The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

John M. Gottman, Ph.D.,
and Nan Silver

THREE RIVERS PRESS • NEW YORK

2

How I Predict Divorce

Dara and Oliver sit face to face in the Love Lab. Both in their late twenties, they have volunteered to take part in my study of newlyweds. In this extensive research, 130 couples have agreed to put their marriages not only under the microscope but in front of the camera as well. Dara and Oliver are among the fifty who were observed during an overnight stay at the Love Lab "apartment." My ability to predict divorce is based in part on my analysis of these couples and their interactions.

Dara and Oliver say their lives are hectic but happy. She attends nursing school at night, and he works long hours as a computer programmer. Like many couples, including those who remain content as well as those who eventually divorce, Dara and Oliver acknowledge that their marriage isn't perfect. But they say they love each other and are committed to staying together. They positively beam when they talk about the life they plan to build.

I ask them to spend fifteen minutes in the lab trying to resolve an ongoing disagreement they are having while I videotape them. As they speak, sensors attached to their bodies gauge their stress

levels based on various measurements of their circulatory system, such as how quickly their hearts beat.

I expect that their discussion will be at least somewhat negative. After all, I have asked them to quarrel. While some couples are capable of resolving disagreements with understanding words and smiles, more often there's tension. Dara and Oliver are no exception. Dara thinks Oliver doesn't do his share of the housekeeping, and he thinks she nags him too much, which makes him less motivated to do more.

After listening to them talk about this problem, I sadly predict to my colleagues that Dara and Oliver will see their marital happiness dwindle. And sure enough, four years later they report they are on the verge of divorce. Although they still live together, they are leading lonely lives. They have become like ghosts, haunting the marriage that once made them both feel so alive.

I predict their marriage will falter not because they argue—after all, I asked them to. Anger between husband and wife doesn't itself predict marital meltdown. Other couples in the newlywed study argue far more during the fifteen minutes of videotaping than do Dara and Oliver. Yet I predict that many of these couples will remain happily married—and they do. The clues to Dara and Oliver's future breakup are in the *way* they argue.

The First Sign: Harsh Startup

The most obvious indicator that this discussion (and this marriage) is not going to go well is the way it begins. Dara immediately becomes negative and accusatory. When Oliver broaches the subject of housework, she's ready to be sarcastic. "Or lack thereof," she says. Oliver tries to lighten things up by cracking a joke: "Or the book we were talking about writing: Men are pigs." Dara sits poker-faced. They talk a bit more, trying to devise a plan to make sure Oliver does his share, and then Dara says, "I mean, I'd like to see it resolved, but it doesn't seem like it is. I mean, I've tried making up lists, and that doesn't work. And I've tried letting you do it on your

own, and nothing got done for a month." Now she's blaming Oliver. In essence, she's saying the problem isn't the housekeeping, it's him.

When a discussion leads off this way—with criticism and/or sarcasm, a form of contempt—it has begun with a "harsh startup." Although Dara talks to Oliver in a very soft, quiet voice, there's a load of negative power in her words. After hearing the first minute or so of their conversation, it's no surprise to me that by the end Dara and Oliver haven't resolved their differences at all. The research shows that if your discussion begins with a harsh startup, it will inevitably end on a negative note, even if there are a lot of attempts to "make nice" in between. Statistics tell the story: 96 percent of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the *first three minutes* of the fifteen-minute interaction! A harsh startup simply dooms you to failure. So if you begin a discussion that way, you might as well pull the plug, take a breather, and start over.

The Second Sign: The Four Horsemen

Dara's harsh startup sounds the warning bell that she and Oliver may be having serious difficulty. Now, as their discussion unfolds, I continue to look out for particular types of negative interactions. Certain kinds of negativity, if allowed to run rampant, are so lethal to a relationship that I call them the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Usually these four horsemen clip-clop into the heart of a marriage in the following order: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Horseman 1: Criticism. You will always have some complaints about the person you live with. But there's a world of difference between a complaint and a criticism. A complaint only addresses the specific action at which your spouse failed. A criticism is more global—it adds on some negative words about your mate's character or personality. "I'm really angry that you didn't sweep the kitchen floor last night. We agreed that we'd take turns doing it" is a

complaint. "Why are you so forgetful? I hate having to always sweep the kitchen floor when it's your turn. You just don't care" is a criticism. A complaint focuses on a specific behavior, but a criticism ups the ante by throwing in blame and general character assassination. Here's a recipe: To turn any complaint into a criticism, just add my favorite line: "What is wrong with you?"

