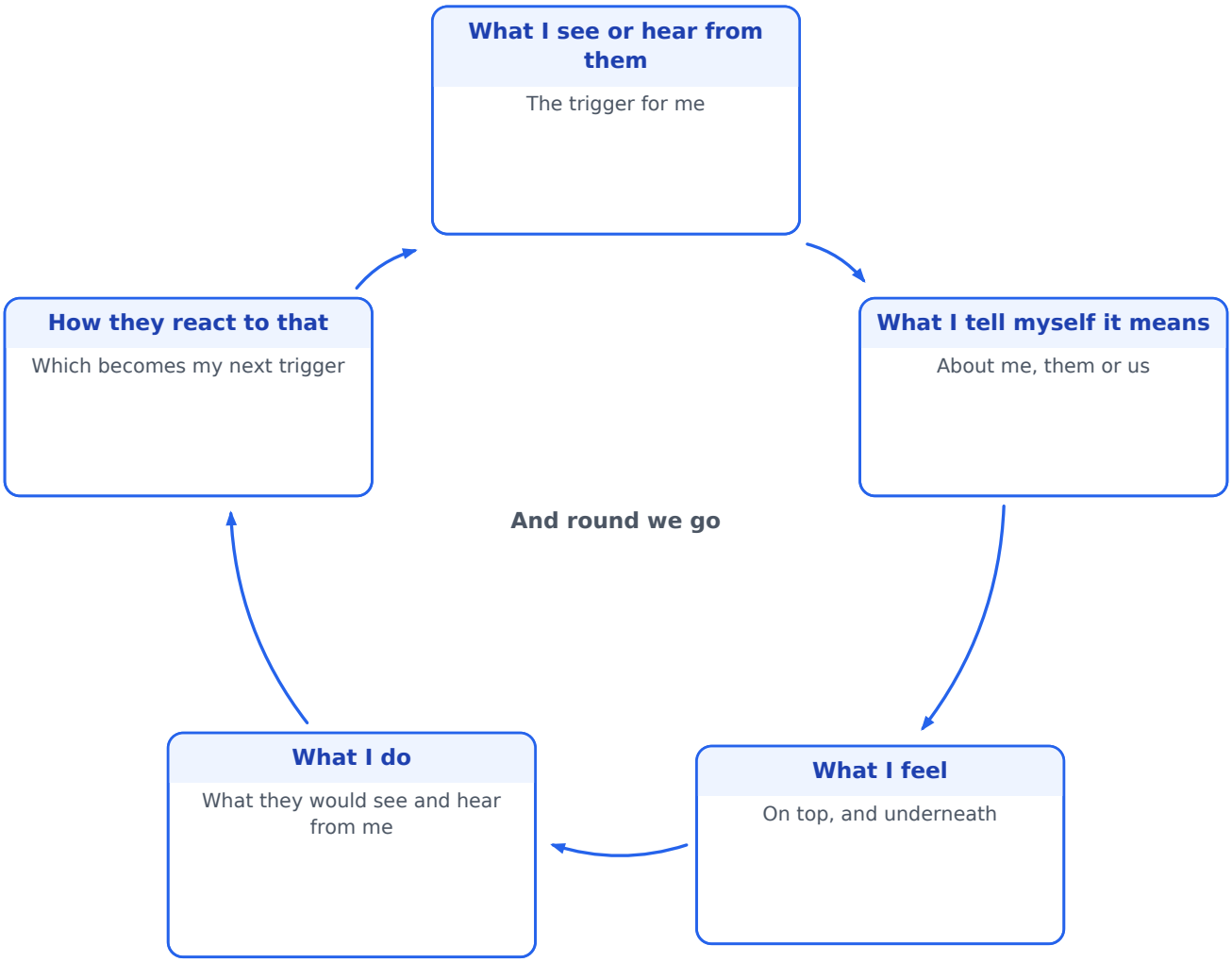
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The pattern we get stuck in

Map the steps of an argument you keep having.

Name _____ Date _____

Most couples and families have one or two rows they have over and over, with different subjects each time. Mapping the steps helps you both step out of it. Fill this in separately, or together when you are calm.



Underneath my reaction, what am I really needing or afraid of?

What might they be needing or afraid of?

What could each of us do differently at the very start of the cycle?

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Listening so people feel heard

How to listen so the other person knows they have been understood.

Feeling heard is one of the things people want most from those close to them. Good listening is a skill. It depends more on paying attention than on saying the right thing.

The basics

1. **Stop what you are doing.** Phone down, screen off, turn towards them.
2. **Let them finish.** Hold back your own story, your advice and your defence.
3. **Show you are with them.** Nod, "mm", "go on".
4. **Reflect back what you heard.** "So what you are saying is..." "It sounds as if..."
5. **Check the feeling.** "That must have been frustrating."
6. **Ask open questions.** "What was that like?" "What happened then?"
7. **Ask what they need.** "Do you want ideas, or do you want me to just listen?"

Blocks to listening

- Interrupting
- Jumping in with advice
- "That is nothing, wait till you hear what happened to me"
- Defending yourself before they finish
- Planning your reply
- Checking your phone

What helps

- Staying quiet a bit longer
- Summarising in your own words
- Naming the feeling
- "Tell me more"
- Tolerating silence
- Asking before advising

When it is about you

Listening is hardest when you are the one being complained about. Try to hear the whole thing first. "Let me check I have got this right..." You can give your side afterwards. Understanding is not the same as agreeing.

