

**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).

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

**Awareness** requires being aware of when I was wrong.

**Admission** is an acknowledgement of accepting responsibility (“I was wrong”) without assigning any blame to the other. The operative word here is *promptly*, because procrastination can lead to rationalization and search for reasons not to make amends.

**Apology** involves saying “I am sorry” without offering any justification, argument, defense, or excuse (JADE).

**Amendment** means corrective action that says “I have done this to set things right.”

**Agreement** or commitment to the other person (“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 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.

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 the other may have no right (Doverspike, 2008). Giving forgiveness, especially when doing so is silent and unspoken, is a way of operationalizing love. In other words, forgiveness is compassion in action.

Psychologists and marriage and family therapists use the term *repair attempts* to refer to efforts that a couple makes to deescalate tension during a discussion that involves a disagreement. The success or failure of such 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. See also

“Making Amends” for a description of essentially the same concept using a different terminology that is used by individuals in 12-Step programs.

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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