

# Understanding John Gottman's Negative Sentiment Override in Relationships

Negative sentiment override and positive sentiment override are psychological terms from John Gottman, a leading expert on relationships who created the [7 principles for making marriage work](#).

Negative sentiment override occurs when one or both partners in a relationship interpret neutral or even positive interactions negatively. This often leads to misunderstandings and escalating conflicts. On the other hand, positive sentiment override acts as a buffer during disagreements, allowing partners to maintain a positive view of each other and the situation, even during conflict, helping them to turn toward each other more readily.

## What Causes Couples to Get Stuck in Negative Sentiment Override (NSO)?

Negative sentiment override can stem from several factors, each potent enough to trigger it independently if severe enough. However, it's more typical for a combination of factors to play a role. Here is a list of common factors that can contribute to negative sentiment override:

- **Poor Communication:** Misunderstandings often occur when partners communicate ineffectively. This lack of clarity can lead to feelings of resentment and frustration. For instance, if one partner frequently interrupts the other, this can create a sense of not being heard or valued, which fosters negative sentiment.
- **Recurring Conflicts:** When disputes remain unresolved, they can lead to a cyclical pattern where past frustrations color the perception of current interactions. Each partner may begin to expect negative outcomes from discussions, further entrenching the sense of conflict and misunderstanding.
- **Negative Perspective:** This is the heart of negative sentiment override. It involves a persistent negative view where even neutral or positive actions by one's partner are perceived in a negative light. This could be something as simple as misinterpreting a compliment as sarcasm, leading to more significant relationship distress.
- **Old Wounds:** Old, unresolved issues can significantly contribute to negative sentiment override. These unresolved issues act like a filter through which current interactions are seen, making it hard for partners to move past them and appreciate positive present actions.
- **Self-awareness and Perspective:** Often, a lack of self-awareness can magnify negative sentiment override. If one partner is not aware of their biases or doesn't realize how past experiences influence their current perceptions, they're more likely to stay stuck in a negative viewpoint. Learning to be present and evaluate situations independently of past hurts can mitigate this effect.

## Recognizing Signs of Negative Sentiment Override

Negative sentiment override can subtly enter a relationship and significantly affect everyday interactions. Recognizing the signs early can help couples take action to prevent escalating conflicts and break free from negative sentiment.

Here's what to watch for:

- **Constant Criticism:** When even small actions are met with criticism, it may suggest negative sentiment override. For instance, simple tasks like how someone loads a dishwasher could provoke unnecessary criticism or correction, indicating a deeper discontent where neutral or even positive actions are perceived negatively.
- **Defensive Responses:** If one partner consistently reacts defensively to comments or questions that are not overtly accusatory, this could signal negative sentiment override. Defensiveness is often a response to feeling perpetually criticized or anticipated attack, even from benign conversations.
- **Contempt and Disrespect:** Contempt can manifest in communication through sarcasm, mean-spirited jokes, eye-rolling, or dismissive body language. When actions like these become frequent, it's often a strong indicator of negative sentiment override. They not only convey dislike but also show a lack of respect for the partner.
- **Increased Conflict Frequency:** When conflicts become more regular and escalate quickly over trivial matters, it's possible that negative sentiment override is at play. The frequency and ease of moving from calm to conflict can show the negative lens through which partners are seeing each other's behaviors.
- **Stonewalling or Withdrawal:** One partner may withdraw from conversations or physically leave the scene during disagreements. This behavior, often a response to feeling overwhelmed by negativity, prevents effective communication and resolution of issues.
- **Decrease in Affection:** A noticeable decrease in affectionate behavior can be a sign of negative sentiment override. Simple gestures like touching, smiling, making eye contact, or initiating any form of warmth might diminish, as partners start to see each other more as adversaries than as allies.
- **Negative Attributions:** Instead of giving the benefit of the doubt, partners consistently see the negative side of each other's actions. There is little effort to try to understand or accept each other's viewpoints. For example, if one partner is late coming home, the other might immediately assume it was done out of thoughtlessness or disregard, rather than considering other explanations. Negative attributions like this can flood a relationship with conflict.

