Tips for An Effective Apology

Elements of an Effective Apology

1. Expression of remorse, a genuine "I'm sorry."
2. Specific statement of what you are taking responsibility or accountability for.
3. Acknowledgement of harm or impact. You can recognize someone else's experience as legitimate, even if you felt differently.
4. Intention for future action, whether that is doing something specific to make amends or how you would aim to handle a similar situation differently in the future.

Things to *Avoid* in a Strong Apology

1. Don't make excuses. While it's OK to offer some explanation if you think it will help, the other person was impacted regardless of your positive intent. Use of the word "but" is often a clue that the apologizer is attempting to justify what they did, so it should generally be avoided (with some exceptions as in the case below).
2. Don't pressure the other person to offer forgiveness or do anything in response.
3. Don't overdo it. Over-apologizing puts the focus back on you when it belongs on the other person's well-being instead.

Examples below originally by Julie Corliss, modified by Kavana & Kalil.

EFFECTIVE WORDING	**WHY IT WORKS**
"I'm sorry I lost my temper last night. I've been under a lot of pressure at work, but that's no excuse for my behavior. I love you and will try harder not to take my frustrations out on you."	Takes responsibility, explains but does not excuse why the mistake happened; expresses remorse and caring, and promises reparation.
"I forgot, and I apologize for this mistake. It shouldn't have happened. What can I do to avoid this problem in the future?"	Takes responsibility and begins a conversation about how to remedy the error.
"Hey, I'm really sorry. That was a poor judgment on my part and I should have known better."	Owns what happened and recognizes the mistake.
INEFFECTIVE WORDING	**WHY IT DOESN'T WORK**
"I apologize for whatever happened."	Language is vague; offense isn't specified.
"Mistakes were made."	Use of passive voice avoids responsibility.
"Okay, I apologize. I didn't know this was such a sensitive issue for you."	Sounds grudging, thrusts the blame back on to the offended person.

Why Apologize
Apologizing is a bid toward reconnection after a relationship rupture. It helps reestablish safety and rapport. By acknowledging the past, the parties are able to move into the present and future. A good apology, especially if followed by effective action, restores trust and brings healing.

Why Act Unilaterally
Ideally, both parties are able to take responsibility for pieces of the conflict, and come back into connection with awareness of their own blind spots and growth edges. However, if the other person cannot own their part in a conflict, it can still be freeing and clarifying for us to approach a conversation by taking responsibility for our part in the situation. Even if you don't want to reestablish connection, this can help you to accept that the other person isn't able to take responsibility for their part and move on from the dynamic.

Why Not Apologize

- If an apology does not feel sincere, it may make things worse. Sincerity is expressed by both what you say and how you say it.
- Apologies are often taught in childhood as a reflex: a way to defuse conflict when it's too soon or we don't feel genuine remorse. When we apologize in this way, we may be enabling unhealthy patterns, or denying our own truth for the sake of the relationship.
- Apologizing supports repair in an ongoing relationship with someone you are invested in. Sometimes the effort is not worth it given the context.

Why Request An Apology?
If we are in an ongoing relationship and feel unresolved conflict below the surface, it can block whatever genuine connection may be possible. Sometimes the relationship cannot recover or deepen until we share our experience. You will be in a better position to request an apology if you are willing to hear the other person's experience too, and to take responsibility for whichever pieces of the conflict are yours.

Responding to an Apology

There is also an art to responding to apologies in ways that deepen trust and increase the likelihood of being able to repair future ruptures. When we can take in the apology and also offer some grace to the person apologizing, it cultivates safety for them to offer future apologies. If we add shame or pile on other mistakes or failures when someone apologizes, we miss the chance to receive their genuine remorse, and we affirm their fear that apologizing is too vulnerable or not worth doing.

Getting out of the "Offender/Victim" binary

The more power differential exists in the relationship, the more it may fit into a clear “offender” and “victim” binary--however unless you have no agency at all in the situation, there is likely to be at least some responsibility for each party. Yet, we often approach an apology as an opportunity to be proven right by the other person’s admission of guilt; we often feel that only one person should need to apologize. It is important to acknowledge your part in any conflict, even if the only thing you could have done differently was to end the interaction sooner or express your boundary more clearly. What is the 5% or 10% of responsibility you can take for the situation? Can you apologize for that, even if the other person cannot apologize for their part in what happened? This allows us to be more empowered and at choice, releasing us from being a victim of someone else’s actions.

Gifts of an Effective Apology

Apologizing is an opportunity to build intimacy and trust, through shared vulnerability. We also get to build trust in ourselves, knowing that we show up for repair when we make mistakes or hurt people we care about. It is an opportunity to release resentment and rebuild connection. **How can we center the *opportunity* of apology rather than the *risk* of it?**

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