

**HOW TO MAKE AMENDS:  
A KEY TO EMOTIONAL FREEDOM**  
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“Love means never having to say you’re sorry,” was a catchphrase from Erich Segal’s novel that was popularized by its 1970 film adaptation, *Love Story*. However, Segal was wrong. Real love involves making apologies, taking responsibility, offering restitution, exchanging forgiveness, and experiencing reconciliation. Contemporary psychological research echoes ancient theological writings that have shown that relationships are enriched by the dynamics of forgiveness and reconciliation (Worthington, 2001, 2006).

Admitting when we are wrong is so fundamental to healthy relationships that this principle is even incorporated into the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The 10th Step of AA reads, “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.” This step is known as “relationship glue” by those who are living lives that are happy, joyous, and free. In contrast, one of the best ways to a ruin relationship is to never admit when we are wrong. What is worse than admitting when we are wrong is not admitting it. Some of us are so obsessed with being right that we are willing to sacrifice our emotional composure, our serenity, and even our relationships to those who were once close to us. In the words of the Rev. Dr. Reuel Howe (1905-1985), “Indeed, this need of individuals to be right is so great that they are willing to sacrifice themselves, their relationships, and even love for it.”<sup>1</sup> It is one of the most commonly cited reasons for relational *cut-off*, the most extreme form of emotional distancing.

Making an *apology* requires *words*; making *amends* requires *actions*. We can make apologies all day long but if there is no change in our behavior, then the apologies are meaningless.

A simple formula for making ongoing amends is contained in the Three As of Awareness, Acceptance, and Action:

**Awareness:** Continue to take my inventory (not the inventory of others) by engaging in self-monitoring.

**Acceptance:** Admit to myself when I am wrong by noticing a feeling of discomfort or guilt.

**Action:** Admit to the other person when I am wrong, by moving from feeling discomfort to expressing action.

To create more harmony in your relationships, admit when you are wrong. Rather than focusing on others who have wronged you, focus on others you have wronged. Rather than thinking of how others may have hurt you, think of how you may have hurt them. Rather than making a list of the things others have done to you, make a list of the things that you have done to them. Even if the other has done something wrong, focus on your part in it. The list of wrongs can include what you have said or done that has hurt someone (acts of *commission*), as well as what you have not said or done that otherwise could have helped someone (acts of *omission*).

With respect to putting the focus on our wrongs, rather than focusing on the wrongs of others, Jesus of Nazareth gave this advice two thousand years ago: “First, take the log out of your own eye. Then you can see how to take the speck out of your friend’s eye” (Matthew 7:5; Contemporary English Version).<sup>2</sup>

From an ethical or moral perspective, making amends is about *restorative justice*, also known as corrective justice, which involves some form of restitution or putting things back as they should be. Restoration can involve some act of contrition to demonstrate that one is truly sorry and has changed his or her way of doing things. Apologies can be cheap, especially when flippantly offered merely as a way of excusing unacceptable behavior. In contrast, a sincere apology carries the weight of *repentance*, which requires looking at one’s actions, feeling regret for one’s wrongs, and making a commitment to change. “The truly penitent, declare the Rabbis, “come nearer unto God than even those who have never stumbled or fallen into sin” (Hertz, 1960, p. 122). Ideally, repentance paves the way for *restitution*, which involves compensating the other person for one’s wrongs.

Repentance and restitution are prerequisites for *reconciliation*, which involves the restoration of the relationship. In writing about the relationship between atonement and reconciliation, Levine (2018) observes, “More, saying ‘sorry’ is not enough. We must move from regret and remorse to action” (p. 12).

