

Anatomy of an Apology

When "I'm Sorry" Isn't Enough



After numerous counseling sessions with individuals and married couples, it became evident that when hurt, people were seeking more than just a simple "I'm sorry." They desired apologies that demonstrated complete understanding of how deeply you had hurt them.

FIRST APOLOGY ACTIVITY

Activity #1 (Think of a recent time when you apologized to your spouse/significant other/anybody. In the space below, to the best of your recollection, write the words you used in your apology).

It is important to acknowledge that our apology skills, particularly towards our significant others or others in general, can sometimes be lacking. I believe this deficiency stems from the absence of a crucial element in our apologies: empathy. When employed effectively, empathy has the power to profoundly influence the course of any relationship.

You might believe that empathy is a challenge for you, but I'd like to paint a vivid picture that might trigger a response. I'm certain in the past you've witnessed somebody take a bad fall. At that moment, you and those around you simultaneously have a reaction and run to their aid.

This suggests that most of us possess the capacity for empathy. In that brief moment, you can see the world through that person's perspective, or rather, feel precisely what they experienced. That, my friend, is empathy. The fact that you are reading about apologies indicates a potential for empathy. Yet, the question is: do you know how to effectively employ it when the situation demands it?

While watching the other person fall may appear tragic, even more tragic is our approach to apologizing. This might be because you've rarely seen or been instructed on the correct way to apologize. In certain situations, a simple "I'm sorry" suffices, like when you accidentally step on someone's toes. You instinctively turn to them and say, "Oh my goodness, I'm sorry," to which they might respond with a casual "No problem".

But when you think about the number of times you've said I'm sorry as a reflex I suspect those words became meaningless after a while.

You will encounter numerous situations that require apologies. In fact, as I was composing this paper, a real-life incident unfolded. I ventured out to our garden area and spotted a tall plant that I believed to be a weed among our herbs. Without much thought, I pulled it out. Interestingly, I don't recall ever tending to our garden before this. As it turned out, it wasn't a weed at all but one of my wife's cherished flowers. I'll share more about this later.

Here are the steps you should follow in making an apology:

STEP 1: Prayer

When contemplating the legacy you leave with those you care about, the essence of your Christlike nature should be the central element of any apology. To achieve this, you should enter into prayer, seeking God's guidance in revealing the complete scope of your actions and how they have inflicted harm on others. Sometimes, you remain unaware of the extent of your impact on them because you haven't been taught to introspectively delve into the depths of the pain you may have caused.

STEP 2: Fully Acknowledge Your Part

In this stage of an apology, it's crucial to wholeheartedly acknowledge your part in the situation without offering excuses. Your apology should be constructed in a way which places responsibility solely on you without the appearance of placing blame on those who have been hurt or positioning yourself to be a victim.

This requires you to step into the perspective of those you've harmed to genuinely empathize with their emotions. Until you can do that, you miss an important component of the apology.

STEP 3: Stop Making Excuses

Starting an apology with an excuse significantly undermines its authenticity. It's not difficult to recognize that excuses, regardless of when they surface in an apology, diminish their heartfelt nature. While it might appear you are admitting to your wrong doing, the mere presence of an excuse undermines that admission.

For instance, beginning with, "We haven't had intimacy in months, what other choice did I have?" followed by a simple "I'm sorry" would likely ring hollow.

STEP 4: Acknowledge What You Did Was Wrong

An apology falls short if it fails to recognize that your actions were wrong. Phrases like "I'm sorry you felt hurt" shifts responsibility to the other person and avoid admitting wrongdoing. Additionally, statements like "I made a mistake" are often used when initially explaining your actions. It's essential to refrain from this approach because it wasn't a mistake; you didn't accidentally cheat on your spouse, strike a wall, use hurtful language, yell loudly, or handle your spouse roughly. These actions were intentional choices, even if you weren't always fully aware of why you made them. In your apology, the focus should be on addressing the "why" part and committing to fixing it.