Usually a harsh startup comes in the guise of criticism. You can see how quickly complaint turns into criticism when Dara begins to talk. Listen again to what she says:

Dara: I mean, I'd like to see it resolved, but it doesn't seem like it is. *(Simple complaint)* I mean, I've tried making up lists and that doesn't work. And I've tried letting you do it on your own, and nothing got done for a month. *(Criticism. She's implying the problem is his fault. Even if it is, blaming him will only make it worse.)*

Here are some other examples that show the difference between complaint and criticism.

Complaint. There's no gas in the car. Why didn't you fill it up like you said you would?

Criticism. Why can't you ever remember anything? I told you a thousand times to fill up the tank, and you didn't.

Complaint. You should have told me earlier that you're too tired to make love. I'm really disappointed, and I feel embarrassed.

Criticism. Why are you always so selfish? It was really nasty of you to lead me on. You should have told me earlier that you were too tired to make love.

Complaint. You were supposed to check with me before inviting anyone over for dinner. I wanted to spend time alone with you tonight.

Criticism. Why do you keep putting your friends ahead of me? I always come last on your list. We were supposed to have dinner alone tonight.

If you hear echoes of yourself or your spouse in these criticisms, you have plenty of company. The first horseman is very common in relationships. So if you find that you and your spouse are critical of each other, don't assume you're headed for divorce court. The problem with criticism is that when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way for the other, far deadlier horsemen.

Horseman 2: Contempt. Dara doesn't stop at criticizing Oliver. Soon she's literally sneering. When he suggests that they keep a list of his chores on the refrigerator to help him remember, she says, "Do you think you work really well with lists?" Next, Oliver tells her that he needs fifteen minutes to relax when he gets home before starting to do chores. "So if I leave you alone for fifteen minutes, then you think you'll be motivated to jump up and do something?" she asks him.

"Maybe. We haven't tried it, have we?" Oliver asks.

Dara has an opportunity here to soften up, but instead she comes back with sarcasm. "I think you do a pretty good job of coming home and lying around or disappearing into the bathroom," she says. And then she adds challengingly, "So you think that's the cure-all, to give you fifteen minutes?"

This sarcasm and cynicism are types of contempt. So are name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humor. In whatever form, contempt—the worst of the four horsemen—is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust. It's virtually impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message you're disgusted with him or her. Inevitably, contempt leads to more conflict rather than to reconciliation.

Peter, the manager of a shoe store, was a master at contempt, at least when it came to his wife. Listen to what happens when he and Cynthia try to discuss their disparate views about spending money. He says, "Just look at the difference in our vehicles and our clothes. I think that says a lot for who we are and what we value. I mean, you tease me about washing my truck, and you go and pay to have somebody wash your car. We're paying through the nose for your

car, and you can't be bothered to wash it. I think that's outrageous. I think that's probably the most spoiled thing that you do." This is a textbook example of contempt. He's not merely pointing out that they spend their money differently. He is accusing his wife of a moral deficiency—of being spoiled.

Cynthia responds by telling him that it's physically difficult for her to wash her car herself. Peter dismisses this explanation and continues to take the high moral ground. "I take care of my truck because if you take care of it, it'll last longer. I don't come from the mentality of 'Ah, just go out and buy a new one' that you seem to."

Still hoping to get Peter on her side, Cynthia says, "If you could help me to wash my car, I'd really love that. I'd really appreciate it." But instead of grabbing this chance at reconciliation, Peter wants to do battle.

"How many times have you helped me wash my truck?" he counters.

Cynthia tries again to reconcile. "I will help you wash your truck if you will help me wash my car."

But Peter's goal is not to resolve this issue but to dress her down. So he says, "That's not my question. How many times have you helped me?"

"Never," says Cynthia.

"See?" says Peter. "That's where I think you have a little responsibility, too. It's like, you know, if your dad bought you a house, would you expect him to come over and paint it for you, too?"

"Well, will you always help me wash my car if I always help you wash your truck?"

