

Episode 004 Transcript

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What Not to Do in Your Relationships

Marina: Hi, everyone. Welcome to Episode 4 of Simply Great Relationships podcast. We're so glad that you could join us today. I'm Marina Voron, and this is Meredith Silversmith. We are excited to bring you this episode on what not to do in your relationship. Make sure that you stay tuned until the very end because we've got a really, really great bonus for you today and we will tell you how to get it at the end of the episode.

Meredith: Yep. We always like to talk about what makes relationships go right: what to do, what will help, positive things for aiming things in the positive, but today, we have to go down a different path. We've called this episode "How to Get Divorced" because if you follow these anti-tips, you could be heading down that path. We want to give you the info today on what not to do. We've touched on this before, this concept of these four qualities of communication that are really damaging to relationships. To name them, they're called the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, right, credit to John Gottman. There are four qualities of communication that don't bode well for your relationship. To briefly review them if you didn't listen to Episode 1 yet: criticism. Criticism, an example would be saying: "You're so lazy. You never want to do anything. You're always just laying on the couch. You never help me. I don't understand." That would be critical. The second one, defensiveness.

Marina: Goes hand in hand with criticism, right? Somebody attacks you; you're not just going to stand there and be like "yes, bring it on! I'm a Zen Buddha. I'll just deflect all of it." You're going to get a little defensive. You're going to say "that's not me. That's you. You think I forgot your birthday? You forgot our anniversary. You forgot my mom's birthday. You forgot this. You forgot that. I'm not the one who's forgetful. That's you."

Meredith: Defensiveness, they go hand in hand. The third one is stonewalling. This is when somebody is really overwhelmed and flooded during an argument, and they've shut down, so, They're quiet. They've zoned out. They're staring off into space. They're looking at their phone. They're just sitting and disengaging from the conversation in a nonconstructive way. That's what that looks like.



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Meredith: Contempt being the fourth, most damaging horsemen, contempt is the mean stuff: the yelling, cursing, name calling, sarcasm –

Marina: Belittling.

Meredith: – making fun of the other person, belittling, patronizing, all stuff like that. We don't have to give an example of that. That you can imagine. Stuff that makes you cringe is contempt. These are the Four Horsemen, really important to be aware of. They exist in every relationship. I think that's a really important piece. It's not that to have a healthy relationship there's got to be a 100% absence of the Four Horsemen. It's not realistic. They should be really, really minimized, and contempt really shouldn't happen. Contempt does not need to be present. Just to share a little bit about maybe how we've battled with the Horsemen in our own relationships, I guess for me, I'd probably be a fan of defensiveness.

Marina: Me, too.

Meredith: If my husband pointed something out to me that I did that bothered him, or he wanted to be different – I can't say for sure that he was using his I statements. I'm sure I felt criticized in the moment. I would absolutely say "I didn't do that. That's not what I did. That's not what I meant. You heard me wrong. You are confused. That's not at all what happened. Let me tell you what went down." I can own that. That is my struggle.

Marina: Yeah, I think I can really own the defensiveness also. I wonder if that comes from both of us being really precious only children who never do anything wrong, but I'm really good at the: "that's not me, that's you," and the – George would say something to me that I internalized as critical. I'd be like "well, let me pull out the Rolodex of my rebuttals and get really defensive." I would also say I'm pretty good at serving my defensiveness with a side of criticism, just throwing a jab in there for good measure, or for bad measure, really. It's something that I have very actively worked on, like that 80s aversion technique of the rubber band on the wrist. I've really tried to catch myself because defensiveness is a feeling in your body. You know when you're getting defensive. It's almost like oh. I've really tried to be very mindful of that feeling and just taking a little ownership to de-escalate it because I know what defensiveness leads to. It leads to tit for tat, not going anywhere, wasting good energy and not going anywhere.

Meredith: Yeah. I think for me, too, it's something I've worked on. The way that I've really gotten passed it, for the most part, is just remembering the message it sends to Tom, remembering that if he's bringing the concern to me and I'm responding with defensiveness, I'm essentially telling him "your concern doesn't matter. What you're upset about or what you're concerned about doesn't matter to me. It's not important to me, and I don't care." That's by no means the message that I want to send, so that's really helped me to work on it.



