MAKING AN EFFECTIVE APOLOGY

Difficulty: INTENSIVE | Frequency: VARIABLE | Duration: VARIABLE

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Apologizing for an offense is an important step towards forgiveness and reconciliation. But not all apologies are equally effective. In an effort to avoid blame, we sometimes offer apologies that are hedged or incomplete, and these half-baked apologies are less likely to be well-received. In some cases they may even backfire, fueling hurt and resentment.

It takes courage and vulnerability to admit wrongdoing and try to make things right; there's always the possibility that our efforts will be rebuffed. But given the healing potential of apology for all parties, it's a worthy effort—even if forgiveness isn't the end result.

TIME REQUIRED

10 minutes to read about how to make an effective apology. The amount of time the apology takes depends on the nature of the offense and the reparations you plan to make.

HOW TO DO IT

When you realize you have harmed someone and you decide that you want to apologize, follow these steps:

1. **Acknowledge the offense.** Acknowledging the offense is an essential element of a good apology, but many apologies don't do this adequately. Apologies are most likely to be well-received if you show that you recognize who was responsible, who was harmed, and the nature of the offense. For example, saying "I made a mistake" is more effective than saying "Mistakes were made," which fails to allocate responsibility. Similarly, acknowledging that harm occurred is better than making vague statements that minimize the legitimacy of the offended person's grievances (e.g., "I'm sorry you feel hurt") or fail to acknowledge the specific offense (e.g., "I'm sorry for whatever I said yesterday" rather than "I'm sorry for making that insensitive joke").
2. **Provide an explanation.** In some cases, it's helpful to explain an offense, especially to convey that it was not intentional and that it will not happen again. But explanations that are long-winded, sound like excuses, or blame the victim (e.g., "You were really getting on my nerves") tend to be counterproductive. It's better to say, "There's no excuse for my behavior" than to offer a shallow defense.
3. **Express remorse.** When you hurt someone, it's natural to feel shame, humiliation, or remorse. Expressing these feelings communicates that you recognize and regret the suffering you caused. Be careful of phrases like "That was uncharacteristic of me," which might convey that you aren't taking full ownership for what happened. Instead, acknowledge your disappointment in yourself and your commitment to improve.
4. **Make amends.** A good apology should include efforts to repair the damage done. Reparation for tangible offenses such as loss of property might involve compensation or replacement, whereas reparation for less tangible offenses such as a violation of trust might involve taking steps to improve your behavior, such as attending marriage counseling. When considering how to best make amends, be sure to ask the offended

person what would mean the most to them, rather than simply doing something to relieve your own feelings of guilt. Self-punishment, for example, might alleviate guilt without actually benefitting the victim.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Lewicki, R. J., Polin, B., & Lount, R. B. (2016). An exploration of the structure of effective apologies. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research, 9*(2), 177-196.

American adults rated apologies for a trust violation as more effective when they contained a greater number of the following elements: an acknowledgment of responsibility, an explanation of what went wrong, an expression of regret, an offer of repair, a declaration of repentance, and a request for forgiveness. An acknowledgement of responsibility and an offer of repair were the most important elements, while a request for forgiveness was the least important.

Who Has Tried the Practice?

Several studies have looked at the common elements of apologies in different cultures, and what makes them effective:

- Dutch and Turkish college students completed surveys about hypothetical workplace conflicts. Both groups were more forgiving and less likely to retaliate if the offender apologized by expressing remorse and admitting blame.
- Persian adults were observed during naturally occurring apologies. Researchers found that explicit apologies, acknowledgement of responsibility, and requests for forgiveness were commonly used.
- Sudanese adults verbally responded to situations of offense in a lab. Explanations, expressions of responsibility, offers of repair, and promises of forbearance were the most frequently used apology strategies.

More research is needed to explore whether, and how, the impact of this practice extends to other groups and cultures.

WHY TO TRY IT

Apologies that include these elements are more likely to be effective because they satisfy the psychological needs of the offended person. They can restore the offended person's sense of dignity, validating that they are not to blame and did not deserve to be hurt. They can give the offended person an opportunity to express their feelings and grieve their losses, and in some cases they can contribute to a sense of justice. A sincere apology can also reassure victims that they are safe from further harm, making them more likely to trust the offender again.

SOURCES

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FOR MORE

Lazare, A. (2004). Making Peace Through Apology. *Greater Good*.

Lazare, A. (2004). What an Apology Must Do. *Greater Good*.

This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.