"I'm not sure that I'd want ya to help me," Peter says, laughing.

"Well, will you always help me wash my car, then?" Cynthia asks.

"I will help you when I can. I won't give you a blanket guarantee for life. What are you gonna do, sue me?" asks Peter. And he laughs again.

Listening to this discussion, it becomes clear that Peter's main purpose is to demean his wife. His contempt comes in the guise of assuming the high moral ground, as when he says: "I think that says

a lot for who we are and what we value," or "I don't come from the mentality of 'just go out and buy a new one.'"

Couples who are contemptuous of each other are more likely to suffer from infectious illnesses (colds, flu, and so on) than other people.

Contempt is fueled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner. You're more likely to have such thoughts if your differences are not resolved. No doubt, the first time Peter and Cynthia argued about money, he wasn't so disrespectful. He probably offered a simple complaint like "I think you should wash your own car. It costs too much to always have someone else wash it." But as they kept disagreeing about this, his complaints turned to global criticisms, such as: "You always spend too much money." And when the conflict continued, he felt more and more disgusted and fed up with Cynthia, a change that affected what he said when they argued.

Belligerence, a close cousin to contempt, is just as deadly to a relationship. It is a form of aggressive anger because it contains a threat or provocation. When a wife complains that her husband doesn't come home from work in time for dinner, a belligerent response would be "Well, what are you going to do about it?" When Peter says to Cynthia, "What are you going to do, sue me?" he thinks he's making a joke, but he's really being belligerent.

Horseman 3: Defensiveness. It's no surprise, considering how nasty her husband is being, that Cynthia defends herself. She points out that she doesn't get her car washed as often as he thinks. She explains that it's more difficult physically for her to wash her car herself than it is for him to wash his truck.

Although it's understandable that Cynthia would defend herself, research shows that this approach rarely has the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner.

You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't *me,* it's *you.*" Defensiveness just escalates the conflict, which is why it's so deadly. When Cynthia tells Peter how hard it is for her to wash her car, he doesn't say, "Oh, now I understand." He ignores her excuse—he doesn't even acknowledge what she's said. He climbs farther up his high moral ground, telling her how well he takes care of his vehicle and implying that she's spoiled for not doing the same. Cynthia can't win—and neither can their marriage.

Criticism, Contempt, and Defensiveness don't always gallop into a home in strict order. They function more like a relay match—handing the baton off to each other over and over again, if the couple can't put a stop to it. You can see this happening as Oliver and Dara continue their discussion about cleaning their house. Although they seem to be seeking a solution, Dara becomes increasingly contemptuous—mocking Oliver in the guise of questioning him and tearing down every plan he devises. The more defensive he becomes, the more she attacks him. Her body language signals condescension. She speaks softly, her elbows resting on the table, her intertwined fingers cradling her chin. Like a law professor or a judge, she peppers him with questions just to see him squirm.

Dara: So you think that's the cure-all, to give you fifteen minutes? *(sneering)*

Oliver: No, I don't think that's the cure-all. I think, combined with writing up a list of weekly tasks that have to get done. Why not put it on a calendar? Hey, I'll see it right then and there.

Dara: Just like when I write stuff in your Day-Timer it gets done? *(mocking him; more contempt)*

Oliver: I don't always have a chance to look at my Day-Timer during the day. *(defensive)*

Dara: So you think you'll look at a calendar, then?

Oliver: Yeah. At any point in time, if I'm not up to speed, you should ask me about it. But when that happens now, it's not you asking, it's you telling me, "You haven't done this and you haven't done that." Instead say, "Is there any reason why you haven't done

this or that?" Like, I mean, when I stayed up and did your résumé that one night. Stuff like that happens all the time, and you just don't take that into account at all. *(defensive)*

Dara: And I don't just all of a sudden do things for you, either? *(defensive)*

Oliver: No, you do. . . . I think you need to relax a little bit.

Dara *(sarcastic)*: Hmm. Well, that sounds like we solved a lot.

Obviously, Dara and Oliver have resolved nothing, thanks to the prevalence of criticism, contempt, and defensiveness.

Horseman 4: Stonewalling. In marriages like Dara and Oliver's, where discussions begin with a harsh startup, where criticism and contempt lead to defensiveness, which leads to more contempt and more defensiveness, eventually one partner tunes out. This heralds the arrival of the fourth horseman.

