Contempt is indifference or disdain for the hurt or hardship of others, due to a perception of lower moral standing, character defects, mental instability, inferiority, or general unworthiness. The experience of contempt is powered by adrenaline, which makes us feel temporarily more confident and self-righteous but at the same time, less humane. To the extent that it violates deeper values, contempt makes us vulnerable to unconscious guilt, shame, and anxiety.

Although aimed at others, it’s filled with hidden self-anger, if not self-contempt. It’s impossible to like yourself as much as you deserve while you feel contempt.

The adrenaline of contempt often masks depression by temporarily increasing energy. The trouble is, you have stay contemptuous most of the time to avoid the crash back to depressed mood. Contempt almost always alternates with bouts of worry and depression.

In addition to psychological harm, contempt lowers the efficiency of the immune system and often causes:

- Minor physical ailments, coughs, colds, flus, aches, pains
- Severe physical symptoms
- Chronic exhaustion.

Because it creates a dysphoric consciousness, substance abuse is common in those who suffer from contempt.

Contempt in Intimate Relationships

Contempt is a potent predictor of divorce because it makes an enemy of the beloved. Negotiations are not about behavior so much as the character or personality of the partner.

These are ways that researchers and clinicians measure the degree of contempt in a relationship:

- Refusal to consider any mitigating circumstances about the partner’s behavior
- Refusal to try to see the partner’s perspective
- Negative labeling (lazy, scatterbrained, a nag, a jerk)
- Attributing malevolent intent – he or she is out to get me
- Diagnosing the partner (with personality or emotional disorder)
- Inability to tolerate disagreement
Non-verbal indicators such as tone of voice, facial grimace, gritting of teeth, rolling eyes, sighing when the other speaks, dismissive tone, mocking the other’s speech, gestures, or body posture

The number of negative expressions about the partner far outweigh the positive.

**Failure of Compassion and Kindness Breeds Contempt**

You cannot be happy in love without being compassionate and kind. When we fail at compassion and kindness in love relationships, we automatically experience guilt, shame, and anxiety, usually masked by resentment or anger. Relationships cannot survive without compassion, and they cannot flourish without kindness.

Compassion is sympathy for the hurt or distress of another. At heart it’s simple appreciation of the basic human frailty we all share. That’s why, when you feel compassion, you also feel more humane and less isolated.

Kindness is concern for the wellbeing and happiness of partners, with motivation to help them be well and happy. When you act kindly, you also feel more humane and less isolated.

**What Compassion, Kindness, and Contempt Have In Common**

Compassion, kindness, and contempt are contagious. If you’re around a compassionate and kind person, you’re likely to be kinder and more compassionate. If you’re around a contemptuous person, you’re likely to become more contemptuous.

Compassion, kindness, and contempt are influenced by projection. If you project onto people that they’re compassionate and kind, they’re likely to become more thoughtful of others. If you project contemptuous characterizations, such as, “loser, abuser, selfish, lazy, narcissistic, irrational, devious, etc.,” they’re likely to conform to the projection. (The general rule for social interaction is: Project qualities that you want more of, rather than those you don’t want at all. You’re likely to see an increase in whatever you project.)

**Outgrowing Contempt**

Contempt is a way of avoiding vulnerability. Once it's embedded in a defense system, change in the partner’s behavior will not alter it. Even if your partner does everything you want, you’re likely to resent that it didn’t happen sooner:

“All those years I wasted with you being a selfish jerk and now you decide to be nice!”

As long as contempt persists, any positive behavior change by one partner will seem like too little, too late. It’s impossible to “let go” of contempt, once it’s burrowed into your defense system. Instead, it must be crowded out with compassion and kindness.

**Relationship Pre and Post Test**
Use the two tables below as a pre-test to gauge contempt in your relationship.

Write “yes” next to the things that you and your partner tend to do when you disagree or complain about each other’s behavior.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listen attentively</th>
<th>Your Partner</th>
<th>You</th>
<th>How your partner would describe you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make a sincere effort to understand and sympathize</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflect the speaker’s meaning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintain an attitude or respect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Try to find some truth to what the other said</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grimace, grit teeth, roll eyes, sigh, seek distraction</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Circle the positive-to-negative ratio of your interactions with your partner on a typical day? Specifically, how many positive interactions are there for each one that is negative? Circle your answer.

9:1 (positives for each negative)  
8:1  
7:1  
6:1  
5:1  
4:1  
3:1  
2:1  
1:1  
1: x (at least two negatives for each positive)

(Note: The threshold for a happy relationships is above 5.1 - five positives for each negative interaction, provided that the negative interactions are not abusive.)

**The Great Detoxifier of Contempt**

Loving Kindness is an ancient form of meditation, in which you wish happiness, health, well-being, harmony, love, appreciation, safety, and protection to others in general and to the object of contempt in particular. Direct those thoughts to the person you hold in contempt. It doesn’t have to be formal medication. Just take a minute several times throughout the day to think loving kindness thoughts about the object of our contempt. A few seconds of loving kindness meditation each time you read a contemptuous post should do the trick. But here you must be careful that it is genuinely kind and not looking down on the contemptuous author.
After you practice Loving Kindness thoughts/meditation about six times per day for six weeks, fill out the same tables as a post-test to gauge improvement.

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Circle the positive-to-negative ratio of your interactions with your partner on a *typical* day? Specifically, how many positive interactions are there for each one that is negative? Circle your answer.

9:1 (positives for each negative) 4:1
8:1 3:1
7:1 2:1
6:1 1:1
5:1 1: x (at least two negatives for each positive)