

# Rules of Engagement: For Couples Conflicts

## *Rules of Engagement: A Therapist-Endorsed Guide for Couples in Conflict*

Navigating conflict with empathy and maturity doesn't come naturally to most couples—and that's okay.

These guiding principles are best strengthened with a therapist who can facilitate safe dialogue, offer tools, and hold space for vulnerability.

As a couples therapist, I often work with partners to put these principles into practice in real-time.

---

### SECTION 1: GUIDELINES FOR CONFLICT (WITH A THERAPEUTIC LENS)

#### 1. No Personal Attacks

**Rule:** Never target your partner's character. Focus on the issue, not the identity.

*In therapy, couples learn to separate the problem from the person—a transformative shift.*

#### 2. Time-Outs Are Allowed

**Rule:** Either partner may pause when tensions rise. Take space to regroup, not withdraw.

*A therapist can help couples co-create their own de-escalation rituals.*

#### 3. Practice Active Listening

**Rule:** Listen to understand, not rebut. Reflect what you hear before you speak.

*Therapy offers a structured space to practice deep, attuned listening with a guide.*

#### 4. Use "I" Statements

**Rule:** Speak from your experience. "I feel..." is disarming; "You never..." invites defense.

*In counselling, we explore how "I" language builds bridges, not walls.*

#### 5. Avoid Digging Up the Past

**Rule:** Stay in the now. Resist weaponizing old wounds.

*A therapist helps partners distinguish patterns from petty scorekeeping.*

#### 6. Set Boundaries for Conflict

**Rule:** Define what's off-limits during conflict. Create a code of respect.

*Counselling is where many couples first name their shared ground rules.*

#### 7. Use Collaborative Language

**Rule:** Replace blame with teamwork. Say "we" more often than "you."

*With therapeutic support, couples shift from adversaries to allies.*

#### 8. Avoid Generalisations

**Rule:** Stay specific. "You always" is rarely true—and usually harmful.

*Therapy teaches couples how precision fosters empathy.*

#### 9. Define a Resolution Timeframe

**Rule:** Don't let issues fester. Set a time to return and resolve.

*A therapist can keep track of unresolved threads and bring couples back gently.*

## **10. Share Feelings, Not Just Thoughts**

**Rule:** Let emotion have a voice. Facts alone won't move hearts.

*In therapy, we practice emotional literacy—a cornerstone of intimacy.*

## **11. No Silent Treatment**

**Rule:** Never punish with silence. Communicate readiness, not withdrawal.

*In counselling, we examine the difference between healthy space and toxic disconnection.*

## **12. Take Responsibility**

**Rule:** Own your part. Growth starts with humility.

*Therapy invites reflection, not self-blame—just honest ownership.*

## **13. Use Humour Wisely**

**Rule:** When well-timed, kindness-laced humour can soften tension. Avoid biting sarcasm.

*Therapy helps couples find lightness without minimizing pain.*

## **14. Seek Compromise**

**Rule:** Let go of being "right." Find middle ground.

*With a therapist's help, couples often discover that flexibility is love in motion.*

## **15. Reassure and Appreciate**

**Rule:** Even mid-conflict, express affection and gratitude.

*Counselling reinforces rituals of connection that anchor you through storms.*

---

## **SECTION 2: APOLOGY AS ART (AND THE THERAPIST'S ROLE)**

Conflict without repair breeds resentment. As your therapist, I help you turn apology from a reactive gesture into a restorative practice.

### **1. Apologise Sincerely**

**Rule:** Acknowledge the harm without excuse.

*In therapy, we slow down enough to find the words that ring true.*

### **2. Avoid Conditional Apologies**

**Rule:** Drop the "if" and "but." Say "I'm sorry I hurt you." Full stop.

*I help couples identify and replace subtle blame with honest ownership.*

### **3. Learn From Mistakes**

**Rule:** Apologise with a vow to grow.

*Therapy supports behavioural change so your words are backed by action.*

### **4. Time It Right**

**Rule:** Apologise when your partner can receive it.

*Together we learn how to read each other's emotional climate.*

### **5. Make Layered Apologies**

**Rule:** Address every layer of the hurt, not just the surface.

*Therapy offers the time and tools to unpack these layers gently.*

### **6. Be Ready to Forgive**

**Rule:** Forgive at your own pace—but keep the heart open.

*In counselling, we explore how to forgive without rushing or pretending.*

## **7. Follow Up With Action**

**Rule:** Let your change speak louder than your sorry.

*We craft accountability plans in-session that support lasting repair.*

## **8. Use "I'm Sorry" Meaningfully**

**Rule:** Say it when you mean it—not just to end discomfort.

*Therapy helps couples stay in hard conversations long enough to make them healing.*

## **9. Reflect Before Speaking**

**Rule:** Understand the hurt you caused before you apologise for it.

*As your therapist, I hold the space where deep reflection becomes possible.*

## **10. Apologise Face-to-Face**

**Rule:** If at all possible, apologise in person. Presence matters.

*In-session apologies can be powerful and deeply healing.*

## **11. Allow Time for Healing**

**Rule:** Let the apology land, settle, and take root.

*In therapy, we honour the slow work of trust repair.*

---

## **Final Thought**

These aren't just rules—they're relationship muscles.

