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## **Apologies and Forgiveness**

**Expert Article by Susan Heitler, Ph.D.**

**For Issues: Relationships and Marriage**

Apologies remove the toxic sting from mistaken interactions. After upsets, which are conflicts that have happened in the past, effective apologies convert a relationship from antagonistic back to collaborative. They convert a negative view of the other back to mutual respect and trust. They also change the emotions of the victim from anger back to acceptance, a process often termed forgiveness.

What are the active ingredients of an effective apology? What components enable these beneficial transformations to occur?

**Two basic premises.** One key premise in effective apologies is that all the participants in upsetting interactions generally have had good intentions. Rather than wanting to hurt each other, the participant(s) in the upset were subject to mistakes, misperceptions or other “misses.” The problem, that is, was not the person but the problem—the miscommunication, misunderstanding, mistaken action, etc. Part of the clean up process therefore needs to be to find the “miss.”

A second key premise is that the game is not over when folks experience an upset. To the contrary, mistakes are for learning. The goal of apologies therefore is to concretize the learning in order to raise the likelihood that a similar event will not reoccur. That way a curse or upsetting event can be turned into a blessing.

**Six Steps.** A fully effective apology is a complex multi-step endeavor. After mini-mistakes, a brief apology of just a few sentences can cover most of these six elements sufficiently. “I’m sorry I just bumped into you. I sure didn’t mean to. I was rushing and didn’t even notice you standing there. Are

you ok? I'm so glad. In the future even if I'm in a hurry I'm not going to dash around corners like that." In response to more complex and emotionally-evocative or damaging situations however, a full six-step apology is likely to be more lengthy.

Let's take the example of a husband, Paul, who phoned his wife that he would be home by 6:00. To his wife's distress, Paul did not walk through the front door until 7:00.

### **1. Acknowledgement of the mistake.**

Saying "Oh no. I'm really late. I feel terrible about that," gets the apology ball rolling.

Paul looked at his wife's chagrin when he arrived home an hour late. He realized immediately that his casualness about time had created a problem. Paul launches his apology sequence by acknowledging his mistake, so there's no doubt that he understands what the problem was in his action.

The worst response from an apologizing harm-doer, the one that can most severely compound the antagonism his/her problematic behavior has created, is to lie. If Paul fudged the facts saying, "I didn't say 6:00; I told you 7:00!" he would surely further infuriate Claire. Any form of cover up exacerbates the extent to which a wrong-doer causes damage. In fact, as a general rule, lying or any form of cover-up is even more damaging than the initial problem. This damage is even more severe if the original problem already involved secrecy and trust issues. After financial mistakes that have been hidden, addictive behaviors, or sexual infidelities, for instance, lying makes recovery radically more difficult.

What would have happened if Paul had admitted his mistake, and then indulged in *minimizing* it--if Paul had said "I wasn't *that* late!" The apology would then make the situation worse rather than better. Minimizing the error is provocative rather than soothing.

What if Paul had indulged himself in *blame-the-victim*, insisting, "Look, you could have fed the kids earlier!" Blame-the-victim, as opposed to Paul's mature acknowledgment of his mistake, would have instantly taken a problematic situation and amplified its negative consequences, further antagonizing instead of soothing his wife.

Verbalizations by a harmdoer of what the other participant has contributed to the problematic event can similarly undo apology attempts. “You should have told me you’d been cooking,” would be extremely provocative. Any form of telling the other what she or he should have done is essentially blaming the victim. Focusing on the other’s role indicates a deficit in the assumption of personal responsibility for his/her actions, so blaming anyone other than one’s self totally undermines the effectiveness of the first step in the apology process.

Paul stays focused on his, and only his, contributions to the problem. “That extra hour I took buried in the work on my desk was not worth letting you down. It’s like I stole time from you—from us—and gave it to my company.”

By contrast, Claire herself, the recipient of the apology, may add insights about her role in the upset. This addition could be very helpful in the mutual healing process. “Yes, and I can see that I also was mistaken when I didn’t let you know I would be cooking a special dinner for you. I wanted to surprise you. At the same time I know that you often mean ‘between 6 and 7’ when you say you’ll be home at 6:00, and usually I don’t mind, so I’ve been training you to be casual about the time.”

A response like this from Claire would convert Paul’s simple apology into a double apology. Both partners then are aiming to learn something from the distressing event. Double apologies help the most to decrease the likelihood of future repetitions of similar upsets.

**2. Expression of regret**, with detailing of the damage 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.

To the extent that Paul is able to explain his understanding of the harm done by his action, his apology will ring all the more true. ““I’m so sorry Claire! I can see that my arriving home an hour after when I told you I’d be back has been real upsetting for you.”

The more specific detailing of the harm that has been done, the higher the impact of an “I’m sorry” statement. “I’m sorry I was late! I see that you made a lovely dinner which has been sitting getting cold

on the table. Wow! What a great meal! And now the kids are melting down because dinner is so late.” In these ways Paul, the harmdoer, is going well beyond the simple words, “I’m sorry.” He clearly understands the problems his action has caused.

