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undo send in real life



# Undo send in real life



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I am alligator man, a dangerous amphibious monster. I swim quietly toward my prey, a seven-year-old girl named Isabelle, who also happens to be my daughter. Sensing the danger, she nervously scans the surface of the pool. Suddenly she spots me. Our eyes lock for a brief moment. She smiles, screams, and lunges in the opposite direction, laughing. But I'm too fast. I push off the bottom of the pool and pounce. When I land within a few inches of her, she turns to face me, gasping, hand held up in the air.

"PAUSE!" she yells.

"What's the matter?"

"I swallowed water," she sputters.

So, of course, we pause.

Which gives me a few seconds to think: why don't we do that in real life?

We've all hit the "Send" button on an email and immediately regretted it. So many of us do it regularly, in fact, that Google has added a feature to Gmail called "Undo Send". Once you hit "Send" Gmail holds the email for five seconds, during which time you can stop the email from going out.

What's interesting is that, apparently, a five-second pause is all most people need to realize they've made a mistake.

With an email, hitting "Undo Send" can save a tremendous amount of time, energy, and backpedaling. But in real time — in person or on the phone — there's no "Undo Send." Sometimes, like a judge who tells the jury to ignore what a witness just said, we try to undo send. But once the words come out, there's no turning back. Like my mother is fond of saying, "I forgive . . . but I don't forget."

The key, in real time, is to avoid the unproductive "Send" in the first place.

Those five seconds Google gives us to undo our mistake? Maybe we can use them *before* we hit "Send." Perhaps that's all we need to avoid making the mistake. Five little seconds.

"Pause," Isabelle yelled when she swallowed the water. Stop the action for a few seconds and let me catch my breath.

There's no rule that says we need to respond to something right away. Pause. Take a few breaths.

Recently, due to a miscommunication about timing, I missed a client meeting. Later that day I was in the hallway at the client's office when suddenly I heard the leader of the project, we'll call him Bob, yell, "Hey Bregman, where were you?!?!"

Immediately my heart rate shot up. Adrenaline flowed. And my emotions flooded in. Embarrassment. Anger. Defensiveness. *Who does Bob think he is yelling across the hall at me like that in front of other people?*

I spoke to Joshua Gordon, a Neuroscientist and Assistant Professor at Columbia University, about my reaction. "There are direct pathways from sensory stimuli into the amygdala," he told me.

Come again?

"The amygdala is the emotional response center of the brain," he explained. "When something unsettling happens in the outside world, it immediately evokes an emotion."

That's fine. But pure raw unadulterated emotion is not the source of your best decisions. So, how do you get beyond the emotion to rational thought?

It turns out while there's a war going on between you and someone else, there's another war going on, in your brain, between you and yourself. And that quiet little battle is your prefrontal cortex trying to subdue your amygdala.

Think of the amygdala as the little red person in your head with the pitchfork saying "I say we clobber the guy!" and think of the prefrontal cortex as the little person dressed in white saying "Uhm, maybe it's not such a great idea to yell back. I mean, he is your client after all."

"The key is cognitive control of the amygdala by the prefrontal cortex," Dr. Gordon told me. So I asked him how we could help our prefrontal cortex win the war. He paused for a minute and then answered. "If you take a breath and delay your action, you give the prefrontal cortex time to control the emotional response."

Why a breath? "Slowing down your breath has a direct calming affect on your brain." He told me.

"How long do we have to stall?" I asked. "How much time does our prefrontal cortex need to overcome our amygdala?"

"Not long. A second or two."


There we have it. Google's five seconds is a good rule of thumb. When Bob yelled at me in the hall, I took a deep breath and gave my prefrontal cortex a little time to win. I knew there was a misunderstanding and I also knew my relationship with Bob was important. So instead of yelling back, I walked over to him. It only took a few seconds. But that gave us both enough time to become reasonable.

Pause. Breathe. Then act. It turns out that Isabelle's reaction might be a good strategy for all of us.

"Ready?" I ask Isabelle once she seems to have recovered.

"Set, go." She yells as she dives back into the water, clearly refreshed and focused on the stairs she's trying to reach

I give her a five-second head start and then dive under the water after her.





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