

*Special Report: TRIGGERS*

**How to Identify and Handle Behaviors that Cause and Exacerbate Bullying and Abrasiveness**

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As a research sociologist as well as a conflict consultant, I am always searching for new ways to understand workplace conflicts so that I can empower my clients and readers to reduce conflict and get on with the important work of business and life.

Here is a gem of research that has helped hundreds of my clients and that is sure to help you too. Dr. John Gottman is sociologist and researcher at the University of Washington, who has been studying communication for over two decades and has identified four behaviors that will lead to trouble.

With a sense of humor, Gottman labeled his findings “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” Imagine a flash of lightning, a horse rears and panics, he bolts, and on instinct, the other horses start to stampede. That is what happens in communications that are quickly becoming arguments. Lightning strikes - you flinch, you run, wild actions and reactions happen, and before you know it you are in the midst of a stampede. Dust is flying and you are in a panic. You can’t see, hear, or think. You just know you have to keep moving with the pack. You start reacting and saying things or doing things you will later regret.

**Here are the four TRIGGERING Behaviors that cause the most trouble:**

1. **Criticism:** Attacking someone’s personality, character, decisions or ideas, usually with the intent of making someone right and someone wrong.

**Examples:**

- Generalizations: “you always...” “you never...” “you’re the type of person who ...”
- Accusations: “why are you so ...?” “How could you...?” “What’s the matter with you?”

2. **Contempt:** Attacking someone’s sense of self with the intention to insult or psychologically abuse him or her.

**Examples:**

- Insults and name calling: “bitch, bastard, wimp, fat, stupid, ugly, slob, lazy...”
- Hostile humor, sarcasm or mockery

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- Body language & tone of voice: sneering, rolling your eyes, curling your upper lip
- Telling others the person is incompetent, aggravating, or impeding your progress

**3. Defensiveness:** Seeing self as the victim, warding off a perceived attack.

**Examples:**

- Making excuses (e.g., external circumstances beyond your control forced you to act in a certain way) “It’s not my fault...”, “I didn’t...”
- Cross-complaining: meeting your partner’s complaint, or criticism with a complaint of your own, ignoring what someone said
- Disagreeing and then cross-complaining “That’s not true, you’re the one who ...”
- Yes-butting: start off agreeing but end up disagreeing
- Repeating yourself without paying attention to what the other person is saying
- Whining. For example: “It’s not fair.”
- Blaming history: “This is the way I am. I’ve always been this way.”
- Blaming company culture: “This is how it works here. I’m just doing what everyone else does. Why am I being singled out?”
- Blaming confusion: “I don’t understand what happened. The people who are complaining said they liked me, they’ve never told me there was any problem. How was I supposed to know my actions were offensive? Why now?”

**4. Stonewalling:** Withdrawing from the relationship as a way to avoid conflict. People may think they are trying to be neutral, but stonewalling implies disapproval, icy distance, separation, disconnection, and/or smugness.

**Examples:**

- Stony silence
- Monosyllabic mutterings
- Changing the subject
- Leaving the room
- Presenting conclusions without discussion
- Refusing to discuss an issue anytime or anyplace
- Claiming that you’re the boss or in charge so you can do as you wish

**Who uses these Triggering Behaviors?**

The truth is we all use these behaviors, and even when we learn this model we can slip into these behaviors. For example, this is especially true when someone is using judgment and contempt and we respond with

defensiveness, judgment or stonewalling. Even when we are aware, things like judgment and defensiveness are part of our daily behaviors. If you bring these behaviors into a difficult conversation, I can guarantee you that things will not go well.

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Here are more examples of Triggering Behaviors that incorporate the Criticism, Contempt, Judgment and Defensiveness behaviors Gottman identified.

- Assuming you are right and refusing to listen to alternative explanations
- Drawing conclusions based on your own point of view without checking your facts and assumptions
- Withholding love and support until you get your way
- Gossiping
- Colluding with others to hurt someone else
- Forcing others to take sides and threatening them to force them to join your side
- Pretending to be “neutral” when others are in conflict but actually taking a side
- Spying on others and then revealing information to others

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Here are some TRIGGER phrases:

- What’s the matter with you?
- Who do you think you are?
- Why did you do that?
- Where do you come off doing/saying that?
- I don’t know who you think you are but...
- You are incapable of...
- You never...
- You always...
- You intended to... but you failed to do...

#### **“I know it when I see it”.**

With a little self-awareness you will see TRIGGERS everywhere. These are behaviors that move a plot forward in a movie, that cause hate-crimes, divorces, unhappy children, and road-rage. They are so common that we are truly unaware.

#### **What can you do?**

1. **Don’t React** As the recipient of triggering behaviors you have the choice to participate or wait out the storm. If you feel judged, you can choose to NOT defend yourself. Wait it out. Ask questions about the judgment. Ask, “What if that assumption is not quite correct?” “What if there is another explanation?”

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2. **Identify** triggering behaviors in TV programs and in movies. Listen to the news and you will hear how reporters and interviewers use contempt to make the other person “less than...”.
3. **Recognize** your own triggering behaviors and substitute them with straightforward requests.
4. **Take responsibility** for your own triggering behaviors and words.
5. **Replace** your critical, contemptuous or defensive thoughts with non-judgmental clear communication.
6. **Feel** when you are experiencing triggering behaviors so that you can control your rising emotions and develop new ways of responding.
7. **Consciously avoid** joining the stampede triggered by these behaviors and words.
8. **Acknowledge** and express appreciation for any communication that does not have Horsemen.
9. **Ask** for suggestions on ways to improve your own communication.
10. **Replace** thoughts of righteous indignation or innocent victimization with thoughts of appreciation and responsibility. This is soothing and validating.
11. **Practice** respect and appreciation.
12. **Be patient.** You and your counterpart are developing new patterns of behavior. Don't expect everything to be “fixed” instantly.
13. **Laugh.** Laughter is a critical element for all healthy relationships. Bring humor into your life.
14. **Celebrate.** Do something special to recognize each other's achievements, or just to mark quality time together.
15. **Forgive.** Life is short, and nobody is perfect. Don't put your partner in a “relationship stable” just because he or she made a mistake.
16. **Run free.** Let yourself enjoy the freedom of grazing without fear of stampedes by learning to live life without contempt, criticism, defensiveness and stonewalling.
17. **Complain rather than criticize.** Here's a criticism: “We had a deadline and you missed it. You always miss them. I don't know what's the matter with you? Why can't you keep to the deadlines? Are you daft? Are you too busy playing computer games?” This is entirely different than a complaint:

Here's a complaint: “You missed the deadline.” And then follow with a solution: “It's imperative that we meet the deadlines we set for our customers. When we miss the deadline, we damage our credibility. There are no legitimate excuses for missed deadlines. What will it take for us to meet our upcoming deadlines?”

In sum: if you understand these four TRIGGERS, you can learn to communicate without using them and you will be able to control yourself and avoid responding to any TRIGGERS others use.