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Marina: That's a really, really great thing to be mindful of is what is my partner trying to tell me in this moment and not make it so much about you, but really you listening to your partner and to their thought, need, feeling in the moment. I think it's okay to say "can you say that to me differently."

Meredith: Yes. I think that's a really, really important thing. If your partner says something to you that hits you the wrong way, give them the benefit of the doubt, right? Give it a second and say "you know what, that kind of felt a little critical. Could you try to say that again? Could you say it to me differently? I want to hear what you're saying. I want to understand where you're coming from, and I want to hear you, so can you tell me in a different way?"

Marina: I almost feel like that's like waving a little white flag and reducing defensiveness, to be able to say "let's have a do-over here. Let's say it in a way that's going to make both of us receive and give the message that we're actually going for."

Meredith: Yeah, definitely. There are reasons why we result to using the Four Horsemen, right? It's not that we wake up in the morning, and we're like how can I criticize my husband today. What do you think about that?

Marina: Of course. I don't think people are inherently jerks. This is what I always tell my couples, and I think this even rang true for me for a long time. I think the Four Horsemen are a bad tool to express a good need or to express a good feeling. They're a bad coping tool to get to a really important and really good thing. I really think people resort to them because they don't have better-coping tools. Unfortunately, I think some of these are little bit ingrained in language. People feel like "the louder I yell; the more critical I get, the more my message will get across." It's really dysregulating and feels really horrible when you want to express a feeling, and you feel like it's not being heard. Sometimes, again, we're not using the best, most constructive tool. We're not being strategic, essentially. We're using a really poor strategy to try to meet a really important need.

Meredith: We're using what comes easily in the moment, right? We're saying "I'm frustrated. I want you to know I'm frustrated, so I'm going to show you in any way I can." That's not going to get the outcome that you want.

Marina: Exactly. I think people really resort to these when they feel flooded. Again, we talked about flooding in Episode 2, and we talked about it actually in Episode 1 also. When we're feeling flooded, we're not ourselves. We have our claws out, and we have our claws out because we're feeling all types of ways inside, but we're not using that rational, good part of our brain. We're using the part of our brain that can really sabotage us.

Meredith: Yeah. I mean, essentially, you're in fight-or-flight mood, right? If you're in fight-or-flight mood and you're looking at your partner, you're looking at them as an enemy. That's the reality, right? When you're flooded, everyone's an enemy. Everything is dangerous. We're going to misperceive. We're looking through a filter of danger. That's how I explain it. You're going to see things more negatively than perhaps they were intended.



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Meredith: It makes sense if you're looking for danger and you hear criticism, you're going to respond with defensiveness or contempt. If you really want to up the ante, you go to contempt. Being flooded and being able to manage your flooding in a healthy way is a really great way to avoid using the Four Horsemen. We're going to talk more about that later.

Marina: Yeah.

Meredith: So, I think that's a really important piece. What do the Four Horsemen invite from your partner? We talked about that, right? Criticism invites defensiveness. Defensiveness invites more criticism. It becomes a sort of cycle. What do you feel like stonewalling invites?

Marina: So, This is kind of how I explain it to couples. Think about it like this: you start out eye to eye. Somebody brings in criticism, so they up the ante. This partner isn't just going to be like "well, let me meet you here." They're going to say, "now I feel bad, so let me surpass, let one up you. Let me get defensive, and then let me throw criticism back your way." Then, this partner is like, "well, I don't like being down here. Let me criticize you some more, and let me maybe get a little defensive." They keep going tit for tat like that. The ante keeps getting upped. Then, this partner gets flooded. Say - Their body, not even their mind, their body says, "this is way too much for me. This isn't working for me. This doesn't feel safe." This partner says, "I need to tap out of this. I don't feel safe. I don't feel okay in this situation." They remove themselves. Whether it's physically or mentally and emotionally, they remove themselves. To this partner who's staying up here but may not be quite flooded yet but is probably an inch away from it, I think a lot of times it feels like well, "this jerk's ignoring me, so I'm going to yell louder. I'm going to get more contemptuous. I'm going to get more defensive." I think contempt is pulling out the biggest guns. I think contempt can really come out when one person stonewalls. This person just is left kind of hanging because they're like well, my needs are so unmet. I'm so dysregulated right now. I'm so bothered right now. I'm going to up, and up, and up until this person reengages. What they're not realizing is this person's in no physiological condition and in no mind state to really be able to re-engage.