A sincere apology can be a necessary but not sufficient condition for making amends. Making amends may involve an apology, but making amends goes beyond an apology and includes the 5 As:

1. **Awareness** requires being fully conscious and self-aware of when I was wrong. Awareness is two-fold, consisting of *self-awareness* (i.e., what I have done and what I have failed to do) and *other-awareness* (i.e., the consequence or impact on others). Viewed from another perspective, awareness includes consciousness of *intentions* (actions, inactions) and *impact* (outcome, consequences, injuries, or harms). In either case, this silent mental step requires no external or overt action.
2. **Acceptance** refers to the internal (covert) conscious recognition and assent to the reality of an action, situation, or consequence without attempting to change it or explain it away. **Admission** refers to the external (overt) acknowledgement of accepting responsibility (“I was wrong when I \_\_\_\_\_”) without assigning any blame to the other. Even if the other person may have contributed to the impact or outcome, it is our responsibility to accept and admit our part in it. Even if our part is only one-percent, we do not minimize our part but we acknowledge and admit it promptly. The operative word here is *promptly*, because procrastination can lead to rationalization and search for reasons to avoid making amends.
3. **Apology** involves saying “I am sorry that I \_\_\_\_\_” without offering any justification, argument, defense, or excuse (JADE). A genuine apology consists not only of the *content* of *what* is said but in the *authenticity* of *how* it is said.

**4. Action** means corrective action—the amendment—that says “I am trying to set things right by \_\_\_\_.” A superficial apology without changed behavior is only an excuse to engage in continued harmful actions.

**5. Agreement** or commitment to the other person (“I will do my best to not \_\_\_\_ again”). This step is optional unless one is involved in a committed or covenantal relationship, in which maintenance and repairs are an ongoing part of the relationship.

In ongoing relationships, an additional component may involve another A: **Asking** the other person for feedback in the future (“Please let me know if I do it again”). This type of request is designed only for relationships that are healthy and reciprocal—not to absolve us of our responsibility to monitor our future actions.

**Giving forgiveness.** Making amends does not involve making a request for forgiveness (“Will you forgive me?”), because such a request can place an explicit burden on the other person. Asking a person for forgiveness may be making a request for something that the other person is unable, unready, or unwilling to give. Neither does making amends involve making a request for reconciliation (“Can we get back on track?”). Although receiving forgiveness and achieving reconciliation occur in healthy relationships, making amends is more about doing our part and less about expecting the other person do anything at all. Although forgiveness is necessary for achieving true reconciliation, receiving forgiveness from another person is not necessary for making restitution to the other person. Conversely, giving forgiveness to a person who has wronged us is more a matter of giving up or letting go of any resentment, to which we may

feel like we have a right, and giving compassion, to which we may feel the other may have no right (Doverspike, 2008). Giving forgiveness, especially when doing so is silent and unspoken, is a way of operationalizing love. Forgiveness is compassion in action.

**Repair attempts.** Psychologists and marriage and family therapists use the term *repair attempts* to refer to efforts that couples make to deescalate conflict and tension during discussions that involve conflict or disagreement. A repair attempt is any action or statement that prevents negativity from escalating out of control (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In relational terms, making a repair is less about fixing what is broken and more about getting back on track.

Using key phrases (e.g., “I hear you” or “I understand”) can sometimes help the other person see that we are trying to understand and deescalate the conflict. Appropriate use of humor (not teasing) can be helpful. Also important are voice intonation and body language (e.g., head nods, eye contact, and even physical gestures of affection). The success or failure of a couple’s repair attempts in a single conversation often reflects the pattern the couple tends to follow over time. A crucial part of that pattern is whether their repair attempts succeed or fail. Failed repair attempts provide an accurate marker for an unhappy future.

Repair attempts have some similarity to making amends, although making a repair in the present—in real time—usually reduces the need for having to make amends later. Admitting when we are wrong and making amends for our wrongs can go a long way toward improving our relationships with others. If focusing on making amends to those in the past seems like an insurmountable task, then simply start with making “living amends” to those who are part of

your life each day. It is never too late to start a new day.

