

Conscious Apologies

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Introduction

Some people just hate to apologize. They deny or ignore mistakes or behavior that is harmful to others. They refuse to admit that they are wrong. They act as if being wrong means that they are terrible people. The problem with never apologizing, of course, is that you can cause conflicts to escalate and can severely damage relationships.

Other people say "I'm sorry" when there is no logical reason for them to be sorry. Women, especially, are often socialized to please others – and to worry about disapproval. Saying, "I'm sorry" anytime there is potential confusion or discomfort can seem like a way to make everyone feel okay. The problem is that constantly apologizing can make you feel and seem less powerful than you really are.



Instead of habitually never apologizing or always apologizing, we can become conscious about when and how to apologize and about what to say and do instead when saying "I'm sorry" is inappropriate. Conscious apologies can improve our relationships and increase our ability to act as powerful respectful individuals.

Why Apologize?

When you say or do something that upsets or harms someone else, the three words, "I am sorry" can save you a lot of time and prevent a lot of problems. It is of course important that you have a good intention and that you understand for yourself what the other person did to contribute to the problem. If someone feels hurt, telling this person that he or she is wrong for feeling that way will cause further upset and diminish trust. Empathizing instead can diminish conflict and built trust.

What Makes Apologizing Hard?

Some people feel as if apologizing is degrading, or it implies a negative intention on their part. Remember that nobody is perfect and that mistakes are part of learning. The concern is not what our intentions are but what the impact of our behavior is on others. The rule is that if anyone is hurt, uncomfortable, or left out, that is important. It is not our job to change those feelings, but it is our job to apologize for anything we may have done or failed to do that led to those feelings.

Avoid Mixed Apologies

Mixing explanations, justifications, or qualifiers with an apology can diminish your communication. For example, saying, "I am sort of sorry, but I did this because _____" can backfire and make the other person feel as if you don't really mean what you are saying.

When apologizing, try to use simple clear language. Your goal is not to protect yourself, but to acknowledge the other person's feelings.

Being Sorry While Setting Boundaries

Don't make promises you should not keep by saying that you will do or not do something just because someone is unhappy about it. Sometimes we will need to set boundaries that hurt the feelings of others in order to keep our own integrity. For example, we teach children to say, "I am sorry that this hurt your feelings **and** I still do not want you to touch me."

Inappropriate Apologies

If what happened is truly not harming or upsetting someone else, there is no reason to apologize. There is no reason to be sorry for making mistakes while learning, for example. There is no reason to apologize for asking for help. There is no reason to apologize for setting a boundary.

Mistakes Are Part of Learning

When you are learning something new, give yourself permission to make lots of mistakes or to forget everything. If somebody gives you feedback to help you learn and remember, the best response is usually to say "Thank you!"

Sometimes adults think that it will undermine their authority if children see that they are wrong. However, it can be very empowering for children to see that we as adults are cheerfully willing to acknowledge when we make mistakes instead of denying or ignoring them. We can show in the moment the truth of the belief that nobody is perfect and that mistakes are part of learning.

Learn From the Message Despite the Delivery

In working relationships, one of the greatest gifts others can give us is their honest opinion. Because people are often uncomfortable about expressing critical opinions, important feedback might not always be delivered in positive terms. Even if it is very negative feedback, the best response is usually to say, "Thank you for telling me." We are thanking this person for the information, not for the negativity.

Saying, "I'm Sorry" Without Apologizing

In English, the words "I'm sorry" can also be used to mean, "I'm sorry that this happened to you." This is not an apology. "I'm sorry" in this context is often the **most** appropriate thing to say when something bad has happened to someone.

Changing Automatic Apology Habits

It is challenging to change any long-established behavior patterns, and it is important not to feel bad while you are doing it. Our goal is to become as fully conscious of our behavior as possible so that we are making choices rather than reacting to a situation as if we are on automatic pilot - not getting triggered and either shutting down or exploding in anger, but getting centered instead. We don't want to refuse to apologize because of fear that this will diminish our worth and we only want to apologize when we are clear about the reason why this specific apology is appropriate.

Instead of hating the behavior and blaming ourselves for having it, it works better to understand that this behavior developed as a coping mechanism that served a purpose in our lives. Instead of being mad at ourselves for struggling when we want to change a behavior pattern, we can honor ourselves for having the courage to work on growing into a more centered positive person.

If you are always apologizing, here are some steps that have worked for others:

1. Recognize that you are apologizing all the time and why it is important to stop - because you want to be fully present, take up all the space you are entitled to, and feel powerful and effective.
2. Become aware in the moment of when you are apologizing without feeling bad about it. Try to step back emotionally and ask people around you to help you to increase your awareness in a supportive way, without making fun of you or being irritated.

Here's a technique that can work for "I'm sorry" and other speech patterns such as "Actually," "You know," "like," "uh," "um," etc. Set a time on a regular basis where someone will simply count the number of times you say "I'm sorry" and tell you what the number is. Or, give someone a bright pink card and ask the person to hold up the card each time you say, "I'm sorry." Instead of saying "Oh, sorry! I did it AGAIN!," find something supportive to say to yourself such as, "How interesting!"

It's amazing how often just having the apology or other speech pattern pointed out to you helps to reduce it.

1. Practice using a different behavior to replace the apology. You can decide, before each apology to ask yourself, "Why am I apologizing? Does this really make sense?" You can breathe quietly instead of apologizing.

If you are someone who hates to apologize, here are some ways to learn how to use this tool in building better relationships:

2. Take some time to reflect on what upsets you about having to apologize. Think about times when not apologizing has harmed important relationships in your life. Try to reframe negative messages, such as, "Apologizing makes me feel weak or look bad." Instead, find positive messages such as, "Taking responsibility for the impact, intended or not, of my behavior on others makes me a more powerful respectful person."
3. Get comfortable with the language of simple apologies. Practice apologizing to yourself out loud in the mirror without adding any explanation, justification, or qualifying language. Just say something like, "I'm sorry that what I did was hurtful to you." Try expressing empathy instead of defending yourself. You can put yourself in the other person's shoes by saying something like, "If someone did that to me, I'd be upset too."

4. Practice getting centered when someone sounds upset with you or accuses you of doing something wrong. Just breathe quietly for a moment and try to listen without judgment. Expressing understanding for another person's point of view and being sorry if they are upset with you is about building trust, not about who is right or who is wrong.

As you work on becoming conscious about apologies, look for progress, not perfection, and celebrate your growth each step of the way!

To Sum Up

One important key to effective appropriate communication is to make apologizing or not apologizing or saying "I'm sorry" conscious decisions rather than automatic habits.

Sometimes people even have dual habits of apologizing unnecessarily for small things and refusing to apologize for large problems. For example, one supporter told us: *"One of my housemates regularly apologizes unnecessarily for talking too quickly, for not talking at all, or for being tired at the end of the day, but then will be defensive and make excuses for not doing chores or for being rude. It is amazing how some habits develop! Even though I cannot change my housemate's habits, I have become more conscious of my own apology patterns. It is so important to know when to say 'I am sorry,' and when to think before apologizing."* Often, when we change our own habits, it can have a positive effect on those around us as well.