

**HOW TO MAKE AN APOLOGY:  
A KEY TO INTERPERSONAL RECONCILIATION**

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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 for our actions and making a sincere apology when we are wrong. In reality, there are two major reasons why people use apologies, and thus two types of apologies.<sup>1</sup> Sure, there may be many more types, but a binary model simplifies things a bit.<sup>2</sup> One type is the surface or *superficial apology*, which mainly functions as an excuse for unacceptable actions. The other type is the structural or *sincere apology*, which can function as a pathway to repentance and reconciliation.

**Superficial apology.** Some people use superficial apologies simply to feel better about themselves. It is all about them. All they need to do is admit they made a mistake. At a minimum, they make no admission at all, simply dismissing their actions with an “I’m sorry” only when they are caught. It is a passive form of an excuse. At best, their motivation may be out of guilt, suggesting the rudimentary development of a conscience. At worst, they may have learned to use apologies as a way getting pardons without having to give anything in return—or make any changes in their behavior. A person can make apologies all day long but if there is no change in the person’s behavior, then the apologies are meaningless. Superficial apologies are cheap, especially when they are flippantly offered merely as an excuse of unacceptable behavior.

**Sincere apologies.** 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 one’s behavior. Ideally, repentance paves the way for *restitution*, which involves restoration of the relationship. However, because for some people the term “restitution” has acquired a legal or even litigious connotation, the term *reconciliation* is more often used in interpersonal relationships. The term “reconciliation” carries with it the implication of interpersonally reconciling the relationship with the other person. The motivation of a sincere apology grows out of empathy and a genuine concern for the other person’s feelings. The concern is for the other person—and the relationship itself—and not simply for the offender. This type of apology can help heal a relationship. A sincere apology can be a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for making amends, receiving forgiveness, and achieving reconciliation. As a general rule, a sincere apology is a prerequisite for reconciliation, but reconciliation is not a prerequisite for an apology. An apology can also be contrasted to making amends: Making an *apology* requires *words*, whereas making *amends* requires *actions* (Doverspike, 2015, p. 1).

**Making an apology.** There are the three steps needed to make a genuine or sincere apology:

**Step 1. Say “I am sorry.”** Don’t say “I’m sorry.”

In saying “I am sorry,” each word requires more intentionality and increases the specificity of meaning. Acknowledge the other person’s feelings by saying it out loud (e.g., “That must have hurt”). A genuine apology not only consists of the *content* of *what* is said but also the *authenticity* of *how* it is said. Expressing sorrow does not in itself make us guilty, but rather expresses empathy and care for what the other person is already feeling in the moment regardless of how we may have caused the harm of hurt. We do not have to question whether the perceived impact of actions or words makes sense. Just because an action or word would not affect us doesn’t mean that it might not affect someone else.

**Step 2. Say “It was my fault.”** If our actions or words were the cause of an injury experienced by the other person, we acknowledge it by saying it out loud. It may be an opportune moment to ask how our actions or inactions affected the other person. Again, we do not question whether it makes sense. Feelings do not have to make sense to be experienced. We lower our defenses and open our hearts to hear the other’s concerns. We listen to learn, but we do not listen to mentally plan a defensive rebuttal. We remember to avoid JADE: We don’t justify, argue, defend, or explain. Instead, if our actions are criticized, we consider responding with “You may be right.” By finding a way to agree with some part of the criticism, we remain open to finding insights and new patterns of communication.

**Step 3. Ask “What can I do?”** We ask what we can do to make things better again. We don’t think that because we said “I am sorry,” things are over. Rather than stopping at Step 2—or rushing to offer what we think the solution should be—we ask the person

what we can do to set things right and regain their trust. Most people have at least some idea of what can be done to repair the relationship. By asking explicitly, we have a better chance of not making the same mistake again.

**Example of an apology.** The three steps needed to make an apology are used below:

**Step 1.** “I am sorry that I ignored you at the meeting [apology]. It must have been awkward for you to have been the only newcomer” [empathy].

**Step 2.** “It is my fault [responsibility]. I was so focused on the project that I completely forgot that you didn’t know any of the people there [intentions].”