You may know what to do, but doing it under stress takes practice, guidance, and compassion.

That's where I come in as your trusted couples therapist.

As your couples therapist, I help you turn intention into action, and arguments into helpful growth.

With support, your relationship can become a place where rupture leads to repair, and conflict becomes a pathway to closeness.

# BONUS: The Four Horsemen of Relationship Apocalypse

## THE FOUR HORSEMEN AND HOW TO STOP THEM WITH THEIR ANTIDOTES

### CRITICISM

Verbally attacking personality or character.



### GENTLE START UP

Talk about your feelings using "I" statements and express a positive need.



### CONTEMPT

Attacking sense of self with an intent to insult or abuse.



### BUILD CULTURE OF APPRECIATION

Remind yourself of your partner's positive qualities and find gratitude for positive actions.



### DEFENSIVENESS

Victimizing yourself to ward off a perceived attack and reverse the blame.



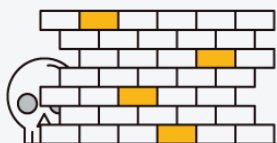
### TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Accept your partner's perspective and offer an apology for any wrongdoing.



### STONEWALLING

Withdrawing to avoid conflict and convey disapproval, distance, and separation.



### PHYSIOLOGICAL SELF-SOOTHING

Take a break and spend that time doing something soothing and distracting.



The Gottman Institute

\*Content for Four Horsemen drawn from The Gottman Institute

# The Four Horsemen of Relationship Ruin — And How Couples Counselling Can Help

The Four Horsemen—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling—don't thunder into relationships dramatically. They show up quietly, in tired tones, disappointed glances, unspoken resentments. Left unaddressed, they predict emotional disrepair and disconnection. But here's the hope: every horseman has an antidote. And couples counselling helps you learn to apply these antidotes with compassion, skill, and courage.

---

## 1. Criticism

Criticism masquerades as feedback, but it wounds the person instead of addressing the problem.

- *Criticism*: "You never think about anyone but yourself. You're selfish."
- *Complaint*: "I felt worried when you didn't call. I thought we agreed we would check in."

Criticism erodes trust and paves the way for deeper rifts. It's not the disagreement itself that causes the damage, but the way we speak our hurt.

### *Antidote: Gentle Start-Up*

In therapy, couples learn to start conversations with grace and vulnerability—how to say what they feel and what they need without sounding accusatory.

- *Example*: "I feel left out tonight. I need some time to talk about my day."

With the support of a therapist, partners can practice this shift from attack to invitation.

---

## 2. Contempt

Contempt isn't just disagreement; it's disdain. It comes through mockery, sarcasm, and superiority.

- *Contempt*: "Oh please, you're exhausted? I do everything around here. You're pathetic."

It corrodes intimacy and respect. Research shows it's the single strongest predictor of relationship breakdown.

### *Antidote: Appreciation and Respect*

Counselling helps couples rebuild a culture of appreciation—to notice the good, to name it, and to nurture it.

- *Example*: "I know you've had a lot on your plate lately. Would you mind handling the dishes tonight? I'd really appreciate it."

Therapists help partners rediscover the language of kindness and the emotional savings account of gratitude.

---

## 3. Defensiveness

Defensiveness sounds like a shield, but it becomes a sword. It pushes blame away instead of letting understanding in.

- *Defensiveness*: "I was too busy. Why didn't you just do it yourself?"

It stops growth in its tracks.

### *Antidote: Take Responsibility*

Through counselling, partners learn how to own their piece of the puzzle without taking on more than they should.

- *Example*: "You're right. I forgot to call. I should've asked you to help earlier. That's on me."

A therapist provides the structure and safety to explore responsibility with maturity, not shame.

---

#### 4. Stonewalling

Stonewalling is what we do when our nervous system taps out. It looks like silence, withdrawal, a shutting down.

- *Stonewalling sounds like:* Nothing. Just blank stares, cold shoulders, or walking away.

It signals overwhelm, not disinterest.

*Antidote: Self-Soothing and Time-Outs*

In therapy, couples learn how to recognise flooding and create emotional pause buttons that support re-engagement.

- *Example:* "I'm too upset to talk right now. Can we take 20 minutes and come back to this?"

Therapists teach techniques to self-regulate, pause wisely, and return to dialogue with clarity and calm.

---

#### Final Word: Where Relationship Counselling Comes In

All couples encounter conflict.

The question isn't "Will we fight?" but "How will we repair?"

Couples counselling doesn't make conflict disappear—  
it teaches you how to navigate it without losing one another along the way.

It provides tools. It offers a mirror.

It slows the pace so you can reflect, not react.

Together, we build fluency in emotional language, courage in vulnerability, and strength in repair.

Your relationship doesn't need to be perfect to be beautiful.

But it does need tending.

And it's never too early—or too late—to get help keeping the Four Horsemen at bay.