Meredith: They're feeling ignored. They're feeling abandoned. They're feeling left alone, which is triggering for a lot of people. The cycle continues until it reaches a point where you exhaust yourself. You give up. It's time to go to work. It's time to go to whatever it is. You part ways until you calm down. So, That's what the cycle can look like and how the Horsemen play off each other as you use them in an argument. Not pretty, not pretty.

Marina: I know I've seen this in session. I'm sure you have also. You can see how shaken up and dysregulated people feel but then how physiological self-soothing can really, really help them. We're going to get into that.

Meredith: Absolutely. So, Let's talk about that: what to do instead of using the Horsemen, right? Going back to Episode 1, my favorite takeaway: I statements. I love I statements.

Marina: I love I statements.



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Meredith: We're going to go Horseman by Horseman. For criticism, the way to get your need met in a healthy way rather than criticizing your partner is by using I statements. Use I statements to talk about your feelings, your needs, what would help you. Instead of criticizing and saying, "you never help me with the garbage, you always make me do it by myself, you're so selfish, blah, blah, blah," say, "hey, I'm feeling kind of overwhelmed by having to handle the garbage by myself every day. It would really help me if you could alternate with me or come with me, do something to join me in that." Totally different way of approaching it but the same message.

Marina: It invites a compromise, right? Another thing to add to an antidote for criticism is think about when you start out with a criticism. Are you starting in a nice, calm manner-

Meredith: Probably not.

Marina: -conversation that's rational and stays at a nice even level? No. When you start with a criticism, you're upping the ante from the get go. You're starting out harshly. If you can ask yourself, "what am I feeling, and what do I need, and what am I trying to express?" instead of starting out harshly, you're starting out cool, calm, and collected. You're much more likely to express a genuine thought, feeling, need as opposed to start harshly and invite a tit-for-tat cycle of criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and ultimately stonewalling. You want to keep in mind if you can soften that startup by using those I statements and asking yourself what am I feeling, what do I need first, you're really helping for things to stay at an emotionally manageable level.

Meredith: Yep, definitely. That's a really good point. What do you think for defensiveness would be the great way to replace that?

Marina: Defensiveness is "it's not me, it's you, right?" So, I think organically the antidote to that is to say maybe it's a little bit me also, you know, to almost bring yourself off of that pedestal and take a little bit of ownership. Take a little bit of accountability. I think that's a huge way to wave the white flag, to say this was my part in it. I always tell couples if you don't know what to take ownership for, take ownership for the fact that you got defensive and say it in a different way. Just doing that is already waving enough of a white flag to say I want to shift the direction of this conversation. It doesn't have to be a huge thing.

Meredith: That's true. Yeah. It can be the tiniest, tiniest piece.

Marina: I always people go for small. I feel like we're not in Texas. Things don't have to be big. Go for small. Take accountability. Take a little ownership for a small, emotionally manageable thing. Just wave the white flag. I don't know if you've seen this. Actually, I'm probably sure that you have. A couple comes in. They're talking, and then one person goes, "well, fine. It's all my fault. You're totally innocent. It's all my fault." That's not the antidote to defensiveness. That's contempt.

Meredith: Yep, yes. Totally true.

Marina: That's like being a contemptuous martyr.



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Meredith: You don't want to be a contemptuous martyr.

Marina: So, just a little bit.

