The Five Steps to the Roach Motel

Although "failure to attune" may sound fuzzy and abstract, there is a specific, five-step trajectory that occurs when a relationship has a deficit in this quality.

Step 1: There's a "Sliding Door Moment"

In a committed relationship, partners constantly ask each other in words and deeds for support and understanding. In research parlance, I refer to such requests as "bids." They can be as simple as "Could you get me a beer?" or as profound as "I need you," after a scary medical diagnosis. Not all bids are obvious. Many of them get missed, ignored, or misinterpreted. One partner may say, "I love you," expecting the other to turn around and initiate a hug. But the partner, distracted and just half-listening, says, "I know you do." A husband gets his wife the same book of poster art that he bought her last Valentine's Day. He forgot. She does not.

Every bid made in a relationship initiates what I call a sliding door moment. When one partner expresses a need for connection, the other's response is either to slide open a door and walk through or keep it shut and turn away. Imagine that Henry settles into his favorite chair to watch a movie. His wife, Cindy, wanders over, gazes at the screen, and sighs, "Wow—Paris always looks so gorgeous in movies!" There is a huge catalog of reactions Henry might have to his wife's wistful comment. He could slide the door open by saying something like, "I hope someday we get to go there." I call such a response "turning toward" the partner. Or he could turn away by offering a grouchy grunt or saying, "Shhhh, I'm trying to watch." Any response that doesn't demonstrate interest and connection, slides the door shut.

All long-term relationships are riddled with sliding door moments that end poorly. Even couples who are masters at relationships experience occasions when one partner looks sad or listless or even especially delighted and, for whatever reason, the other isn't tuned in. The partner may be tired or annoyed or just focused elsewhere. Often, we don't think our response, or lack of one, to such a trivial event will matter much.

It's true that turning away from a minor bid is not going to send a relationship hurtling into the abyss. But an abundance of unhappy endings to these interactions without subsequent discussion about what happened does precipitate danger. Over time, one partner or both begin to wonder: *Do I come first, or does someone or something else matter more? Is my partner selfish? Can I risk continuing to trust?*

Step 2: A Regrettable Incident Occurs

As the result of turning away during a sliding door moment, conflict flares. You notice a hurt or accusatory expression on your partner's face and know that somehow you've just made a mess. If you're lucky, your partner will be up-front about what's wrong. "I wanted to tell you what the doctor said, but you couldn't talk about it because you were busy. You knew how nervous I was about getting the test results! I feel you let me down."

If the "offending" partner acknowledges what just happened and accepts responsibility for his or her part in it, the breach can be repaired. If, instead, the partner turns away, the ensuing hurt and anger trigger what I call a *regrettable incident*—an eruption of conflict that becomes an unfortunate part of the relationship's history. Each regrettable incident chisels away a bit at the couple's mutual trust.

Often, the circumstances leading to a regrettable incident are not clear-cut. Relationships are messy. When a door slides shut, both partners might feel injured. Joe becomes upset at a house party when his girlfriend, Maddy, ignores his request that they move to another corner of the room. He thinks she is flirting, which makes him see red. When she doesn't respond to him, he leaves. Maddy doesn't know he is upset or where he has gone. She goes from room to room asking if anyone has seen him. Nobody has. By the time she finds him walking toward his car, she is fuming. "Do you know what you put me through?" she asks. Joe retorts that she has no reason to complain considering that the situation was her doing. She insists that he is being overly sensitive. Joe gets flooded and drives off. The next day they "make up" but resolve nothing. That's how a sliding door moment leads to a regrettable incident.

Again, occasional events like this one will not ruin a relationship. But a pattern of turning away *followed by an inability to acknowledge and repair the breach* brings couples a giant step closer to the roach motel.

Step 3: The Zeigarnik Effect Kicks In

In 1922, an astute twenty-one-year-old psychology student named Bluma Zeigarnik watched as the waiters in a Viennese café handled large, complicated orders without ever writing them down. Intrigued by their remarkable memories, she interviewed them afterward and discovered that none could recall any of the orders they had just filled. Once the waiter delivered the order to the customer's table, he forgot it. Zeigarnik went on to a distinguished career as a psychologist. Her observation in that Viennese café has come to be known as the "Zeigarnik effect:" We have better recall for events that we have not completed than for those we have.