STEP 5: Accept Their Right to Feel

You must acknowledge and respect the emotions of those who have been wronged, whether they're feeling sadness, anger, fury, resentment, shame, or bitterness. You must also honor their decision to distance themselves for a while if needed.

Recognizing and allowing people to embrace their emotions is essential. It aids in the processing of their feelings and fosters better communication. Emotions are complex and disregarding them may hinder the healing process and self-understanding. By creating a space where individuals can freely express their emotions, you demonstrate empathy and respect, ultimately nurturing trust and open dialogue. This paves the way for genuine apologies and constructive conflict resolution.

STEP 6: Accept the Consequences of Your Actions

There will be moments when you might sense that you're being treated unjustly, believing that you don't merit the reactions of those you've wronged. Nevertheless, it's crucial to remember that, regardless of how unjust you perceive the treatment or how questionable the decisions others are making, you are the one who placed them in the position of treating you unfairly or making poor choices.

It would also be a mistake to believe your actions harm only the person directly affected by your actions. But there may be broad-reaching harm to others in the community who are closely

involved with those who are harmed. The consequences may be felt by those connected to the primary person harmed. (family, friends, business associates, etc.)

STEP 7: Don't Expect Any Timeline for Forgiveness

Refrain from establishing a fixed timeline for forgiveness. While some individuals prefer swift resolutions, it's essential to recognize that expecting someone to forgive you according to a set schedule is unfair. The processes of healing and forgiveness are gradual, often spanning weeks, months, or even years. Moreover, these processes can only commence when you genuinely grasp the impact of your actions and offer heartfelt apologies.

What does this look like in Real Life?

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE 1:

Here's a real-life example of a spouse who cheated. They said, "I'm sorry. I felt like you were pulling away from me and I then felt distant from you. I then turned to this other person to meet the needs you weren't meeting." (paraphrasing)

Most of that information wasn't important to their apology. It's because part of it was an excuse, never acknowledging the hurt their spouse was feeling. As a matter of fact, they made their spouse responsible for their actions.

In practice, the apology should look like:

(Spouse's Name Here), I had an affair which caused you great pain. I see, but can't fully grasp the pain that I caused, but I do know I hurt you deeply. I made it so you can no longer trust me. My number one job in our relationship was to help you feel safe. I did the opposite. It is my responsibility to help you feel loved and adored, but I was unloving and made you feel ugly, unworthy.

For all of that, I'm sorry.

These are the steps I've taken:

1. I've shut down all communication with the other person.
2. I've confessed this to my pastor/friend/other source of support.
3. I'm in counseling to understand the parts of me which allowed this to happen.

Moving forward, there are additional steps I'll be taking which will include somebody who will be holding me accountable.

I understand this will take you a while to process and that you may never recover from this. But I commit to not forcing a timeline on you for you to forgive me or even want to be around me. I will not impose a timeline but wait on you as you go through the healing process. I look forward to the time when you can forgive me.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLE 2:

Recall when I mentioned I pulled what I thought was a weed from my wife's garden, only to find out it was what would have been a beautiful flower bush. As you saw above, my initial apology went like this. "I'm sorry, I thought it was a weed". And then I went about my business as she tried to replant it. Then I came back to my computer to work on this talk. And low and behold, it hit me square in the face that I showed zero empathy towards my wife in my apology.

Immediately I got up and went to my wife and said, “I was thinking about your flowers and how hard you worked on them. I remember when you first found the dahlia farm and how much you loved these flowers and somehow wanted to grow your own. I know these flowers meant a lot to you and saw your disappointment when I pulled that one out. I’m sorry for that. Next time I think of pulling anything, I’ll first check with you.

Side note: Five minutes later when she was sharing this story with my daughter, she added that she did the same thing too, thinking it was a weed. Wait, What?

SECOND APOLOGY ACTIVITY

Activity #2 (Re-think your apology from the first activity and rewrite it using the 7 principles outlined above).