Try this

Once this week, in a conversation with someone close, do nothing but listen and reflect back for five minutes. No advice, no stories of your own.

What I noticed

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Validation

Showing someone that their feelings make sense. It works on yourself too.

Validation means letting another person know that their feelings and reactions are understandable. It is not the same as agreeing, approving or giving in. You can validate how someone feels and still hold a different view.

Why it matters

People who feel dismissed tend to push harder. People who feel understood tend to settle. Validation is often the quickest way to calm a row.

How to do it

1. **Pay attention.** Put the phone down. Look at them.
2. **Reflect back.** "So you were waiting for an hour and nobody told you."
3. **Name what is unsaid.** "I would guess that felt pretty disrespectful."
4. **Make sense of it.** "Given what happened last time, of course you were worried."
5. **Say it is normal, when it is.** "Anyone would be upset by that."
6. **Be real.** Treat them as an equal, not as fragile.

Invalidating

- "You are overreacting."
- "It is not that bad."
- "You should not feel like that."
- "At least..."
- Jumping in with advice

Validating

- "That sounds really hard."
- "I can see why you would feel that."
- "That makes sense to me."
- "Tell me more."
- "What do you need right now?"

Validating yourself

Many of us are quick to tell ourselves we are being stupid or dramatic. Try the same steps inwards: "I feel hurt. Given what happened, that makes sense. Anyone might."

Someone I could practise validating this week, and how

Something I am feeling that I could validate in myself

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Time out plan

Stepping away before things are said or done that cannot be taken back.

Name _____ Date _____

A time out is not storming off, and it is not avoiding the issue. It is a planned pause to let your body calm down so the conversation can go better. It works best when the people close to you know about it in advance.

The steps

1. **Notice.** I am at my step-away level.
2. **Say it.** Use the agreed words, calmly. No parting shot.
3. **Leave.** Go somewhere else for the agreed time. At least 20 minutes: the body needs that long to settle.
4. **Cool down.** Walk, breathe, stretch, splash cold water. Do not rehearse the argument. Do not drink or drive.
5. **Come back.** Return when I said I would. If I am not ready, say so and name a new time.
6. **Talk, or agree when to talk.**

My step-away level (0 to 10) and how I know I am there

The words I will use. For example: "I am getting too angry to talk well. I am taking 30 minutes and I will come back."

Where I will go

What I will do to cool down

How long, and how I will come back

Agreed with the people I live with

What they will do when I call a time out

☐ Let me go ☐ Not follow me ☐ Not have the last word

When we will come back to what the row was about

If there is any risk of violence, safety comes first. Talk to me, your GP or a support service.

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A weekly check-in for couples

Twenty minutes a week to talk about how things are between you.

Name _____ Date _____

Pick a regular time when you are both reasonably rested. Phones away. Take turns for each section. The listener's only job is to listen and say back what they heard.

1. Something I appreciated about you this week

2. A moment I felt close to you

3. Something that was hard for me this week (in or outside the relationship)

4. Anything between us that needs clearing up. Start gently: "I felt... when... and I would like..."

5. Practical things for the week ahead (plans, money, who is doing what)

6. One thing I would like from you this week

7. Something we can look forward to together

Finish with something warm: a hug, a walk, a cup of tea. If section 4 gets heated, take a break and come back to it.

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Appreciation log

Noticing what is going right between you.

Name _____ Date _____

When a relationship is under strain, we start to notice only what the other person gets wrong. This rebuilds the habit of seeing the rest. Each day, write one thing they did or one quality you value. Then tell them.

Day	Something I appreciated	Did I say it?	How they responded
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

What do I notice after a week of this?

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Rebuilding trust

What each person needs to do when trust has been broken.

Trust is the belief that someone will be honest with you, will do what they say, and will not knowingly hurt you. When it is broken, by a lie, a betrayal or a let-down, both people have work to do if the relationship is to continue.

If I broke the trust

- Take full responsibility, with no "but"
- Answer questions honestly, even when it is uncomfortable
- Be open about where I am and what I am doing, without being asked
- Be patient. I do not decide when they should be over it.
- Keep small promises, every time
- Show that I understand the hurt

If my trust was broken

- Allow myself to feel what I feel
- Say what I need in order to feel safer
- Notice the efforts being made
- Decide whether I want to rebuild, and say so
- Try not to use it as a weapon in every row
- Get support for myself

What rebuilds trust

- **Consistency over time.** Not grand gestures. Being reliable in small things, week after week.
- **Transparency.** Volunteering information before being asked.
- **Empathy.** Hearing the pain without getting defensive.
- **Repair when there is a slip.** Owning it at once.

What gets in the way

- Pressure to move on quickly
- Minimising ("it was not that bad")
- More secrets coming out later
- Punishing with no end in sight
- Never talking about it at all

What to expect

- Setbacks, bad days and sudden waves of hurt are part of the process.
- Trust comes back in stages, and it is often different afterwards. Different can still be strong.
- Not every relationship should be rebuilt. If there is ongoing dishonesty, or you are not safe, your wellbeing comes first.

What would need to happen for trust to grow here? What is my part?

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