

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

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There are two major reasons why people use apologies, and thus two types of apologies. Sure, there may be many more types, but a binary model simplifies things a bit. 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 them. 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. Superficial apologies are cheap, especially when they are flippantly offered merely as a way of excusing 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. 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.

**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.” Instead, say “I am sorry,” because each word requires more effort and increases specificity of meaning. Acknowledge the other person’s feelings by saying it out loud (e.g., “That must have hurt”). We express sorrow for the pain the other person has experienced. It may be helpful to ask the other person what specific action or inaction caused the pain or injury. Expressing sorrow does not make us guilty, but rather expresses empathy and care for what the other person is already feeling in the moment regardless of who or what may have caused the hurt. We do not question whether it makes sense. Just because something wouldn’t affect us doesn’t mean that it might not affect someone else.

**Step 2. Say “It was my fault.”** If our behavior was the cause of the injury, we say it out loud. It may be an opportune moment to ask how our actions or inactions affected the other person. 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 use 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 can find insights and new patterns of communication.

**Step 3. Say “What do need from me?”** 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 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. It must have been awkward for you to have been the only newcomer.”

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

**Step 3.** “What would you need from me next time so that things will go better?”

**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. A sincere 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 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 *metanoëo* (Greek: μετανοέω) has been translated as *repent*.

In secular terms, the concept of repentance can be operationalized in terms of the five R’s:

**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 agreement to the other person. 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.

## References

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