

Susan Heitler, Ph.D.
4500 East 9th Ave, Suite 660
Denver, CO 80220
303 388-4211

Apologies

Apologies remove the toxic sting from mistaken interactions. An effective apology, however, is a complex event. Interestingly, apology is broadly used as a mediation intervention in China¹, and is listed as an appeasing technique for mitigating conflict in Japanese conflict resolution² but seldom mentioned in American literature on conflict resolution.

Ideally, a full apology includes the following six elements¹:

1. Full acknowledgment of the problematic behaviors. Saying what happened needs to include taking responsibility (“I did do x.”) for the troubling action.

Acknowledging, “I did do x, and I see now that it was mistaken,” indicates that the harmdoer both admits having taken the action and comprehends how this action has been hurtful. The opposite of taking responsibility is evidenced if the harmdoer says, “I did x, but..” and then goes on to give excuses or to counter blame.

Any verbalizations by the harmdoer of what the other participant has done to contribute to the problematic event is inappropriate at this point. Focusing on the other’s role indicates a deficit in the assumption of personal responsibility for his/her actions. Any form of blaming the messenger, or of blaming anyone other than self, will undermine the effectiveness of this first step in the apology process. The recipient of the harmdoer’s apology may add, “Yes, and I can see that I also was mistaken when I ...,” but if the harmdoer speaks about the harm recipient’s actions, s/he will diminish his/her own apology. The harmdoer’s focus must at this point be only on his/her own wrong-doing.

By contrast, expression of awareness of the impacts of his/her actions on the other does increase the effectiveness of a harmdoer’s apology. “I see now that in response to what I did you experienced pain/sorrow/fear...etc.” clarifies that the harmdoer understands the effects his/her actions had on the recipient.

If a harmdoer has compounded his/her problematic behaviors by lying, minimizing, or any form of cover up, additional apologies are necessary specific to these actions.

¹For a more complete discussion of the ingredients of an effective apology see Chapter 7, “Cleaning Up After Toxic Spills” in S. Heitler, **The Power of Two: Secrets to a Strong & Loving Marriage** (New Harbinger, 1997).

Lying in any form must be included in the acknowledgment of mistakes, and in subsequent steps of the apology as well. Often the lying of a coverup is as, or even more, damaging than the initial problem.

2. Expression of regret for the suffering that was incurred. The words “I’m sorry ...” convey the heart of an apology, that is, verbalization of regret that one’s actions have led to another’s suffering. Pain is there to make us aware of a problem. When a harmdoer conveys empathy, concern for the other, and self-reproach for having caused suffering, the harm-receiver’s emotional pain begins to diminish. As a wise patient once told me, “To the extent that he (the harmdoer) remembers, I can forget.”

3. Statement of non-intentionality, e.g., “I didn’t intent to hurt you.” After a car accident, most drivers would immediately get out of their car and express concern and regret coupled with non-intentionality--“Are you okay? I’m so sorry! I sure didn’t intend to hit you!” This expression that the intention was benign even if the outcome of a person’s actions proved harmful reduces the recipient’s anger.

4. Clarification of mitigating circumstances. At this point, exploration of factors that had bearing on the event can aid in clarifying how and why the upsetting interaction unintentionally occurred. Sequence makes a difference here however. If mitigating circumstances are described before acknowledging errors, expressing regret, and clarifying non-intentionality, explaining these circumstances sounds like making excuses for the mishap.

5. Restitution. Damages from the mistaken behavior need to be assessed and appropriate recompense considered.

6. Learning. A plan to prevent recurrences of similar events in the future begins the transformation of a harmful event into one that can produce positive eventual outcomes.

Reconciliation is the outcome when both sides have genuinely acknowledged their mistakes, expressed apologies for suffering that resulted, and accepted one another’s apologies.

¹Wall, J. A., Sohn, D-W., Cleeton, N., Jin, D. J. (1995). Community and family mediation in the People's Republic of China. International journal of conflict management, (6)1.

²Ohbuchi, K. and Fukushima, O. (1997). Personality and interpersonal conflict: Aggressiveness, self-monitoring, and situational variables. International journal of conflict management (8)2.