

**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 taking responsibility, making apologies, 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).

Maintaining self-awareness and admitting when we are wrong are so fundamental to healthy relationships that these principles are 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 for a person to never admit when wrong.

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 making a list of the things that others have done to wrong you, make a list of the things that you have done to wrong others. This list 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*). Jesus of Nazareth gave similar 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).

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 he changed his or her way of doing things.

Apologies can be cheap, especially when they are flippantly offered merely as a way of excusing unacceptable behavior. In contrast, sincere apologies carry the weight of *repentance*, which requires looking at one’s actions, feeling regret for one’s wrongs, and making a commitment to change. 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.

A sincere apology is a necessary but not sufficient condition for making amends. Making amends involves the 5 As: *attention* (being aware of when I was wrong), an *acknowledgement* (saying “I was wrong” without assigning any blame to the other), an *apology* (saying “I am sorry” without offering a defense or excuse), an *amendment* (“I have done this to set things right”), and an *agreement* or commitment (“I will not do it again”). In ongoing relationships, an additional component may involve *asking* the other person for feedback in the future (“Please let me know if you think I am wrong again”).

Making amends does not necessarily involve a request for forgiveness (“Will you forgive me?”), which can place an implicit burden on the other person. Neither does making amends involve a request for reconciliation (“Can we get back on track?”). Although receiving forgiveness and achieving reconciliation from

the other person can occur, 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 is not necessary for making restitution to the other person. At the same time, 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.

References

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