Think of the husband who comes home from work, gets met with a barrage of criticism from his wife, and hides behind the newspaper. The less responsive he is, the more she yells. Eventually he gets up and leaves the room. Rather than confronting his wife, he disengages. By turning away from her, he is avoiding a fight, but he is also avoiding his marriage. He has become a stonewaller. Although both husbands and wives can be stonewallers, this behavior is far more common among men, for reasons we'll see later.

During a typical conversation between two people, the listener gives all kinds of cues to the speaker that he's paying attention. He may use eye contact, nod his head, say something like "Yeah" or "Uh-huh." But a stonewaller doesn't give you this sort of casual feedback. He tends to look away or down without uttering a sound. He sits like an impassive stone wall. The stonewaller acts as though he couldn't care less about what you're saying, if he even hears it.

Stonewalling usually arrives later in the course of a marriage than the other three horsemen. That's why it's less common among newlywed husbands such as Oliver than among couples who have been in a negative spiral for a while. It takes time for the negativity

created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable "out." That's the stance that Mack takes when he and his wife Rita argue about each other's behavior at parties. She says the problem is that he drinks too much. He thinks the bigger problem is her reaction: She embarrasses him by yelling at him in front of his friends. Here they are, already in the middle of an argument:

RITA: Now I've become the problem, again. I started off with the complaint, but now I am the problem. That always seems to happen.

MACK: Yeah, I do that, I know. *(Pause.)* But your tantrums and childishness are an embarrassment to me and my friends.

RITA: If you would control your drinking at parties, puleese . . .

MACK: *(Looks down, avoids eye contact, says nothing—he's stonewalling.)*

RITA: Because I think *(laughs)* for the most part, we get along pretty well, really *(laughs)*.

MACK: *(Continues to stonewall. Remains silent, makes no eye contact, head nods, facial movements, or vocalizations.)*

RITA: Don't you think?

MACK: *(No response.)*

RITA: Mack? Hello?

THE THIRD SIGN: FLOODING

It may seem to Rita that her complaints have no effect on Mack. But nothing could be further from the truth. Usually people stonewall as a protection against feeling *flooded*. Flooding means that your spouse's negativity—whether in the guise of criticism or contempt or even defensiveness—is so overwhelming, and so sudden, that it leaves you shell-shocked. You feel so defenseless against this sniper attack that you learn to do anything to avoid a replay. The more often you feel flooded by your spouse's criticism or contempt, the

more hypervigilant you are for cues that your spouse is about to "blow" again. All you can think about is protecting yourself from the turbulence your spouse's onslaught causes. And the way to do that is to disengage emotionally from the relationship. No wonder Mack and Rita are now divorced.

Another husband, Paul, was quite up front about why he stonewalls when his wife, Amy, gets negative. In the following discussion he articulates what all stonewallers are feeling.

AMY: When I get mad, that's when you should step in and try to make it better. But when you just stop talking, it means, 'I no longer care about how you feel.' That just makes me feel one inch tall. Like my opinion or feelings have absolutely no bearing on you. And that's not the way a marriage should be.

PAUL: What I'm saying is, if you wanna have a serious conversation, you're gonna do it without yelling and screaming all the time. You start saying things that are hurtful.

AMY: Well, when I'm hurt, mad, and I wanna hurt you, I start saying things. And that's when we should both stop. I should say, "I'm sorry." And you should say, "I know that you wanna talk about this. And I really should make an effort to talk instead of just ignoring you."

PAUL: I'll talk when—

AMY: It fits your purpose.

PAUL: No, when you're not yelling and screaming and jumping up and down stomping.

Amy kept telling Paul how it made her feel when he shut down. But she did not seem to hear him tell her *why* he shuts down: He can't handle her hostility. This couple later divorced.

A marriage's meltdown can be predicted, then, by habitual harsh startup and frequent flooding brought on by the relentless presence of the four horsemen during disagreements. Although each of these factors alone can predict a divorce, they usually coexist in an unhappy marriage.