Meredith: That's a great suggestion. For flooding or for stonewalling – stonewalling is a sign that you're flooded. What do we do? You have to take space. There's no other option. Once you're flooded, you've got to take space, at least 20 minutes, to do something to physiologically soothe your body. We talked a lot about this in Episode 1, I believe. It's taking space in another room and doing something other than sitting and ruminating in your head about what was just talked about, what made you angry, what your partner said, what you're going to say when you get back out there: read a book, watch TV, take a walk, take a shower, play with your dog, do a mindfulness app, do a meditation, go exercise, anything that will shift your mind's focus from the argument to something else.

Marina: I always like to tell people that are likely to flood – and I think people become really good at identifying it. We do some biofeedback in session where people put on the pulse oximeters, and they learn how their body feels when they're there. I always tell people to have that repertoire of go-tos, to not wait until you're flooded and then say, "should I read a book, should I go for..." – have that preemptively ready for you. If you know you're going to do meditation off of YouTube, have that mediation saved to your home screen. If you're going to do a progressive muscle relaxation, have that link ready. If you're going to read a book, know what book you're going to read, and where you're going to go, and what that's going to be like just because when you're in a flooded state, it's overwhelming. You're in a true overwhelm, and you don't have the mental bandwidth to go, what would be the best mediation? Let me google." You're not in that rational, calm state, so it's really good to build that repertoire of tools when you are in a rational, calm state so that you have them really readily available when you need to use them.

Meredith: Absolutely. You're not in the mindset to make rational decisions, so you have to plan ahead. This is really an important one. If you find yourself stonewalling, make sure you have that ready to go. It's going to make a big difference.

Marina: I think there's a ton of apps that are really, really great. I'm a big believer in having an app on your phone ready to go. You just pop in your headphones, and you're good to go.

Meredith: Agreed. Then, we have contempt. What contempt is, as Marina said before, is you are feeling your needs are so incredibly unmet in that moment that you're taking out the big guns, right?

Marina: The biggest guns.

Meredith: The biggest guns that you have. So, If you're feeling that your needs are super, super unmet and that's what's putting you in that space, the best thing to do is talk to your partner about your needs, and what you're needing, and what you're expecting, and how you're feeling, right?



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Marina: Because in contempt, you're very you, you, you. "You're not doing this. You're not doing that. Why are you like this? I should have never been with you." It's a very finger-pointing, very projecting on your partner. Really what you're trying to do – again, you're using a bad communication tool to try to get to a really valid goal. What you're trying to say is, "I'm hurting in this moment. I need something in this moment. I have an unmet need. I have an unmet feeling. I have something that needs validation." If you're able to just take that little break, to take that little second, and ask yourself how am I feeling, what do I need, and to really verbalize that to your partner instead of saying "you, you, you, you, you" from your pedestal so it's more like a you, you, you, you, you, that really, really shifts the tone of the conversation. Also, it lets you actually express your feeling, your need. It lets you externalize your feeling, you know? I love the saying: "if you can name it, you can tame it." If you're able to express your feeling, you're going to feel a lot more control of it also.

Meredith: Yep, definitely. Definitely. I think another piece with contempt – if you're getting to the point of contempt, you're probably flooded also. Everything that applied to stonewalling about taking space and doing something for 20 minutes to calm down – if you're finding yourself being contemptuous, apply the same techniques.

Marina: Yeah, definitely. Again, contempt is really big guns. The people that preemptively jump to contempt and the people who actually – tell me if you see this. The people who preemptively jump to defensiveness and preemptively jump to contempt, that speaks to a relationship pattern where they for a long time have not felt heard, and have not felt like their needs have been met, and have felt attacked. They're probably living in a state of a little bit of dysregulation and flooding. That's a really important – if this is resonating with you right now, if you're like wow, I walk in and I look at my partner and I'm defensive, that's a really big sign that you really need to ask yourself how am I feeling and what do I need. Put that out there. If you're coming in, and you're saying, "why don't you ever do this for me, why do you have to make me feel this way, what's wrong with you, why are we even together" – again, pause and ask yourselves: "what am I feeling and what do I need?" because that is such a sign of the fact that you have a really unmet need. You have some really unmet feelings. But, a lot of times, people are really good at identifying stuff their partner isn't doing, but they're not so good at naming what that feeling is. When you're able to ask yourself that question, you're able to reduce that preemptive defensiveness and contempt that's really, really damaging. Imagine what it's like to be the partner that's getting defensiveness when they're like, "well, I didn't even say anything."