### How to Make Amends

There is not only one “right” way to make amends, but there are several reasonable ways. Because reasonableness does not define itself, what seems reasonable to one person may not make sense to another. Therefore, it becomes important to consult with a counselor, sponsor or a wise friend who can provide a perspective. One popular method for making amends is the Five Column method, which involves taking a sheet and making five columns that include: (1) the person harmed, (2) their relationship to me, (3) my harmful act, (4) the reason for my amends, and (5) my willingness (Al-Anon, 1997, p. 81).

The willingness column can be subdivided into three columns: now, later, and never. As amends are made to people in the “now” column, some of the names seem to shift into this column from the “later” column. Some people are surprised to learn that as they make amends to people who were previously in the “later” column, it becomes easier to consider people in the “never” column. Over time, willingness becomes more developed. In many respects, the reason for making the amends may be the most important, because it helps us guard against self-serving interests. The goal is to do our part—except when to do so could further harm the intended person or others—not to expect a specific outcome from the other person.

### How Not to Make Amends

Step 10 also has 10 corollaries that suggest actions that are not ways not to make amends.

Here are the 10 Corollaries of Step 10:

1. Avoid saying, “I am right,” because it implies someone else is wrong.
2. Avoid saying “I told you so” when someone else admits being wrong, because it implies rejection of the others amends.
3. Avoid saying “I was wrong” merely to be a people-pleaser, because it is dishonest.
4. Avoid saying, “I’m always wrong,” because it is a merely poor excuse.
5. Avoid saying “They were wrong,” because doing so is a way of judging them.
6. Use *specificity* when making amends: The greater the specificity, the more the honesty.<sup>3</sup>
7. Use *temporality* when making amends: If it’s not done promptly, it will probably not get done at all.
8. Use *scalability* making amends: The bigger the wrong on our part, the bigger the amends.
9. Use *proportionality* when making amends: The bigger the impact on their, the bigger the amends.
10. Use *finality* when making amends: In some cases, the best way to make amends is to simply leave the other person alone.

### Five Step Full Apology

Psychologist David Woodsfellow, Ph.D., co-author of *Love Cycles, Fear Cycles*, describes that he calls a “full apology” (D. Woodsfellow, personal communication, May 29, 2022). With over 25 years and 25,000 hours of experience providing couples therapy, Woodsfellow (2022) has provided continuing education and peer consultation groups to counselors and therapists. Here are the five steps of Woodsfellow’s model:

1. “I’m sorry.”
2. “I see that I hurt you.”
3. “I was wrong.”
4. “Here’s what I’ll change to not do it again.”
5. “Here’s what I’ll do to make it up to you.”

In discussing confession, repentance, and relationality, Woodsfellow also draws wisdom from the Torah: “...When a man or woman commits any wrong toward a fellow man ... and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess the wrong he has done” (Numbers 5:6–8). Woodsfellow differentiates between the covert action of realizing and the overt action of confessing: *Realizing* a wrong is an internal process that involves awareness, self-judgement, guilt, and shame. *Confessing* is an external process that involves communication and relating to another person.

### Epilogue

In the words of Canadian educator Laurence Peter (1919–1990)<sup>4</sup> “Psychiatry enables us to correct our faults by confessing our parents’ shortcomings.” Having practiced as a psychotherapist for over 45 years, I have seen many people enter counseling and psychotherapy as poor substitutes for making amends. Although psychotherapy can lead to the self-awareness needed for making amends, there are many people who seem to use psychotherapy as a way of correcting their own faults by confessing those of others.

One true goal of psychotherapy is to increase the three As: Awareness, Acceptance, and Action. Making amends to others helps reduce one’s sense of *guilt*, whereas making amends to oneself helps reduce one’s sense of *shame*. When it comes to having the courage to change and make amends, our responsibility is to do our part. The other person’s response is not our responsibility.

## Notes

1. Reuel L. Howe was professor of pastoral theology, first at Philadelphia Divinity School, then at the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia. He founded the Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, and is the author of a number of books on pastoral studies.