The Fourth Sign: Body Language

Even if I could not hear the conversation between Mack the stonewaller and his wife, Rita, I would be able to predict their divorce simply by looking at his physiological readings. When we monitor couples for bodily changes during a tense discussion, we can see just how physically distressing flooding is. One of the most apparent of these physical reactions is that the heart speeds up—pounding away at more than 100 beats per minute—even as high as 165. (In contrast, a typical heart rate for a man who is about 30 is 76, and for a woman the same age, 82.) Hormonal changes occur, too, including the secretion of adrenaline, which kicks in the "fight or flight response." Blood pressure also mounts. These changes are so dramatic that if one partner is frequently flooded during marital discussions, it's easy to predict that they will divorce.

Recurring episodes of flooding lead to divorce for two reasons. First, they signal that at least one partner feels severe emotional distress when dealing with the other. Second, the *physical* sensations of feeling flooded—the increased heart rate, sweating, and so on—make it virtually impossible to have a productive, problem-solving discussion. When your body goes into overdrive during an argument, it is responding to a very primitive alarm system we inherited from our prehistoric ancestors. All those distressful reactions, like a pounding heart and sweating, occur because on a fundamental level your body perceives your current situation as dangerous. Even though we live in the age of in vitro conception, organ transplants, and gene mapping, from an evolutionary standpoint not much time has passed since we were cave dwellers. So the human body has not refined its fear reactions—it responds the same way, whether you're facing a saber-toothed tiger or a contemptuous spouse demanding to know why you can never remember to put the toilet seat back down.

When a pounding heart and all the other physical stress reactions happen in the midst of a discussion with your mate, the consequences are disastrous. Your ability to process information is reduced, meaning it's harder to pay attention to what your partner

is saying. Creative problem solving goes out the window. You're left with the most reflexive, least intellectually sophisticated responses in your repertoire: to fight (act critical, contemptuous, or defensive) or flee (stonewall). Any chance of resolving the issue is gone. Most likely, the discussion will just worsen the situation.

Men and Women Really Are Different

In 85 percent of marriages, the stonewaller is the husband. This is not because of some lack on the man's part. The reason lies in our evolutionary heritage. Anthropological evidence suggests that we evolved from hominids whose lives were circumscribed by very rigid gender roles, since these were advantageous to survival in a harsh environment. The females specialized in nurturing children while the males specialized in cooperative hunting.

As any nursing mother can tell you, the amount of milk you produce is affected by how relaxed you feel, which is related to the release of the hormone oxytocin in the brain. So natural selection would favor a female who could quickly soothe herself and calm down after feeling stressed. Her ability to remain composed could enhance her children's chances of survival by optimizing the amount of nutrition they received. But in the male natural selection would reward the opposite response. For these early cooperative hunters, maintaining vigilance was a key survival skill. So males whose adrenaline kicked in quite readily and who did not calm down so easily were more likely to survive and procreate.

To this day, the male cardiovascular system remains more reactive than the female and slower to recover from stress. For example, if a man and woman suddenly hear a very loud, brief sound, like a blowout, most likely his heart will beat faster than hers and stay accelerated for longer, according to research by Robert Levenson, Ph.D., and his student Loren Carter at the University of California at Berkeley. The same goes for their blood pressure—his will become more elevated and stay higher longer. Psychologist Dolf Zillman, Ph.D., at the University of Alabama has found that when male subjects

are deliberately treated rudely and then told to relax for twenty minutes, their blood pressure surges and stays elevated until they get to retaliate. But when women face the same treatment, they are able to calm down during those twenty minutes. (Interestingly, a woman's blood pressure tends to rise again if she is pressured into retaliating!) Since marital confrontation that activates vigilance takes a greater physical toll on the male, it's no surprise that men are more likely than women to attempt to avoid it.

It's a biological fact: Men are more easily overwhelmed by marital conflict than are their wives.

This gender difference in how physiologically reactive our bodies are also influences what men and women tend to think about when they experience marital stress. As part of some experiments, we ask couples to watch themselves arguing on tape and then tell us what they were thinking when our sensors detected they were flooded. Their answers suggest that men have a greater tendency to have negative thoughts that maintain their distress, while women are more likely to think soothing thoughts that help them calm down and be conciliatory. Men, generally, either think about how righteous and indignant they feel ("I'm going to get even," "I don't have to take this"), which tends to lead to contempt or belligerence. Or they think about themselves as an innocent victim of their wife's wrath or complaint ("Why is she always blaming me?"), which leads to defensiveness.

