

# HOW TO GIVE A GOOD APOLOGY

BY KIM BOIVIN, RCC

**K**nowing how to effectively apologize is one of the most important skills we can develop in life. It has a huge effect on our overall quality of life.

When I work with couples, I get to see how people give and receive apologies. I get to see the kinds of apologies that don't work and may do further damage, and I also get to see apologies that work and create more closeness and bonding.

As counsellors, often it's a key part of our job to help couples learn how to give and receive good apologies and to experience their healing benefits. When we receive a good apology, we know it. It's like we have a built-in system in our bodies, hearts, and brains that recognizes a good apology. We feel acknowledged, and we feel relieved.

While helping our clients learn better apologizing skills may be a positive part of therapy, as counsellors, we can also benefit from honing these skills in our own lives.

## WHAT A GOOD APOLOGY LOOKS LIKE AND SOUNDS LIKE.

A good apology is heartfelt, sincere, and deep. It is given with eye contact that is soft and body language that is open. The words are said in a soft/gentle, slow way. It's obvious through this body language, tone of voice, and the words used that the person feels remorse and feels the hurt the other person feels. While the words "I'm sorry" are offered, they are offered along with the following:

- Acknowledgement of wrongdoing (in a specific way)

*"I should not have reprimanded you in front of everyone."*

- Acceptance of responsibility (no blame or defensiveness)

*"It was unprofessional of me to speak to you as I did."*

- Expression of remorse and empathy

*"It must have been very upsetting for you, as well as for the others present."*

- Offer of compensation (that is meaningful to the receiver)

*"I will acknowledge and apologize for my behaviour at today's meeting."*

## HOW TO APOLOGIZE APPROPRIATELY

"I'M SORRY" IS NOT ALWAYS GOOD ENOUGH



The secret ingredient to offering a sincere apology is **INTENTION**.

### FOLLOW THIS FOUR-LINE FORMULA

1	I'M SORRY FOR...	1
2	I WAS WRONG BECAUSE...	2
3	IN THE FUTURE, I WILL...	3
4	WILL YOU FORGIVE...	4

### HOW TO SAY SORRY IN SIX SIMPLE STEPS

- 1 Apologize before it's too late.
- 2 Examine the situation.
- 3 Realize the hurt you caused.
- 4 Take charge for the damage.
- 5 Make sure to seek forgiveness.
- 6 Promise it won't happen again.



- Communication not to repeat the transgression in the future

*"In the future, I will address any concerns I have constructively and privately."*

Sometimes, it helps to write your apology in a card, and then sit and read it aloud to the one you've hurt.

We can see that a good apology offers much more than "I'm sorry." It helps to recognize offering a good apology is a process involving multiple steps. Sometimes, depending on the transgression and the damage done, a good apology needs to be offered more than once.

Initially, learning to make good, effective apologies may seem like a daunting process — for clients and counsellors alike — because it means taking the (sometimes very) difficult step of sincerely accepting responsibility for the transgression and deeply understanding how that transgression was felt by the other person. But the benefits of a good apology are felt immediately by both the giver and the receiver, and the relationship is all the richer for it.

## APOLOGIES THAT DON'T WORK

Non-apologies dressed up as apologies do nothing to repair and can even make an uncomfortable situation worse.

- ▷ I'm sorry, okay!
- ▷ I'm sorry but...
- ▷ I'm sorry if you feel...
- ▷ I hope you don't feel...
- ▷ It wasn't my intention to...
- ▷ If you hadn't \_\_\_\_\_ then I wouldn't have \_\_\_\_\_
- ▷ Look, I said I was sorry!
- ▷ I'm sorry but that's your perception.
- ▷ And of course, not saying anything at all and expecting it to be a "given" for the person to know you're sorry is not an apology.

*Kim Boivin, RCC, is CEO of Positive Change Counselling in Vancouver. Since her own first therapy session at the age of 13, she has been passionately engaged with emotional, mental, and relationship health.*

### RESOURCES

<http://national.deseretnews.com/article/4226/the-process-of-a-heartfelt-effective-apology.html>

*Hold Me Tight* by Dr. Sue Johnson (Little, Brown, and Company, 2008)