## Consequences of Negative Sentiment Override

When negative sentiment override creeps into a relationship, it reshapes how partners communicate, resolve conflicts, and connect on an emotional level. Negative sentiment override makes it harder for partners to turn toward each other with understanding.

### Conflicts Increase

- **Misinterpretation of Intentions:** Partners often perceive each other's comments and actions more negatively than intended. A compliment might be seen as sarcasm, or genuine concern could be interpreted as nagging.
- **Reduction in Positive Feedback:** As negativity increases, expressions of love, gratitude, and support decrease. This withdrawal of positive interactions disheartens both individuals, making open and closed channels of communication even harder.
- **Escalation of Minor Issues:** Small disagreements can quickly become major conflicts as partners are less likely to give each other the benefit of the doubt.
- **Difficulty in Finding Solutions:** With a prevailing negative outlook, the focus tends to be on blaming rather than resolving. The usual result is a negative state of mind and recurring arguments over the same issues with no resolution in sight.
- **Increasing Emotional Distance:** As conflicts become routine and unresolved, partners might choose to avoid confrontation altogether, not out of resolution but to escape the emotional toll of constant bickering.

### **Emotional Intimacy Suffers**

- **Loss of Connection:** Negative sentiment override often leads to a feeling of estrangement between partners. As mistrust builds, the emotional bond that once brought them close can significantly weaken.
- **Decrease in Affectionate Behaviors:** The quantity and quality of physical affection like hugs, kisses, and gentle touches decline. This physical disconnection mirrors the emotional gulf developing between partners.
- **Growing Resentment:** Accumulated negative interactions can lead to deep-seated resentment, making it difficult for partners to see each other in a positive light again.

### **Building Emotional Connections to Combat Negative Sentiment Override in Your Relationship**

When negative sentiment override clouds a relationship, rebuilding and nurturing emotional connections becomes crucial. Here's how you can foster fondness, admiration, and mutual respect, transforming everyday interactions for the better.

#### **Fostering Fondness**

- **Positive Recall:** Regularly share memories and experiences where you felt happiness, love, or pride in each other. Talk about the moments that brought you together and the qualities in each other that you most admire.
- **Gratitude:** Make it a habit to express gratitude for even the simplest actions your partner takes. A sincere 'thank you' for making breakfast or a compliment on how they handled a situation goes a long way towards creating an environment where positive sentiment can flourish consistently.

- **Affection:** Increase acts of physical tenderness—hugs, kisses, or simply holding hands. Such gestures release oxytocin, often dubbed the 'cuddle hormone', which enhances a feeling of connection and trust.

### **Cultivating Admiration**

- **Active Listening:** Pay attention to what your partner says without planning your response. Show that their thoughts and feelings matter by reflecting back what you hear and asking thoughtful questions.
- **Validate:** Acknowledge your partner's emotions without immediately trying to solve problems. Understanding doesn't have to mean agreement, but it does communicate respect.
- **Celebrate Successes:** Actively celebrate each other's achievements, both big and small. Doing so builds a shared sense of pride and joy.

### **Encouraging Mutual Respect**

- **Effective Communication:** Emphasize using “I” statements to express your thoughts and feelings while encouraging your partner to do the same. This approach reduces blame and makes it easier for you and your partner to turn toward each other and accept bids for attention and affection.
- **Boundaries:** Understand and respect each other's personal boundaries. This practice not only fosters mutual respect but also helps maintain individuality within the relationship. Respect for boundaries is an important part of the increase in fondness and admiration that enhances relationships.
- **Compromise:** Endeavor to find solutions that benefit both partners. Show readiness to give and take, proving that both partners' needs are valued and important.

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