

## Breaking out of Unhealthy Marital Interactions<sup>1</sup>

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For couples today, there's an abundance of information on how to sustain healthy, happy marital relationships. From how-to books to expert advice given in magazines, on television, radio and the Internet, couples are bombarded with strategies, tips, and techniques focused on how to improve their relationships. What many couples fail to realize is that these positive practices won't work without addressing negative patterns and destructive behaviors in their relationship.

According to marriage and relationship researcher Dr. John Gottman, there are four negative patterns of interaction that are major destroyers of marital relationships. They are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.

Couples should avoid criticism or using hurtful or judgmental comments aimed at their partner's character or personality. More complex is contempt, or an attempt to psychologically abuse a partner through disrespectful statements and actions. Contempt can be both verbal and non-verbal, such as sarcasm or mockery or simply rolling your eyes in disgust.

Contempt can often lead to defensiveness. Individuals often have a natural defensive reaction to criticism and contempt. However, couples can be defensive even when criticism is constructive and may be a response to previous, current, or future attacks. Finally, partners may stonewall, or put a physical or psychological wall around themselves, to avoid conflict.

1. This document is FAR3041, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Broadcast as program 528. Published on EDIS March 2012. In the interest of time and/or clarity, the broadcast version of this script may have been modified. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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Unfortunately continual avoidance can lead to even greater conflict between couples. It's important to identify and break these negative cycles of behavior before they destroy your marriage.

Listening, learning and living together, it's the science of life. "Family Album" is a co-production of University of Florida IFAS Extension, the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, and of WUFT-FM. If you'd like to learn more, please visit our website at <http://familyalbumradio.org>.

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## References

Baugh, Eboni J. (2006) "Un-Healthy Marital Interactions: What Not To Do and What Can Be Done." EDIS document FCS2247, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Retrieved September 25, 2006 online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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