2. I have always been struck by a section of the Book of Numbers 5:5-7 that reads “add its fifth to it,” which is really a way of making amends. This verse is an ancient foreshadowing of the wisdom found in the Eighth and Ninth Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA):

8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

In contrast, I have always found it ironic that the concept and practice of making amends is almost totally lacking in traditional Christianity, albeit with the exception of those who endorse the various horrible theories of *substitutionary atonement*:

The terrible and un-critiqued premise of many “substitutionary atonement theories” is that God demanded Jesus to be a blood sacrifice to “atone” for our sin-drenched humanity. As if God could need payment, and even a very violent transaction, to be able to love and accept God’s own children! These theories are based on retributive justice rather than the restorative justice that the prophets and Jesus taught. (Rohr, 2020, para. 4).

The alternative orthodoxy of the Franciscan view of atonement (often called “at-one-ment”) is that God did not demand Jesus’ blood as payment for sins, but that Jesus came to reveal the true nature of God as love.

With the exception of the story of the spiritual conversion of tax collector Zacchaeus, there is nothing in the New Testament about making amends to those we have harmed or wronged. In contrast, the writers of the Gospel of Luke set a pretty high bar:

<sup>8</sup> But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (Luke 19:8, NIV).

Given that Zacchaeus is identified as a “son of Abraham” in the next verse (Luke 19:9), his model of making amends had roots in the “Restitution for Wrongs” section of the Torah:

<sup>5</sup> יהוה spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>6</sup> Speak to the Israelites: When men or women individually commit any wrong toward a fellow human being, thus breaking faith with יהוה, and they realize their guilt, <sup>7</sup> they shall confess the wrong that they have done. They shall make restitution in the principal amount and add one-fifth to it, giving it to the one who was wronged. (Numbers 5:5-7, Sefaria).

The New International Version (NIV) provides the following translation:

<sup>5</sup> The Lord said to Moses, <sup>6</sup> “Say to the Israelites: ‘Any man or woman who wrongs another in any way<sup>[a]</sup> and so is unfaithful to the Lord is guilty <sup>7</sup> and must confess the sin they have committed. They must make full restitution for the wrong they have done, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the person they have wronged (Numbers 5:5-7, NIV).

[a] Numbers 5:6: “or woman who commits any wrong common to mankind”

According to one Jewish scholar, “add its fifth” means to add an additional 20%. In contrast, Zaccheus is talking about an additional 400%, which is very different (D. Woodsfellow, personal communication, May 30, 2022).

**4.** A functional analysis of behavior can be applied to *harmful actions* (acts of omission and especially acts of commission) and *amends*. An *operational definition* of behavior describes what the actions or behavior of interest looks like in a way that is observable, measurable, and repeatable. A behavior has validity only if it enables observers to capture what the behavior is and what it is not. A functional analysis of behavior includes a description of five variables:

- ✓ *Specificity* refers to the specific behavior that can be observed, measured, or recorded in some way.
- ✓ *Frequency* refers to the number of times the behavior occurred in a specific period of time.
- ✓ *Duration* refers to the length of time the behavior occurs in a specific period of time.

- ✓ *Intensity* refers to the strength of the behavior in a specific period of time.
- ✓ *Context* refers to the location, place, or setting where the behavior occurs.

**4.** Laurence Johnston Peter, Ed.D. (1919–1990) was a Canadian educator and *hierarchiologist* who was best known to the general public for the formulation of the Peter Principle: “In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence... [I]n time every post tends to be occupied by an employee who is incompetent to carry out its duties... Work is accomplished by those employees who have not yet reached their level of incompetence.” Peter also coined the term *hierarchiology* as the social science concerned with the basic principles of hierarchically organized systems in the human society:

“Having formulated the Principle, I discovered that I had inadvertently founded a new science, hierarchiology, the study of hierarchies. The term hierarchy was originally used to describe the system of church government by priests graded into ranks. The contemporary meaning includes any organization whose members or employees are arranged in order of rank, grade or class. Hierarchiology, although a relatively recent discipline, appears to have great applicability to the fields of public and private administration.” (Peter & Hull, 1969).

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