

The coronavirus lockdown could test your relationship. Here's how to keep it intact (and even improve it)

March 31 2020, by Raquel Peel



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With the raft of [social distancing measures](#) in place to control the spread of coronavirus, you may be spending more time with your partner than ever before.

If you're both working from home, and with nowhere to go out to in the evenings, there's a chance you might start to get on each other's nerves. Perhaps it's happening already.

This is normal, particularly given the increased stress we're all feeling right now. But since we could be in this predicament for a while yet, it's worth taking steps to ensure we get through this period with our relationships intact. We might even be able to come out stronger.

Steering clear of the Four Horsemen

American psychology researcher John Gottman [proposed](#) certain behaviours, or the "[Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#)", lead to the dissolution of romantic relationships.

The first horseman is [criticism](#). This behaviour is defined as an attack on your partner's character, as distinct from offering a critique or voicing a specific complaint.

Particularly at a time like this, you might be keeping track of your partner's flaws but not saying anything so as to avoid conflict. But bottled up, anger and frustration will turn to resentment, which you may express by criticising your partner.

[Psychologists explain](#) criticism includes inflexible "always" and "never" statements such as "you always have to have the last word" or "you never listen".

The second horseman is [contempt](#). This behaviour is defined as an insult to your partner. People might do this verbally using sarcasm, or simply by rolling their eyes.

An example is when your partner is talking to you and you say "here we

go again" without mindfully listening to what they are trying to say.

The third horseman is [defensiveness](#). This behaviour is defined as a counterattack, most often in response to perceived criticism. People use this as a strategy to protect themselves when they are feeling victimised. They assign their partner responsibility for causing them pain.

You might be exhibiting defensiveness if you're [constantly feeling criticised](#), misunderstood and blamed by your partner without cause, and have an "I am right and they are wrong" attitude.

The fourth horseman is [stonewalling](#). This behaviour is defined by elaborate manoeuvres to avoid interacting with a partner. People who stonewall will often stop communicating with their partner, with the exception of negative non-verbal gestures.



Credit: SHVETS production from Pexels

Turn this crisis into an opportunity

People deal with stressful situations by rationalising the best way to protect themselves. This might mean pushing your partner away using the four horsemen.

Gottman estimated these [behaviours](#) are [90% accurate](#) in predicting [relationship](#) dissolution if not addressed. In his research, couples exhibiting all four horsemen who divorced did so on average 5.6 years after marriage.

A [lack of relationship skills](#) – that's not being open to finding solutions and not admitting any fault for relationship breakdown—is another key contributor to relationship dissolution. So it's important to do your best to work on your relationship at this time.

As well as making an effort to avoid the four horsemen, here are some other tips for how you and your partner can emerge from this crisis with your relationship intact—if not improved:

- monitor the balance between positive and negative interactions with your partner. Aim for a [ratio of 5:1](#)
- own your feelings: use "I" statements to voice your needs as opposed to "you" statements to explain what your partner needs to do or change
- listen to your partner's feelings and validate their response to this crisis as being OK. Don't become defensive and attack your

- partner for how they feel or act
- reassure your partner of their safety. Have a conversation about what safety means to both of you and how you plan to keep yourselves and other members the household safe. This might also include an exercise of discerning facts from myths around the current crisis
 - make a new routine with your partner to fit around working at home and family commitments at home. This routine needs to include quality couple time (don't be afraid to touch, be intimate with and [have sex with](#) your partner if you're both healthy)
 - this new routine also needs to include time apart. Give each other time to work on individual hobbies and take it in turns looking after the kids or other family members at home
 - make plans with your partner for after the crisis is over. It's important to accept the reality, but also acknowledge this is not permanent. Planning can help keep you positive and motivated to stay safe
 - use this time to practise healthier habits such as eating well, sleeping, exercising, practising mindfulness and learning a new skill. These things improve mental well-being and if done together, can help build intimacy.

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