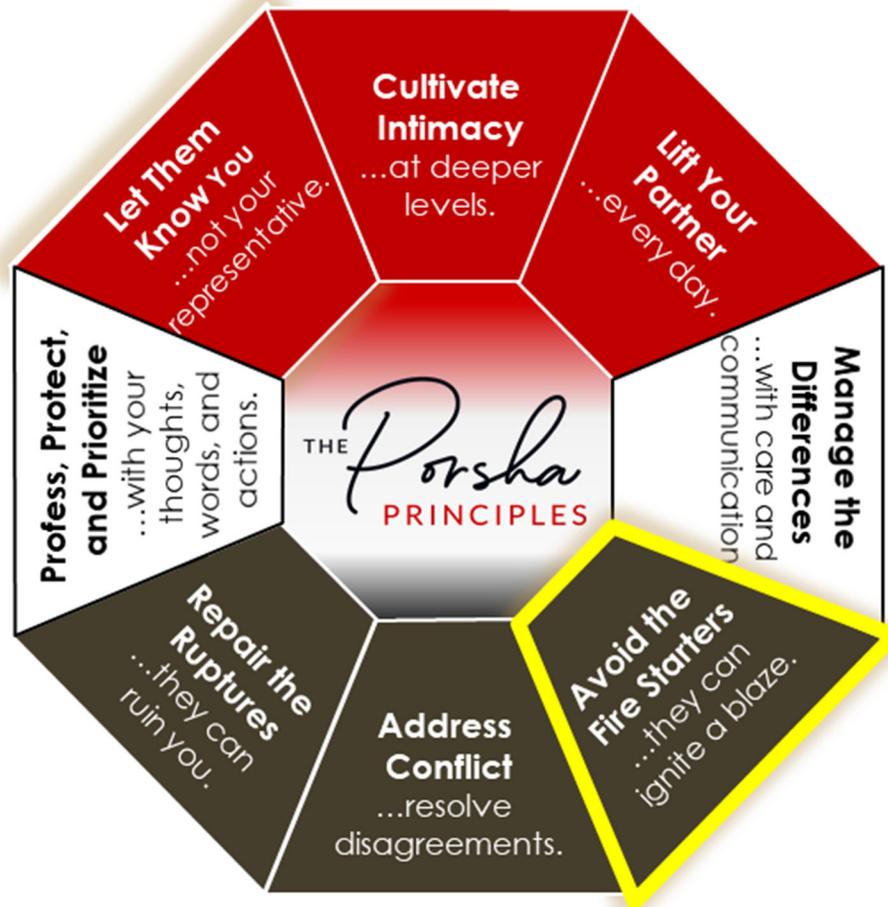




Principle 5: Avoid the Fire Starters...They Can Ignite a Blaze



What You Will Learn	<p>Foundation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is a fire starter and what are the 14 most common ones? <p>Proactive Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the four fire prevention steps to prevent a fire before it starts? <p>Intervention Strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the 5 steps to take to extinguish a fire you start before it turns into a blaze.• What are the 4 steps to extinguish a fire that your partner starts before it turns into a blaze? <p>Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Steps you and your partner can take to put the principle into practice: "Our Fire Starters"
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For every person, there are things their partner can do or say that nearly guarantee an argument will ensue. Do any of these statements resonate with you?

- "You're late, again?"
- "This wouldn't have happened if you had just listened to me!"
- "So, it's ALWAYS my fault?"
- "You are so narrow-minded sometimes."
- "Why can't you just keep a commitment?"
- "You don't ever stand up for me."
- "Blah, blah, blah....I'm done talking about this."
- "You always let your mother tell you what to do."



I call statements like these fire starters. Why? They typically provoke your partner to respond in a negative way. You can likely recall a time when a statement like the ones above didn't stop with just the statement. Instead, it ignited a serious blaze that was difficult for the two of you to put out. Over time these negative experiences, if unresolved, can deteriorate into vicious cycles or severe ruptures as you will learn in Principle 7, Repair the Ruptures.

The Vicious Cycle

Let's take a closer look at how these cycles work.

When partners engage over and over in negative interactions, they create a negative pattern of interacting that can become a vicious cycle. One partner does something that triggers a negative reaction from their partner, which then triggers another negative reaction from the other partner, which triggers...and so on. This vicious cycle can devastate the couple's attachment bond if the cycle is not disrupted.

Many times, couples are unaware of this vicious cycle; they are just trying to deal with all the day-to-day stuff and get their emotional needs met the best way they can. But any time one partner initiates a fire starter, or each time one partner tries to reach for the other and feels in some way rejected or unheard, the cycle is reactivated.

Often what is happening under the surface of the vicious cycle is panic and fear. One or both partners are wondering, "Do I even matter to you? Do you have my



back? Will you really be there for me?" There is a "cry for help." but usually an unhealthy cry, aka a fire starter such as blaming, criticizing or shaming, that continues to reactivate the cycle.