**Step 3.** “What would you need from me next time so that things will go better? [repair]” or “What can I do to make things better? [intentions]”

**Repair attempts.** Psychologists use the term *repair attempts* to refer to efforts that couples make to deescalate tension during a discussion that involves a conflict or 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 the pattern is whether the couple’s repair attempts succeed or fail. Failed repair attempts provide an accurate marker for an unhappy future. An apology alone can be the beginning of repairing a relationship and the regular practice of these principles can help maintain a healthy relationship. Making sincere apologies, admitting when we are wrong, and seeking reconciliation can go a long way toward improving our relationships with others.

**Repentance.** The concept of *repentance* (Hebrew: תשובה, literally, “return,” pronounced tshuva or teshuva) is one element of atoning for sin. In Judaism, there is the recognition that everyone sins on occasion, but that people can stop or minimize those occasions in the future by repenting for their past transgressions. “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). In writing about the relationship between atonement and reconciliation, Levine (2018) observes, “Saying ‘sorry’ is not enough. We must move from regret and remorse to action” (p. 12).

The idea of repentance is similar to *metanoia*, an English transliteration of the Greek μετάνοια (literally, “after-thought” or “beyond-thought”), which has variously been understood as atonement, transformative change, or spiritual conversion. The verbal cognate *metanoeo* (Greek: μετανοέω) has been translated as *repent*.

**The Five Rs.** The concept of repentance can be operationalized in terms of the five Rs:

1. **Responsibility** requires recognizing that we have done wrong. *Mea culpa* (Latin, literally “through my fault”) is an acknowledgement of having done wrong. The phrase originated from the *Confiteor* (a prayer of confession of sinfulness) used in the Roman Rite at the beginning of Mass or when receiving the sacrament of Penance. This component can be put into words: “I was wrong.”
2. **Regret** consists of genuine remorse for having done wrong and for the pain or problem we caused. Regret does not involve guilt at getting caught for a wrongdoing, but rather guilt based on empathy for having harmed or injured the other person. Put into words, expressing regret is said, “I am sorry that I \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. **Resolve** involves a commitment to never repeat the action again. Without such a commitment, an apology becomes nothing more than an excuse to engage in the same action when the same situation or temptation arises in the future. Probably the most difficult of the four R’s, resolve is a commitment to change one’s actions. Although it may be implicit, resolve is made stronger when it is explicit: One practices resolve by saying, “I will do my best not to do it again.”
4. **Repair** means to engage in corrective action that says (even without words), “I have done this to set things right.” As a form of restorative justice on an interpersonal level, keeping up with repairs in relationships is similar to the ongoing maintenance by making amends.
5. **Remind** means to remember that we must remain self-aware as we monitor our thoughts and actions in the future. In ongoing relationships that are intimate and significant, this component can also include a reminder to the other person. While maintaining personal accountability and without burdening the other, we may consider making the disclosure: “I hope you will let me know if you see me slip, because our relationship is important to me.” The final “R of relationship is why making sincere apologies and amends help deepen and strengthen relationships.

### 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 his 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.

### Ten Important Words

Ten of the most important words include: “I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me.” It’s not only easier read than done, and it’s not even 10 words.

### Notes

1. A third type of apology, falling somewhere in the middle of the other two, would be a *social apology*, which functions as a type of social bid. Many of us make these gestures on a daily basis for small things. For example, if I inadvertently turn the corner with my grocery cart and almost bump or crowd another customer at the store, I simply apologize and let the other person pass first. My apology did not mean that I was intentionally trying to bump others, or that I was trying to harm someone, or that I intend to continue running into people with my grocery cart. Instead, making a repair bid is a way of striving to be respectful, taking responsibility for my side of the lane, and treating others the way I like to be treated. On many occasions, it may be the other person who makes a social apology in this context. Regarding it as a *social bid*, I simply reciprocate by saying something like “excuse me, “no problem,” or “we’re good” (with appropriate intonation of voice to communicate positive affect). A social bid (also known as a bid for connection) is described by psychologist John Gottman as “the fundamental unit of emotional communication” (Gottman & DeClaire, 1993, p. 4). Like bids for connection, a social apology functions as a type of glue that holds social networks together.

2. A fourth type of apology—which is not even an apology—is an expression of consolation or sorrow. An expression of *consolation* refers to the emotional and psychological comfort given to someone who has suffered a severe, significant upsetting loss—such as the death of a loved one. For example, an expression of consolation might begin with, “I am so sorry for your loss.” It is typically provided by

expressing shared regret for the loss and, later in time later, by expressing a realistic sense of hope for the future.

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