# 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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