Pain, physical or emotional, arises to make us aware of a problem. When a harmdoer expresses regret, the victim no longer needs the pain to continue because both the harm-doer and the victim now have an explicit and shared awareness of the problem. By acknowledging and expressing regret for the suffering caused by his error, the harm-doer thus enables the victim’s emotional pain to begin to diminish.

However, Claire may appreciate Paul’s apology thus far and yet still continue to feel distressed. Her continued pain indicates a hurt that has not yet been fully aired. “I spent two hours, my whole free hour during the kids’ naps cooking a souffle for you and now it’s just a soggy scrambled egg!” If Claire is having trouble regaining her sense of well-being after receiving an apology, Paul would be well-advised to continue to ask about, listen for, accept and even amplify her concerns.

“I feel so bad!” Paul might continue, digesting aloud the further concerns Claire has shared with him. “I love souffles, and even more love that you were willing to make my favorite food instead of taking your break to exercise!” Claire is now cleansing herself of bad feelings and handing the residues to her husband. Paul’s out-loud digestion of what his wife has explained about her distress enables the clean-up to be effective.

**3. Statement of non-intentionality, e.g., “I didn’t intend to hurt you.”** After a car accident, most drivers would immediately get out of their car and couple their expressions of responsibility and regret with a statement non-intentionality--“ I bumped into the back of your car! Are you okay? I’m so sorry! *I sure didn’t intend to hit you.*”

Expressing that the intention was benign even if the outcome of a person’s actions proved harmful reduces the victim’s anger. Paul therefore needs to be sure to add, “I sure didn’t mean to hurt you, or the kids, when I was so slow getting out of my office.”

**4. Explanation of mitigating circumstances.** At this point, verbalizing the factors that had bearing on the event now can aid in clarifying how and why the unintended hurt occurred.

Sequence makes a big difference here. If someone tries to explain mitigating circumstances before first acknowledging and expressing regret for his error and the harm it has caused, explaining the circumstances sounds like making excuses for the mishap.

Beware also of the potent little word *but*. A sure way to backspace-delete his apology would have been for Paul to say “I do feel terrible about having been late, *but* ....”

“I did x, *but*..” erases all the prior expressions of regret, responsibility-taking, and non-intentionality. Even if the additional information is totally valid, the word “but,” by erasing what was said earlier, causes legitimate explanations of what happened to come across as excuses.

**5. Restitution.** Now it’s time to switch from looking backward to looking forward toward problem-solving by assessing damages and finding how to remedy them.

How might Paul offer restitution? One option might be for him to suggest that he will put all the kids to bed tonight so Claire can have the evening off, having given up her daytime free hour to cook the souffle. Another option might be to offer to bring a special family dinner home the next night for a compensatory family party.

**6. Learning.** The final and most important outcome of an upset is a plan to prevent recurrences in the future. Paul’s remaining job thus will be to convert the bad feelings generated by his mistake, including his own guilt, shame and regret, into positive learning. A plan of action for prevention of similar upsets in the future transforms the curse of a harmful event into a blessing.

Remember now the first premise, that the problem is the *problem* not the *person*. “I’ll be more considerate,” would be about Paul as a person. Learning is only effective if the focus is on specific behaviors and systems. “In the future I’m going to aim to be home earlier than I tell you rather than later. I’d feel terrific if every time I told you I’ll be home at 6:00 I was home fifteen minutes before the

scheduled arrival. I think that what I need to do to make this happen is instead of just saying to you, and to myself, when I'll be home, I need to calculate what time I'll leave. Then, I need to calculate what time I'll need to start clearing my desk to be sure I'll really leave at that time."

A helpful clinical saying goes like this: "To the extent that he (the harmdoer) remembers, I can forget." Remembering in this case refers both to fully understanding how the mistake occurred, and to having a complete plan of action for handling similar situations more effectively in the future.

For Paul to learn from his error, he needs to analyze carefully what happened between his comment to his wife that he would be home by 6:00 and his actual home arrival at 7:00. Did he start his leaving rituals too late? Did he take one more look at his e-mail, and then lose time answering it? A plan to keep his email closed for his last half hour at work might help. Or did the problem happen earlier, with an unrealistic estimation of the work he would need to finish before leaving for home? Under-promise and then over-perform might be a better policy for the future.

**What is forgiveness?** Forgiveness is readiness to move forward again with cooperative, and hopefully, in the context of marriage, even loving attitudes. An effective apology generally causes a victim's forgiveness to flow spontaneously.

In this instance, however, Claire still felt angry at Paul, even after his full apology sequence. Paul then would be well-advised to ask a remaining magic question: "Is there any piece of this that still feels unfinished?" An alternative version of this question, often similarly helpful, is "If you look at your continued anger in the best possible light, what is it intended to accomplish?"

"I think I'm worried that when my parents come next week to visit you'll regress back to saying one time for coming home and then again returning much later. I would be embarrassed for you, and mad at you. It means so much to me that my parents see us being happy together. If you repeat the late-guy routine I know I would feel furious."

“I get it. It’s always important that I be home when I say I’ll be home—that I not unilaterally change a plan we’ve made together. At the same time, the stakes are all the higher when your folks are here. I do get it. Thank you so much for figuring out this additional piece!”

Eye contact. Smiles. A warm hug. Reconciliation accomplished. One more lemon turned to lemonade.

For 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).