Obviously, these rules don't hold for every male and every female. But after twenty-five years of research, I have noted that the majority of couples do follow these gender differences in physiological and psychological reactions to stress. Because of these dissimilarities, most marriages (including healthy, happy ones) follow a comparable pattern of conflict in which the wife, who is constitutionally better able to handle the stress, brings up sensitive issues. The husband, who is not as able to cope with it, will attempt to

avoid getting into the subject. He may become defensive and stonewall. Or he may even become belligerent or contemptuous in an attempt to silence her.

Just because your marriage follows this pattern, it's not a given that a divorce is in the offing. In fact, you'll find examples of all four horsemen and even occasional flooding in stable marriages. But when the four horsemen take up *permanent* residence, when either partner begins to feel flooded routinely, the relationship is in serious trouble. Frequently feeling flooded leads almost inevitably to distancing yourself from your spouse. That in turn leads you to feel lonely. Without help, the couple will end up divorced or living in a dead marriage, in which they maintain separate, parallel lives in the same home. They may go through the motions of togetherness—attending their children's plays, hosting dinner parties, taking family vacations. But emotionally they no longer feel connected to each other. They have given up.

The Fifth Sign: Failed Repair Attempts

It takes time for the four horsemen and the flooding that comes in their wake to overrun a marriage. And yet divorce can so often be predicted by listening to a single conversation between newlyweds. How can this be? The answer is that by analyzing any disagreement a couple has, you get a good sense of the pattern they tend to follow. A crucial part of that pattern is whether their repair attempts succeed or fail. Repair attempts, as I described on page 22, are efforts the couple makes ("Let's take a break," "Wait, I need to calm down") to deescalate the tension during a touchy discussion—to put on the brakes so flooding is prevented.

Repair attempts save marriages not just because they decrease emotional tension between spouses, but because by lowering the stress level they also prevent your heart from racing and making you feel flooded. When the four horsemen rule a couple's communication, repair attempts often don't even get noticed. Espe-

cially when you're feeling flooded, you're not able to hear a verbal white flag.

In unhappy marriages a feedback loop develops between the four horsemen and the failure of repair attempts. The more contemptuous and defensive the couple is with each other, the more flooding occurs, and the harder it is to hear and respond to a repair. And since the repair is not heard, the contempt and defensiveness just get heightened, making flooding more pronounced, which makes it more difficult to hear the next repair attempt, until finally one partner withdraws.

That's why I can predict a divorce by hearing only one discussion between a husband and wife. The failure of repair attempts is an accurate marker for an unhappy future. The presence of the four horsemen alone predicts divorce with only an 82 percent accuracy. But when you add in the failure of repair attempts, the accuracy rate reaches into the 90s. This is because some couples who trot out the four horsemen when they argue are also successful at repairing the harm the horsemen cause. Usually in this situation—when the four horsemen are present but the couple's repair attempts are successful—the result is a stable, happy marriage. In fact, 84 percent of the newlyweds who were high on the four horsemen but repaired effectively were in stable, happy marriages six years later. But if there are no repair attempts—or if the attempts are not able to be heard—the marriage is in serious danger.

I can tell 96 percent of the time whether a marital discussion will resolve a conflict, after the first three minutes of that discussion.

In emotionally intelligent marriages I hear a wide range of successful repair attempts. Each person has his or her own approach. Olivia and Nathaniel stick out their tongues; other couples laugh or smile or say they're sorry. Even an irritated "Hey, stop yelling at me," or "You're getting off the topic" can defuse a tense situation. All such repair attempts keep a marriage stable because they prevent the four horsemen from moving in for good.

Whether a repair succeeds or fails has very little to do with how eloquent it is and everything to do with the state of the marriage. One happily married couple who taught me this lesson were Hal and Jodie. Because of the nature of his research, Hal, a chemist, would often find out at the last minute that he wouldn't be able to get home for dinner. Although Jodie knew Hal couldn't control his hours, the dinner situation frustrated her. When they discussed the problem in our lab, she pointed out to him that the kids always refused to eat dinner till he got home, so they were often having their dinner very late, which she didn't like. So Hal suggested that she give them a snack to tide them over. Incredulous, Jodie snapped at him: "What do you think I have been doing all along?"