Subsequent studies have shown the power of this effect. We are almost twice as likely to recall "unfinished issues" compared with those we have processed or in some manner put to rest. Between lovers, arguments that end with confessions, amends, and deeper understanding of one another tend to be soon forgotten, although their legacy is a stronger, more enduring relationship. But when a sliding door moment leads to a regrettable incident that goes unaddressed, thanks to the Zeigarnik effect, the hurt remains accessible in our active memory, available to be rehashed again and again. Like a stone in one's shoe, the recollection becomes a constant irritant that leads to an increase in negative attitudes about the partner.

Step 4: Negative Sentiment Override Takes Over

When a pattern of broken trust develops, partners begin to feel like the relationship has emptied out. They no longer feel like friends. With increasing frequency, they see each other in a negative light. University of Oregon emeritus psychologist Robert Weiss coined the term "Negative Sentiment Override" (NSO) for this phenomenon. Under its force, people tend to construe neutral and even positive events as negative. As a result, they enter their Nasty box more frequently. On average, people who suffer from NSO fail to recognize their partner's positive gestures 50 percent of the time. A husband declares one night that he'll cook dinner. His wife, whose major marital complaint is how little work he does at home, reacts with knee-jerk suspicion. Due to NSO, she's convinced he's up to something. Maybe he's trying to show her up as a cook, since his family is joining them. Or he wants to make his parents believe that he's a great husband. She can't accept that he is just being kind.

A common sign of NSO is a tendency to perceive harmless or neutral comments as negative. Nathaniel's wife says, "Oh, look.

The lightbulb blew out again." If he's in the throes of NSO, Nathaniel's inner dialogue will sound something like: *Who died and made me the Official Light Bulb Changer? She can fix it herself!* By contrast, if hurt and suspicion are not tainting his thoughts, Nathaniel is likely to assume that his wife's words mean that, well, the lightbulb blew out. If Nathaniel's wife is also experiencing NSO and sees him frowning out the window, she may read anger, resentment, and contempt into his expression. But if she's satisfied in the relationship, she's more likely to conclude that he's worried about the weather. Happy couples are susceptible to *Positive* Sentiment Override. They perceive each other's neutral acts as positive and don't take personally their partner's negative emotions.

Negative overrides reinforce the belief that the partner is not just thoughtless on occasion, but is a selfish person. If one or both partners end up rewriting their relationship memories with a persistent negative spin, this heralds the death of their love (see chapter 12). It is challenging to switch off NSO once it begins, because circumstances are not black and white. There will be times when suspicion is justified—the partner is being selfish. But there will also be times when the other is falsely accused. The *assumption* and *anticipation* of a partner's negativity harms the relationship, helping to transform the Nasty box into an inescapable prison. Negative Sentiment Override is a litmus test for a troubled relationship.

The following questionnaire will help you determine whether you are experiencing NSO.

Negative Sentiment Override Quiz

Think about an argument, misunderstanding, or discussion of an existing relationship issue that you've had in the last couple of months. Then answer these true-or-false questions.

In the recent past in my relationship, generally I felt:

1. Hurt.	True ❑ False ❑
2. Misunderstood.	True ❑ False ❑
3. Like "I don't have to take this."	True ❑ False ❑
4. Innocent of blame for the problem.	True ❑ False ❑
5. Like getting up and leaving.	True ❑ False ❑
6. Angry.	True ❑ False ❑
7. Disappointed.	True ❑ False ❑
8. Unjustly accused.	True ❑ False ❑
9. "My partner has no right to say those things."	True ❑ False ❑
10. Frustrated.	True ❑ False ❑
11. Personally attacked.	True ❑ False ❑
12. I wanted to strike back.	True ❑ False ❑
13. I was warding off a barrage.	True ❑ False ❑
14. Like getting even.	True ❑ False ❑
15. I wanted to protect myself.	True ❑ False ❑
16. I took my partner's complaints as slights.	True ❑ False ❑
17. My partner was trying to control me.	True ❑ False ❑
18. My partner was very manipulative.	True ❑ False ❑
19. Unjustly criticized.	True ❑ False ❑
20. I wanted the negativity to just stop.	True ❑ False ❑

Scoring

Add all of your "true" responses. Use a calculator to divide the sum by 20. Now, multiply the result by 100 to find your percentage. A score above 40 percent indicates that, right now, you are experiencing Negative Sentiment Override. Working on the excercises in upcoming chapters can help you recover.

Step 5: The Four Horsemen Wreak Havoc

The more negative a couple's interactions become, the less productive their attempts to communicate. The inability to air