

Building a Happy Marriage -- Antidotes for Poisons that Seep into Relationships

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In your marriage life, you often face difficulties. You received the blessing and began your family with determination to live for the sake of others, but in spite of yourself, you do not like your spouse's words and deeds. You had resolved to follow what True Parents have said regarding living for the sake of others, but small issues offend you. If you express those feelings, your spouse becomes angry and when you see that, the conflict magnifies as you both speak and act provocatively. If you talk about your spouse's behavior, you feel that the relationship might worsen, so you hold it in, but when you do, your spouse does not change and you continue hurting your spouse or feeling hurt yourself. In the end, you continue exchanging agitated reactions and the marital conflict grows worse. You and your spouse may become emotionally distant, begin to communicate less, leading to a

relationship in which you live separately or divorce.

A professional marital therapist in the United States, John Gottman, observed three thousand couples for two days each and analyzed their communication. He discovered four poisons that cause marital relationships to deteriorate and lead to divorce. When a couple often injected these four poisons into their communication, 93 percent went on to divorce. On the other hand, a happy couple would immediately use the antidotes to heal the relationship when one spouse sensed the pain caused in the other. If we apply these antidotes within communication between a husband and wife or between parent and child in blessed families, we can build happier relationships.



The four poisons

The poisons, which Gottman refers to as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse [Rev. 6: 1–8], are criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling. I will demonstrate these poisons, which seriously deteriorate relationships, through mini-dialogs and commentary.

Criticism

Criticism is a request for change because the speaker feels it would be better if the other person's speech or behavior were to change, but the other person hears it as criticism. Criticism emerges after you have passed judgment on a person's words or behavior—right or wrong, good or bad, well or poorly done. Singling out your spouse's words, actions, emotions or aspects of character is easy and results in statements like:

What's wrong with you? What the hell did you do? You're doing it wrong. Even if you say you will, nothing ever changes. That behavior is so annoying. I told you not to do that! Can't you do anything properly?

Furthermore, whether the spouse makes this mistake intermittently or it is an unusual occurrence, couples

exaggerate using words such as -- everyday, not once, never, always, every time. They criticize their spouse's words or deeds by saying things like, You never listen to me. What's wrong with you?



Defensiveness

Defensiveness describes people who receive criticism and reflexively speak in a manner to defend themselves or counterattack based on the instinct to protect themselves. They speak or act in a defensive way because they fear that they will be hurt more if they do not respond to the words or actions that are hurting them. They defend themselves by denying wrongdoing:

What did I do? When did I say that? What did I do wrong? I didn't do anything wrong.

To protect themselves they might also counterattack:

So what did you do? How is it my fault? It's all your fault. You were harsher than I was when you were angry. You've made bigger mistakes than this! How am I the only one wrong?

This kind of reactive defensiveness or counterattack happens because you're trying to protect yourselves, but you end up hurting each other more. Because you have been hurt, the criticism and defensiveness repeats itself and the misunderstanding gradually deepens. When criticism and defensiveness builds up, the emotional scars deepen and the relationship worsens.

Contempt

As the scars deepen from exchanging criticism and defensiveness, the spouse's attitudes and comments start to feel impersonal, distant, dispassionate. Now that you are in an impersonal mode, you begin to ignore or despise your partner. When you feel contempt, behavior forms in line with My ideas and actions are better than yours.

You feel that there is something wrong with what your partner says and does even when you look at them in light of God's will, the Principle, or True Parents' teachings. So you feel that you are better than your spouse. Therefore, you scowl, twist your mouth, or look at, speak to, or act toward your partner with scorn:

Who are you to say that? You idiot! You old pig. Know your place. You're such a show off. You're slick with your words but you never take action. Do you think you're so good?

When you and your spouse or another family member exchange contempt, the relationship quickly worsens. Contempt should never be expressed because it is the worst poison to building a relationship. According to research, people treated with contempt are stressed easily, their metabolism weakens and they get infectious diseases more often. Mental pain increases the chance of physical sickness.

Stonewalling

There are two types of stonewalling. One is evasion. When a couple quarrels, rather than hurting each other with criticism or defensiveness and counterattacking, the person avoids it, before it happens.

Another way to avoid interaction is by shutting out the other person. When the scars become too deep a person may build walls and only relate on the shallowest level. If one feels as if the partner is about to criticize or express contempt, they think things like, Ugh, here we go again, how annoying. I wish this would stop. If this continues, it will just lead to a fight. Do that one more time and... I'm tired of this; I'll sleep on the sofa tonight.

