

Stonewalling, from 'The 7 Principles...' (extract)

- Gottman and Silver, (2015)

Summary

- **96%** of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the *first 3 minutes*, so starting sensitively is key, and taking time-outs to calm down is a mature strategy for making progress;
- Generally people '**stonewall**', or seem to shut down and go silent, not because they don't care, but because they are '**flooded**' - *it's a protection against feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed*
- 'Flooding' is physically distressing, shown by raised **heartrate**, secretion of the **stress hormones** adrenaline and cortisol, kicking-in a '**fight of flight**' response'; and **blood pressure** also mounts.

In marriages where discussions begin with a harsh start-up (the first 3 minutes) where **criticism** and **contempt** lead to **defensiveness** and vice versa, eventually one partner tunes out.

Think of the husband who comes home from work, gets met with a barrage of criticism from his stay-at-home wife, and responds by turning on the TV. 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 **stonewall**, research indicates that this behaviour is far more common among men in all kinds of marriages.

During a typical conversation between two people, the listener gives plenty of cues to the speaker that he's paying attention. He may use eye contact, nod his head, and say something like "Yeah" or "Uh-huh." But a **stonewaller** doesn't give this sort of casual feedback. He tends to look away or down without uttering a sound. He sits like an impassive stone wall.

Stonewalling usually arrives later in the course of a marriage... it takes time for the negativity created by **criticism**, **contempt** and **defensiveness** to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable "out".

In stonewalling it may seem that the 'stonewaller' couldn't care less about what the other person is saying, but nothing could be further from the truth. Usually people stonewall as [a protection against feeling psychologically and physically overwhelmed](#), a sensation we call flooding. It occurs when your spouse's negativity is so intense and 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 negative emotional stance (or what you interpret as your spouse's criticism or contempt!) the more hypervigilant you are for cues that your spouse is about to "blow" again. The stonewaller interprets the spouse as hostile, and shuts down as a self-protective response to perceived threat.

A marriage's meltdown can be predicted, then, by habitual harsh start-up and frequent flooding, brought on by the relentless presence of the four horseman (criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling) during disagreements.

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 make it virtually impossible to have a productive, problem solving conversation. 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... 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 and your sense of humour go 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."

Think physiologically:

- In **85%** of heterosexual marriages, the stonewaller is the husband.
- This is not because of some lack on the man's part - the reason lies in our evolutionary biology - that in our evolutionary past it benefitted women to be less wired to fight to support nurturing children, and for men to be wired for vigilance, to be faster to fight to hunt, protect and survive.
- *It's a biological fact: men are more easily overwhelmed by marital conflict than are their wives*