What pulls couples into the negative cycle? Let's look at what one of the legends in the therapy field have said about it.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Dr. John Gottman, an American psychologist and world-renowned researcher known for his work on marital stability and his ability to predict divorce, isolated four fire starters which he called, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." If left unaddressed they can lead to the end of your relationship. Dr. John Gottman predicts relationship failure with over 90% accuracy when these behaviors aren't changed! Here is how he describes these harmful behaviors.

Criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An attack on your partner at the core of their character <i>(not just their behavior)</i> <i>"Your never think of anyone but yourself. You are so selfish."</i>
Contempt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Treating your partner with disrespect, sarcasm, ridicule, or mocking behaviors; contempt assumes a position of superiority <i>"You call yourself a man? A real man provides for his family. You are just a little boy in a man's body."</i>
Defensiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A response to a perceived attack that attempts to invalidate or diminish your partner's thoughts, feelings, or actions. <i>"Of course, I forgot to pick that up on my way home. I have so much on my mind from work, how can I possibly remember something like that."</i>
Stone Walling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Withdrawing from the interaction, shutting down, or not responding to your partner. <i>"I'm done! I don't want to waste another second on this."</i>

Additional Fire Starters

Along with the four fire starters from Dr. Gottman, in this principle, I want to describe nine other common fire starters I've seen through my many years of treating couples. I follow these additional fire starters with strategies for preventing the fire from starting in the first place, and then intervention strategies for quickly extinguishing them.



Blaming	Blaming occurs when a person makes their partner feel guilty for a mistake the partner made. Often times blame is done to cover up one's own mistake (deflecting). <i>"That was a huge mistake you made."</i>
Deflecting	Deflection occurs when a partner tries to shift attention away from themselves to their partner or someone else in order to avoid taking responsibility for their action. <i>"Yeah, I made a mistake, but it's because of you that we are in this situation in the first place."</i>
Exaggerating	Exaggerating occurs when a partner uses a superlative or a gross over statement to make a point against their partner. <i>"You never talk to me, you never listen to me, you never give me the time of day."</i>
Gas Lighting	Gaslighting occurs when a partner attempts to not take responsibility for their action by making the other partner question their own judgement or reality. <i>"No, I never said that. You made that up. You always make things up."</i>
Guiltig	Guiltig occurs when one partner tries to induce the feeling of guilt in the other partner in order to get their way. <i>"You spend so much time at work. But when I want just a little of your time, you don't have it."</i>
Keeping Score	Keeping score is a "me-centered" way of operating, by which you're elevating your role in the relationship to a place of superiority by showing that you have done more than the other person. <i>"Every time you travel for work, I have to do my job and take care of the kids solo, so when it comes to vacation, we should do what I want to do."</i>
Shaming	Shaming combines blaming and guiltig. It is an attack on someone's behavior that isn't in accord with your expectations but adds an underlying message of guilt related to the behavior. <i>"That was a huge mistake you made. You should be ashamed of yourself."</i>
Shoulding	Shoulding occurs when the partner uses "should" or "shouldn't" to express a set of rules of how things should have been done or should be done in the future. Shoulding often comes with an underlying sense of judgment or superiority. <i>"See what happens when you let things go to the last minute? You shouldn't do that."</i>
Speaking out of anger	Speaking out of anger toward your partner includes threats, yelling, shouting, name calling, and use of profanity. <i>"Just shut the hell up!"</i>



Deeper Dive

Our method of engaging with other people when we are upset often comes from the modeling we saw as children. For example, if you come from a family that was very emotionally expressive and reactive, you may find your tendency is to do the same—react first, think second. Consider exploring these deeper questions which may help you better understand why your tendencies are what they are when it comes to fire starters.

- Think about as a child growing up, how did your parents, or primary caregivers, communicate with each other when they were upset?
- How did each of them communicate with you when they were upset with you? (e.g., critically, blaming, shaming)
- Whether they were communicating with you or each other, how did that make you feel?
- What did you do about it?
- How did you communicate to partners in past intimate relationships when you were upset? How do you feel about that? What do you wish you had done differently?

From these questions, and given your past experiences, do you notice any similarities or differences with how you communicate when upset with your partner today?

Proactive Strategies

Use proactive strategies to prevent the fire before it starts. If you find **yourself** about to deliver a fire starter, try my **4-step Fire Prevention Strategy**.

1. Pause...count to five before you respond to allow time for the automatic negative reaction to flow pass.
2. Next, quickly remind yourself how much your partner means to you and how much you care about them.
3. Then, consider the reaction you most desire from your partner (e.g., an apology, an expression of concern for you, a change in their behavior, etc.)
4. Finally, decide the words to use that would most likely evoke that reaction from your partner.

You may be surprised how these four simple steps can help extinguish a fire even before it starts. These steps can truly be an effective fire prevention strategy.

If you are unable to stay calm enough to use the fire prevention strategy, protect your relationship by calling a timeout and coming back to the table at an agreed upon time. Here's an example:

"I want to take a timeout here. I'm starting to get irritated, and I know I won't be able to engage in a healthy conversation right now. This is important, so can we