



GOTTMAN METHOD · SENTIMENT OVERRIDE

THE DRIP AND THE SNAP

When one partner runs a steady stream of commentary and the other has lost the patience to field it, what's usually underneath is negative sentiment override: a Gottman-researched pattern for what happens when the goodwill between you runs low.

HOW THE DRIP BUILDS

commentary to override

- One partner offers a steady stream of corrections, observations, and unsolicited notes. Each one is small, and most are not meant to wound.
- The other partner absorbs them. For a while there is enough goodwill to let them roll off, or to answer with a joke.
- Over months, the corrections outpace the warmth, and the reservoir of goodwill between you runs low.
- Once it does, the receiving partner starts to hear even neutral comments as criticism. This is negative sentiment override: the negative read becomes the default filter.
- Now the buffer is gone. What used to slide off their shoulders is suddenly hard to ignore, and what used to earn a joke earns a snap, because there is nothing left in the tank to soften it.

WHY “JUST RESPOND BETTER” ISN’T THE WHOLE FIX

IT TAKES BOTH OF YOU

- Negative sentiment override, a term from researcher Robert Weiss, is central to Gottman’s work. Once it sets in, calmer replies do not change the filter on their own; it stays negative until the friendship underneath is rebuilt.
- Often the partner who snaps has carried more of the work of holding things together, absorbing the comments for a long time before hitting a breaking point. That is understandable, not a failure, and it does not make the repair theirs to do alone.
- This is a two-person job: one of you sends less criticism, both of you rebuild the warmth, and the one who snaps gets better tools for the comments that still sting.

THE CYCLE YOU’RE BOTH IN

Neither of you started this on purpose, and neither of you can end it alone. It works as a loop, and each of you feeds one part of it.

- 1 The commentary lands**
A correction, a better way to load the dishwasher, a note on how you said something to the kids.
- 2 Goodwill drains a little**
On its own the comment is minor. On top of the last hundred like it, it is not, and the reservoir drops another inch.
- 3 The negative filter fires**
Under override, the comment reads as “you think I can’t do anything right,” whether or not that was meant. The interpretation is automatic, not chosen.
- 4 The snap comes out**
With no buffer left, the reply is sharp instead of playful, and it skips the humor or the light “here we go” that used to defuse it.
- 5 The commenter feels attacked**
The sharpness stings, so they defend, explain, or comment again to make their point, and the loop pulls tighter.

IF YOU'RE THE ONE COMMENTING

You are not a bad partner for noticing things, and your eye for how things could be better is real. The task is to spend it carefully, because the sheer volume of it is costing you the closeness you actually want.

1 **Pause before you comment**

Run a quick filter: does this need saying, does it need saying by me, and does it need saying right now? Most passing observations fail at least one of the three.

2 **Swap criticism for a complaint**

Gottman's distinction: criticism goes at the person ("you never think"), a complaint stays with the moment ("the trash didn't go out and I'm frustrated"). The second is far easier to take in.

3 **Keep the ratio in your favor**

Gottman found stable couples have about five positive moments for every negative one. For every correction, let your partner hear five genuine appreciations, said out loud, not just felt.

4 **Let the small stuff go**

Before you correct, ask whether this is a real problem or just not how you would do it. A different-but-fine way of stacking the dishwasher is not a problem to solve.

5 **Turn the volume down**

Aim for less commentary overall, not only a gentler version of the same amount. Softer criticism delivered just as often still drains the reservoir. Less of it is what gives your partner room to feel close to you again.

IF YOU'RE THE ONE SNAPPING

The snapping makes sense: your patience has been spent down over a long time, and a sharp reply is what comes out when the tank is empty. You get two things here, more room to respond and a fair way to ask for less, because this cannot be your job to manage alone.

- 1 Catch the flood**
When your heart is pounding and you are a second from a sharp reply, that is flooding, and no good response comes from there. Say you need a minute, and mean it.
- 2 Take a real break**
Twenty minutes doing something genuinely settling, not twenty minutes rehearsing the argument in your head. You are bringing your body back down so you can choose your next move instead of firing it off.
- 3 Reach for a repair**
Once you have a little room, the old tools still work: a bit of humor, a light “we’re doing the thing again,” or a plain “that one stung.” A repair is a small bid to stop the slide, and it does not require you to be over it yet.
- 4 Ask without the jab**
Try “I want to hear you, and I can’t keep up with the steady stream of notes. Can you save them for when they really matter?” That names the need and asks for a change without firing back.
- 5 Make it a shared job**
You can get better at responding and still need the criticism to slow down. Both are fair, and both are allowed at once. Managing this pattern is not yours to carry by yourself.

REBUILDING THE RESERVOIR, TOGETHER

Skills in the moment help, and they hold better once the goodwill between you is refilling. That part is shared, and it is built in small, ordinary moments more than in big talks.

small, shared, repeated

- Turn toward the small bids. When your partner shows you something or makes a passing comment that isn't a correction, meet it with real attention. Gottman found these small turns predict long-term closeness more than grand gestures do.
- Trade one appreciation a day. Each of you says one specific thing you appreciated about the other that day. Say something specific rather than general, and say it out loud rather than assuming they already know.
- Agree on a shared word for the pattern. Pick one you both use, without blame, when the drip-and-snap starts up. Using it together turns the pattern into the thing you are both up against, instead of turning on each other.
- Repair after, every time. When one gets away from you, come back later: "that got sharp, I'm sorry," or "I didn't need to add that." Repairs are what keep small ruptures from hardening into the story of who you are.

This does not ask the commenting partner to go silent, or the snapping partner to grin and bear it. What it asks is smaller and shared: slow the drip, refill the goodwill, and each own your half, so the negative filter loses its grip. If the override runs deep, or the same fight keeps winning, that is what couples therapy is for. Adapted from the Gottman Method (negative sentiment override, the Four Horsemen, the 5:1 ratio, flooding, and repair). My Mental Climb is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or certified by The Gottman Institute.

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