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Stonewalling and Taking a Break Are Not the Same Thing

by Emma Todd Carpenter

Conflict and arguments are often unavoidable in a marriage. You and your partner are different people with “unique preferences, backgrounds, biases, and values.”¹ You are likely to disagree, and those disagreements might be about large or small issues. However, partners have the power to decide how they will discuss and resolve a conflict. And when couples approach conflict and differences in a healthy way, disagreements can be productive—even beneficial to the relationship.

Some of the most prominent principles about conflict comes from leading marriage researcher John Gottman. In his extensive research on thousands of couples across many years, he’s found four patterns of communication that tend to predict trouble. He calls these four patterns of interaction the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse:

- **Defensiveness:** A partner typically doesn’t choose to take accountability or responsibility for something they’ve done wrong or responds to situations as though they are being attacked. Instead, they often blame their partner. For example, if a partner is late picking up one of the kids from soccer practice, they might say, “You should have known this might happen and picked up Sally yourself. You know I’m concerned about my interview tomorrow, so it’s not my fault. Do it yourself if you are so worried about being there exactly on time.”
- **Contempt:** A partner often belittles the other—making fun of them, name-calling, or responding sarcastically during an argument, conveying a sense of disgust. For example, if a partner is stressed about the monthly budget, they may say, “What do you care? Go ahead and buy another pair of shoes like a spoiled little brat if you want them that badly!”
- **Criticism:** Instead of offering a helpful comment or a nonconfrontational complaint about a situation

or action their spouse took, a partner criticizes them as a person. This pattern is one that includes a lot of absolutes like “you never” or “you always.” For example, if a partner made an offhanded comment at a family get-together that might be construed as rude, their partner may later say, “Wow, you don’t even care about this family. You never show any sensitivity to my family members—my mom was offended!” Meanwhile, the person may not have even realized that what they said was taken wrong—and the situation could have been resolved with a soft start-up and a listening ear.

- **Stonewalling:** A partner withdraws from the conversation in a way that shows they are done and not interested in repairing the relationship—at least at that point. They don’t respond to comments or requests—they may even physically distance themselves or start doing something else that shows they are no longer attentive to the issue.² For example, if a spouse is frustrated that their partner spends more time with their friends than at home, they may get in a heated argument (an argument that contains the above three horsemen). Eventually, one or the other may feel overwhelmed and begin to ignore the other, perhaps by turning on the T.V., and not allow their partner to try to fix the situation. In some cases that are not considered stonewalling, a person might withdraw to calm or gather their emotions, but when a partner withdraws completely without an intention to resolve the issue later, this stonewall, or barrier, in the relationship can get in the way of healthy communication that could resolve ongoing problems.

Gottman sees stonewalling as the most serious horseman since stonewalling “takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable ‘out.’”² Stonewalling differs however from taking a break or preparing to reenter a conversation after cooling off.

Also, sometimes taking a break is helpful if a partner is feeling overwhelmed or in a negative mood. As leading

marriage researchers indicated in their book, *Fighting for Your Marriage: Positive Steps for Preventing Divorce and Preserving a Lasting Love*, “We tend to give people more benefit of the doubt more frequently when we’re in a good mood and less frequently when we’re in a bad mood. If you’re in a bad mood, you are more likely to perceive whatever your partner says or does negatively, no matter how positive he or she is trying to be.”³ Because of this, it’s important to allow yourself time to cool off—to take a break from the argument.

How to Take a Break

What’s the difference between stonewalling and taking a break? And how can you help your partner understand that you aren’t building a wall but are taking a break?

First, let your partner know that you think the issue is important. You could do this by saying, “I do want to talk about this later,” or “I realize that this is an important discussion,” or even, “Would we be able to talk about this tomorrow?” Whatever you say, make sure “your spouse know[s] that you’re feeling flooded”² and would be able to discuss the issue more productively at a later, designated time. For example, you can use this two-part statement; “Would we be able to talk about this tomorrow? I’m feeling a little overwhelmed right now and need to take a break.”

Second, take responsibility for calming yourself and keeping your commitment to return to the issue when you both feel the timing is better. While stonewalling communicates to your partner that you are no longer willing to deal with the problem, taking a break can help them see that the problem is important to you and that you care enough to work it out under better circumstances when you can approach it less emotionally.

Actually, taking a break may be just the right choice when you’re feeling angry and overwhelmed and your body has gone into that flooded state. When this happens, stress hormones fill your body. Your heart rate and blood pressure rise. Your skin starts to sweat and you get hotter. Being flooded makes sense biologically, since it’s a way we naturally protect ourselves from danger, but it’s not very helpful when you’re trying to resolve a high-stakes conflict with your partner.

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John Gottman explains, “The physical sensations of feeling flooded . . . make it virtually impossible to have a productive, problem-solving discussion.” He continues with some timely advice: “The first step in dealing with flooding is to end the discussion. Now. If you keep going, you’ll find yourself exploding at your partner or imploding (stonewalling), neither of which will get you anywhere.”²

Building a Pattern of Trust

This pattern of taking a break when needed and allowing your partner to do the same can establish a pattern of trust. If your partner doesn’t truly believe that you want to talk about the issue again or that you’re trying to escape from the hard conversation, they might think you are stonewalling. If you don’t communicate clearly, such as using a two-part statement to explain your state and let them know you’ll be back, then misunderstandings may arise where unintended.

Researchers Pascale and Primavera said, “Trust builds slowly as we learn about our partner and they become predictable to us. Predictability is important because having an idea of what will happen makes us feel in control of our lives. . . . If they appear to be consistent and to have our best interests at heart, we can believe they will continue to do so in the future; thus, we can trust them.”⁴



Photo by Daniel J. Schwarz on Unsplash

Mastering conflict resolution comes down to establishing productive patterns and habits. Couples can learn to be mindful of interaction patterns such as Gottman's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and eliminate them when they rear their ugly heads. Partners can also form habits of responding to intense situations by recognizing flooding and using the two-part statement as they clearly communicate their need for a break. As they do so, they can establish the trust in the relationship that problems will be faced and resolved—allowing a stronger marriage to emerge.

***Emma Carpenter** grew up in American Fork, Utah, within a block of her big, Hawaiian extended family. She is currently studying family life and creative writing at Brigham Young University. When she's not writing about family relationships, you'll find her canoeing, cooking, or playing board games with her husband.*

Endnotes

¹ Whiting, J. (2016, December 1). *Conflict in marriage does not need to be destructive*. [Institute for Family Studies](#).

² Gottman, J. M., & Silver, N. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work: A Practical Guide from the Country's Foremost Relationship Expert*. Random House.

³ Markman, H., Stanley, S., & Blumberg, S. L. (1994). *Fighting for your marriage: Positive steps for preventing divorce and preserving a lasting love*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

⁴ Pascale, R., & Primavera, L. (2017, May 19). *Do you trust your partner?* [Psychology Today](#).