Hal realized that he had screwed up. He had displayed a significant lack of awareness about what went on in his own home and, worse, had insulted his wife's intelligence. In an unhappy marriage this could easily be the grounds for some major league sniping. I waited to see what would happen next. Since all other evidence suggested they were happily married, I anticipated that Hal would use some very skillfully wrought repair attempt. But Hal just gave Jodie a really goofy smile. Jodie burst out laughing, and they went on with their discussion.

Hal's quick grin worked because their marriage was working. But when Oliver tried to soften up Dara by chuckling during their conversation about housekeeping, he got nowhere. In marriages in which the four horsemen have moved in for good, even the most articulate, sensitive, well-targeted repair attempt is likely to fail abysmally.

Ironically, we see more repair attempts between troubled couples than between those whose marriages are going smoothly. The more repair attempts fail, the more these couples keep trying. It can be poignant to hear one member of a couple offer up one repair attempt after another, all to no avail. What makes the difference? What predicts that repair attempts will work? Later we'll see that it is the quality of the friendship between husband and wife and, as I described in Chapter One, "positive sentiment override."

THE SIXTH SIGN: BAD MEMORIES

When a relationship gets subsumed in negativity, it's not only the couple's present and future life together that are put at risk. Their past is in danger, too. When I interview couples, I usually ask about the history of their marriage. I have found over and over that couples who are deeply entrenched in a negative view of their spouse and their marriage often rewrite their past. When I ask them about their early courtship, their wedding, their first year together, I can predict their chances of divorce, even if I'm not privy to their current feelings.

Most couples enter marriage with high hopes and great expectations. In a happy marriage couples tend to look back on their early days fondly. Even if the wedding didn't go off perfectly, they tend to remember the highlights rather than the low points. The same goes for each other. They remember how positive they felt early on, how excited they were when they met, and how much admiration they had for each other. When they talk about the tough times they've had, they glorify the struggles they've been through, drawing strength from the adversity they weathered together.

But when a marriage is not going well, history gets rewritten—for the worse. Now she recalls that he was thirty minutes late getting to the ceremony. Or he focuses on all that time she spent talking to his best man at the rehearsal dinner—or "flirting" with his friend, as it seems to him now. Another sad sign is when you find the past difficult to remember—it has become so unimportant or painful that you've let it fade away.

Peter and Cynthia didn't always spend their days arguing about car washing and other money matters. No doubt if you looked at their photo album, you would find plenty of happy pictures from their early days together. But those pictures have long faded from their minds. When asked to describe the early days, they do a good job of telling the facts of their courtship and marriage, but nothing more. Cynthia recounts that they met at a record store where she was the cashier. She got his name and number from his charge card

receipt and called him up to see if he liked the CDs he had bought. Their first date followed.

Cynthia says that she was attracted to Peter at first because he was going to college and was interesting to talk to and nice-looking. "I think it was the fact that I had a charge card," Peter slips in, a snide reference to their current fights over money. He himself seems to have a hard time remembering what attracted him to her when they first met. He says, "Uh . . . *(long pause)* I honestly don't know. I never tried to pin it down to one thing. I think for me that would be pretty dangerous."

When they're asked about the kinds of activities they enjoyed back then, they have a hard time remembering. "Didn't we go on picnics or something?" Cynthia asks him, and he shrugs. The same blank feeling is there when they discuss their decision to marry. "I thought it would solidify the relationship. It seemed like a logical progression—that's basically the main reason," says Peter. He recalls that he proposed to her at a restaurant by tying the ring to a white ribbon wrapped around a bunch of white roses. That sounds promising, until he adds with a sad chuckle: "I'll never forget this. She saw the ring. She started shaking a little bit, and she looked and she asked me, 'I suppose you want an answer?' That's kind of not the reaction I was looking for." He turns to his wife. "You weren't smiling or laughing or anything when you said it—you were just deadpan, like, 'You idiot.'"

"Oh nooo," Cynthia says limply.