These kinds of thoughts lead you to avoid your partner, to stonewall. You resist interacting, avoid eye contact, keep your phone off or ignore calls, and do not respond in any way. Closing the door or leaving the room when your partner speaks to you. You focus on the newspaper or TV and respond absentmindedly. These are efforts to keep peace in a relationship, but they do not help to restore the relationship; they only make it worse. Out of the four types of "poison," women tend to use criticism most often; men tend to use stonewalling. When men stonewall, they physiologically are in a higher state of emotional flooding. Their blood pressure rises so they are unable to focus on the newspaper or TV, but just stare at it. Emotional flooding is when blood rushes to the amygdala rather than the frontal lobe.



The four antidotes

Request rather than complain: Rather than criticizing when your partner's words or deeds don't reach your standards, make a gentle request. Gently requesting what you want is better than pointing out someone's problems or demanding change.

For example, instead of saying, You don't even care about me anymore! Try something like, I become anxious (bored or lonely) when I'm alone in the evenings. Could you come home earlier?

When you come home after work and find the room messy, instead of saying, What did you do all day? What a mess, try a less aggressive approach: I am tired from working all day. Instead of saying that a messy house annoys you, try saying, My stress increases if the house is messy when I come home. Could you please at least keep my own room tidy?

To your spouse who is watching TV: Would you please clean the living room after this show? or I am tired today because I had to take [our child] to the doctor. The living room is messy. Would you vacuum it please?

Whenever you make these kinds of request and your partner responds well, always express your gratitude in words or action. If you express your appreciation even for doing small things, the other person will begin to do them voluntarily and your interaction will change.

Accept some responsibility

When your partner points out a mistake you made but exaggerates by using terms such as "constantly" or "all the time," you may feel criticized or attacked. Sometimes you may have never done that before or

may have done it once or twice. The exaggeration might make you feel unjustly accused and you may respond with denials or defensiveness as if you hadn't done anything. Yet accepting responsibility for part of the problem rather than defending yourself is more effective. Accept the area where your partner is correct. Do not agree to everything but accept responsibility in part by saying, Yes, I did make a mistake. When your partner says, You were drinking again? Why do you always drink?, accept that you drank. Yes, I drank a bit today.

If you had broken a promise, admit it: I broke my promise. I won't do it again.

Accept that you made a mistake: I've been so tired lately; I made a mistake. I'm sorry.

Even if you simply forgot or there was a reason, accept it by saying, Oops, I've been so out of it that I forgot.

When you used a lot of money accept part of the responsibility: Oh! There were many expenses this time.

When you are judged incorrectly: I made many mistakes, but...

When you are angry, admit it: I am very angry.

Anyone can make a mistake.

Thus, if you accept part of the responsibility the negative emotions will gradually disappear.

Appreciation and respect

According to Gottman's research, happy couples express five times more appreciation and respect toward each other than unhappy couples. Once you begin to see the negative things about your partner, you start continuously pointing out things that you want your spouse to change. This can turn into nagging and the relationship suffers. On the other hand, if you look for the good points in your partner, express appreciation and respect your partner for them. Thinking of one good thing a day about your partner and expressing it is an effective way to improve your relationship. Expressing appreciation and respect through compliments, in words and deeds expresses support, encouragement and trust and helps develop an intimate relationship.

Expressing appreciation and respect five times more than criticism can heal your spouse; consideration and intimacy grows: Wow, you did a great job! How did you do that? That is cool! I like someone who is innocent and square. You are glowing with health. That soup you made was the best. Your cooking is better than any restaurant's. I accept your point of view. I trust you. I love to see you working so hard.

Self-soothing

When your partner makes you angry, rather than stonewalling, calm yourself. Practice self-soothing. Initiate self-soothing before anger inside of you becomes an emotional flood. Anger causes brain waves to fluctuate violently in an unstable manner. The heartbeat increases significantly, so the sound of your heart beat increases and you can feel it beating very fast. For men, it takes more than thirty minutes for the heartbeat to calm down when they are angry. For women it can take ten minutes. Thus, it is more difficult to calm a man's anger.

One of the best ways to soothe anger is to breathe deeply. If you are angry, tell yourself to stop. Take deep breathes in and out. Communication is difficult if either of you is angry. If you find yourself unable to calm yourself and to communicate, use hand gestures to signal to your partner to wait while you try to release your tension. If leaving the room and taking a walk outside helps you to soothe yourself, tell your partner, I will come back in thirty minutes, let's talk then, and then carefully pick up the conversation when you return.

The more a couple uses these antidotes the better they will be at implementing them. Once you realize that you may be under the influence of one of the Four Poisons, quickly use one of the Four Antidotes. Make a gentle request to your partner, accept your mistakes while you are in a calm state and express your appreciation and respect. This kind of lifestyle will increase the intimacy in your relationship. By looking for good points, strengths, acts of service or positive things about your partner every day, you will experience more peace and happiness in your own life and in your family.