Meredith: Right, I didn't even do it yet. It gets in the way of giving your partner the opportunity to do it differently because you expect what you've always gotten. If anyone starts to make a change, you don't even get the chance to get the change off the ground because everything's almost predecided in your head because of the cycle. Realistically, if you're listening to this and feeling like yep, that's us, I would recommend taking it a step further. It might be challenging to break that on your own. That's where a really quality couple's therapist or relationship coach can help you individually or individually as a couple break that pattern because when it gets to that point, that's very, very ingrained. It's important to break that.



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Meredith: Those are the Four Horsemen. There's one other piece that we did want to talk about which are trigger words, these words that everything could be going in an okay direction and then one of these words gets thrown out, and it can quickly derail things. I wish we had feedback live from you because I would love to ask what people think that these trigger words are.

Marina: I do that in session all the time.

Meredith: It's really funny. If you were here, I would ask you, but you're not, so, we'll share with you what they are. I'll let you do the first one because the second one is my favorite.

Marina: Okay, the first one, I think, for a lot of people is triggering from their childhood because when you're a little kid and your mom says this word, all of a sudden you feel like you're on the witness stand and you have to prove yourself. When you're a teenager and your mom says this word to you, again, you feel like you're on the witness stand and you have to prove yourself. It's not about what is actually, genuinely going on for you, or what may have happened, or how you feel. It's really about "am I getting it right? Am I living up to the hypothesis? Am I hitting the key points I need to hit?" That magic word is "why". I think what happens with "why" is "why" feels very accusatory and interrogative, right?

Meredith: Yeah.

Marina: "Why" is not tell me your story. "Why" is not let's converse. Give me a little more insight into your internal world. "Why" is I have a hypothesis, and I'm going to corner you until you get it right. "Why" is definitely a use-with-caution. What I always tell people is people use "why" in place of tell me more about that, or "what was it like for you when, or how did that feel for you, or can you help me understand this more." When we're talking about feelings and when we're talking about getting to know your partner and getting to know their emotional world, I think getting to know their genuine story is so important. "Why" doesn't always produce that. "Tell me more, or tell me what that's like for you, or tell me," invites a person to share their experience. "Why", not so much.

Meredith: Yeah. I'm just thinking of an example. If I were to say to you, "it really upsets me when you greet the dog before you greet me when you come home." And you were to say –

Marina: "Why?"

Meredith: I would immediately feel like what I said was wrong, stupid, they don't get it, dismissed all in that moment.

Marina: A little defensive probably.

Meredith: A little defensive for sure like I have to explain myself. I have to explain why that's important to me, why I'm asking for it. My inclination would be to say, "What do you mean why? Why are you asking me? That's a stupid question." You can see how it could spiral from there of something that starts very well. Instead of why tell me more about that. Help me understand. I'd like to know more. Share with me. Little change.



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Meredith: My favorite word which comes up a lot when people – they're on track. They're communicating well. They're validating their partner's feelings. This is how it always comes up for me. A partner just shared all this really important stuff, and their spouse is like okay, so, "I'm hearing you say that it upsets you when I greet the dog before I greet you. It makes you feel left out, and you want to feel like a priority. That's what I'm hearing from you. I really understand. I understand why it would upset you when I greet the dog first, but" – and I just shake my head. I go oh because but is like taking a sharpie and drawing a line through everything you just said before that. It's like never mind, just kidding. It negates everything you just said. When you say all these wonderful things and then you say "but", it makes your partner feel really dismissed and really invalidated even though you did all that great work and you communicated so well. My advice that I always give, it's summarize, validate, period, space, and then share your point. Don't say "but". Say, "I understand where you're coming from," take a breath, and say, "I feel da, da, da, da, da." It's just a different, totally different experience.