The picture doesn't get any better. Peter had pneumonia and a temperature of 103 at their wedding. His main memory, other than feeling sick, was being in the limo afterward with Cynthia and his best man. His friend turned on the stereo, and the Mötley Crüe song "Same Old Ball and Chain" came blasting out. Cynthia remembers feeling hurt because many guests left right after dinner. Peter recalls that everyone kept banging on their glasses with spoons to make him and Cynthia kiss. "I was getting really annoyed," he recalls. To sum up their wedding day, he says, "It was your basic tragedy." Cynthia smiles wanly in agreement.

The reason Peter and Cynthia have such distorted memories is that the negativity between them has become so intense, it's as if it's cast in stone. When the four horsemen overrun a home, impairing the communication, the negativity mushrooms to such a degree that everything a spouse does—or ever did—is recast in a negative light.

In a happy marriage, if the husband promises to pick up the wife's dry cleaning but forgets, she is likely to think, "Oh well, he's been under a lot of stress lately and needs more sleep." She considers his lapse to be fleeting and caused by a specific situation. In an unhappy marriage the same circumstance is likely to lead to a thought like "He's just always so inconsiderate and selfish." By the same token, in a happy marriage a loving gesture, like a wife greeting her husband with a passionate kiss at the end of the workday, is seen as a sign that the spouse is loving and considerate. But in an unhappy marriage the same action will lead the husband to think, "What does she want out of me?"

This distorted perception explains why one husband we studied, Mitch, saw ulterior motives whenever his wife, Leslie, bought him a gift, hugged him, or even called him on the phone. Over time he had rewritten his view of their marriage, creating a very negative script. Whenever a conflict arose, he was all set to feel self-righteous and indignant. His negative thoughts about Leslie helped maintain his distress. He'd get flooded as soon as they had a confrontation. Negative expectations of her and their relationship became the norm. Eventually they divorced.

The End Draws Near

When a marriage gets to the point where the couple have rewritten their history, when their minds and bodies make it virtually impossible to communicate and repair their current problems, it is almost bound to fail. They find themselves constantly on red alert. Because they always expect to do combat, the marriage becomes a torment. The understandable result: They withdraw from the relationship.

Sometimes a couple at this end stage of marriage will come for counseling. On the surface it may seem like nothing much is wrong. They don't argue or act contemptuous or stonewall. They don't do much of anything. They talk calmly and distantly about their relationship and their conflicts. An inexperienced therapist could easily assume that their problems don't run very deep. But actually one or both of them has already disengaged emotionally from the marriage.

Some people leave a marriage literally, by divorcing. Others do so by leading parallel lives together. Whichever the route, there are four final stages that signal the death knell of a relationship.

1. You see your marital problems as severe.
2. Talking things over seems useless. You try to solve problems on your own.
3. You start leading parallel lives.
4. Loneliness sets in.

When a couple gets to the last stage, one or both partners may have an affair. But an affair is usually a *symptom* of a dying marriage, not the cause. The end of that marriage could have been predicted long before either spouse strayed. Too often, couples begin to seek help for their marriage after they've already hit troubled waters. The warning signs were almost always there early on if they had known what to look for. You can see the seeds of trouble in (1) what couples actually say to each other (the prevalence of harsh startup, the four horsemen, and the unwillingness to accept influence), (2) the failure of their repair attempts, (3) physiological reactions (flooding), or (4) pervasive negative thoughts about their marriage. *Any* of these signs suggests that emotional separation, and in most cases divorce, may only be a matter of time.

But It's Not Over Till It's Over

As bleak as this sounds, I am convinced that far more marriages could be saved than currently are. Even a marriage that is about to

hit bottom can be revived with the right kind of help. Sadly, most marriages at this stage get the *wrong* kind. Well-meaning therapists will deluge the couple with advice about negotiating their differences and improving their communication. At one time I would have done the same. At first, when I figured out how to predict divorce, I thought I had found the key to saving marriages. All that was necessary, I presumed, was to teach people how to argue without being overridden by the four horsemen and without getting flooded. Then their repair attempts would succeed, and they could work out their differences.

But like so many experts before me, I was wrong. I was not able to crack the code to saving marriages until I started to analyze what went *right* in happy marriages. After intensely studying happily married couples for as long as sixteen years, I now know that the key to reviving or divorce-proofing a relationship is not in how you handle disagreements but in how you are with each other when you're not fighting. So although my Seven Principles will also guide you in coping with conflict, the foundation of my approach is to strengthen the friendship that is at the heart of any marriage.