Marina: It is. It makes a huge difference. Stop the run-on sentences. You're trying to express two different things. Give each thing its own sentence. Take that period pause. Let your partner really hear the validation and then shift gears to talking about your feelings. You don't need to undo in order to express your stuff. Again, unfortunately, I think this is one that's ingrained in language. It's almost like you have to just pay attention and train yourself to get out of the mode of using but in this way, and I think for a long time the cheat for this was replace "but" with "and," which I think works sometimes if you're able to do it. I think people tend to find it super awkward.

Meredith: And I think some people use it with the intention of "but" if that makes sense. I'll hear, "I understand what you're saying and da, da, da, da, da, and this is all the stuff that I think that's horrible."

Marina: And becomes almost a little contemptuous.

Meredith: Yeah, yeah, that's a great way to put it. It does. You have to be careful with it. I'm a big fan of the period, pause, continue. I'm a believer. Those are your trigger words, so, try not to use them. We had the Four Horsemen. We have our trigger words. These are the don'ts. Don't do it. We don't want you just to listen to this. We want you to integrate it into your relationship today and start sharing it with your partner. To make that a little easier for you, we are making available to you a really great graphic, straight from the Gottman Institute, with the Four Horsemen and the antidotes for them. This is a little cheat sheet that you can use to keep them present in your mind as we talked about last episode. Keep it on your fridge. You know you're going to go in your fridge. You know you're going to see it. It's a really nice common area, mutual area, to put it up and keep it around. You can download that on our website: SimplyGreatRelationships.com/004. Definitely go get it.

Marina: My bonus tip with that one, I always tell couples, "if you're going to put it on your fridge, if you want to extra reinforce it, if you have kids, teach it to your kids" because this is a great life skill. Teaching it to your kids adds – your kids are very good at keeping you accountable. They'll be like "Mom, you're using contempt." I always think that's a really great way to learn it is to teach it to someone, bonus tip.



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Marina: Let's talk about takeaways. What's your biggest takeaway from today?

Meredith: Oh, my gosh. My biggest takeaway is probably... probably the tendency to be defensive, my tendency to be defensive and my tendency to go back at that, just like, again, revisiting that for myself and knowing that that's something that I have to be aware of and I have to work on. Every time I think about it, or I hear about it, it brings it back to the top of my mind. I think that's a takeaway for me.

Marina: You know what, I'm going to have to put you back on your takeaway because I was thinking about that, too. I think that is – keeping defensiveness in check is a work in progress. There is no “okay, and then I'm there, and then I'll never use it again.” I think it's such an innate and inherent thing within us. Refreshing and talking about now, I'm like okay. Now, I'm going to make an extra awareness of keeping that in check and just know that that's my one and know that sometimes – if I'm not in the best mood, or if I'm tired, or if I'm cranky, I do tend to hear things maybe in a little bit more of a critical way than they're meant to be sent out. That defensiveness isn't really going to get me to where I want to go.

Meredith: Yeah, absolutely. I think that's key for us. We'd love to hear what you identified with as you heard about the Four Horsemen. If there was something that really stood out to you and you were like yep, that's me, leave it in the comments because we'd like to know if you're on Team Defensiveness like us or if you went somewhere else. That's all for today. We gave you a lot of don'ts, things to be aware of, and ways to combat them in a healthy manner. Be sure to take these tips and start doing them right away. We'd love to continue the conversation with you in our private Facebook group. I can't talk anymore today, let me tell you. Private Facebook group where we're going to hook you up with tips, tricks, and Live streams exclusively for our members. You can join at: [Facebook.com/Groups/SimplyGreatRelationships](https://www.facebook.com/Groups/SimplyGreatRelationships), or you can go on our website, SimplyGreatRelationships.com, and just click the link there. We'd love to have you, so be sure to join.

Marina: Yup. Until next time, we will see you. Good luck. Don't get divorced. How not to get divorced, follow these tips. Let us know how it goes. See you.

Marina: Bye.

