

Why Won't You Apologize?

*HEALING BIG BETRAYALS
AND EVERYDAY HURTS*

Harriet Lerner



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LONDON

30 Calvin Street, London E1 6NW

T: 020 7490 7300

E: info@duckworth-publishers.co.uk

www.ducknet.co.uk

For bulk and special sales please contact sales@duckworth-publishers.co.uk

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CHAPTER 1

The Many Faces of “I’m Sorry”

My humorist friend Jennifer Berman drew a cartoon of the “guy with a million excuses.” My personal favorite is, “I’m sorry . . . but you never ASKED me if I was married with kids.” Then there’s the *New Yorker* cartoon that shows a father talking to his grown son. “I wanted to be there for you growing up, I really did,” the dad says. “But I got a foot cramp. And then a thing came up at the store—anyway, you understand.”

While the humor of both cartoons rests on their absurdity, we have all received apologies followed by rationalizations that undo them. They are never satisfying. In fact, they do considerable harm.

I’ve been studying apologies—and the men and women who can’t give them—for over two decades. Of course, you don’t need to be an expert on the subject to recognize when a well-deserved apology is not forthcoming, or when a bad apology flattens you. “I’m

sorry” won’t cut it if it’s insincere, a quick way to get out of a difficult conversation, or followed by a justification or excuse.

The healing power of a *good* apology is also immediately recognizable. When someone offers me a genuine apology, I feel relieved and soothed. Whatever anger and resentment I may still be harboring melts away. I also feel better when I offer an apology I know is due. I’m enormously grateful that I can repair the disconnection after having made a mistake or acted badly. Not that I’ve always been a champion apologist. With my husband, Steve, for example, I like to apologize for exactly my share of the problem—as I calculate it, of course—and I expect him to apologize for his share, also as I calculate it. Needless to say, we don’t always do the same maths.

We’re all apology-challenged with certain people and in some situations. Some apologies are easier to offer than others. It’s one thing to forget to return your neighbor’s Tupperware, and another to sleep with her husband. For a small insensitivity, a simple and heartfelt “I’m sorry” may be all it takes, but not all of our insensitivities are simple.

This book will teach you how to craft a deeply meaningful apology, and decode apologies that are blame-reversing, ambiguous, and downright mean. Going beyond the “how-to’s” of the good apology, we’ll be looking at compelling stories that illustrate how much the simple apology matters and why we so often muck it up. We’ll also be looking at heroic apologies

that can open the door to forgiveness and healing in even the most difficult circumstances.

As the title *Why Won’t You Apologize?* suggests, the chapters ahead are also for the hurt or angry person who has received a weaselly or insincere apology—or none at all. When we’ve been insulted or injured by someone who just doesn’t get it, we can learn the steps necessary to change the tone of the conversation and get through. Other times, however, nothing we say or do will change the unrepentant wrongdoer. In fact, the more serious the harm, the less likely it is for the wrongdoer to feel genuine remorse and make amends. What does the hurt party do then?

The challenge of apology and reconciliation is a dance that occurs between at least two people. We are all, many times over, on both sides of the equation. Let’s begin with a brief “sorry sampler”—*sorrys* that go from easy to medium to hard.

THE SIMPLEST “I’M SORRY”

The simplest “I’m sorry,” the one easiest to offer, is when nothing is anybody’s fault. We say these two words not as an apology but rather as an empathic response to another person’s pain (“I’m so sorry you have to go through this ordeal”), or to a situation that has inconvenienced them (“I’m sorry I’m late. An accident on the interstate tied up the traffic”). Here, “I’m sorry” recognizes that the other person was put out or going through a difficult time, and we want to communicate that we care.

In many situations, saying “I’m sorry” requires relatively little effort—but the failure to extend it is not a small omission. Life is hard, and even the briefest of interactions with strangers can brighten your day or haunt it. It’s not that you’re going to sink into a major depression because the woman in the supermarket nearly ran you down with her trolley, and rushed off without even looking up. You might assume that she failed to apologize because she didn’t care, or, alternatively, that she was too preoccupied or overcome with shame to make eye contact and speak. Whatever her reasons, it just doesn’t feel good, and the not-good feeling hangs on. Sometimes, the failure of the other person to apologize when they should hits us harder than the deed they should apologize for.

The Long Wait in the Examining Room

When the relationship matters, the failure to say “I’m sorry” can erode connection, even when it’s clear to both parties that no one is responsible for behaving badly. Consider my therapy client Yolanda, who sat clothed in a skimpy hospital gown on a cold table in the examining room waiting for her doctor, who was nearly an hour late.

“So, my doctor finally appears,” Yolanda tells me, obviously upset, “and she says *nothing*, not even a simple apology. I felt like I wasn’t even a person to her. And later I felt bad about myself for being so oversensitive.”

Questioning ourselves for being “oversensitive” is a common way that women, in particular, disqualify our legitimate anger and hurt. If you’ve hung out in medical examining rooms, you know that patients feel vulnerable. The fact that some of us feel more vulnerable than others in a particular context does not mean we are weak or lesser in any way.

Yolanda didn’t take the long wait personally. She didn’t suspect that her physician was hiding out playing video games or texting her friends. Yolanda simply wanted to hear, “I’m sorry you had to wait so long. My last patient required more time than I had scheduled.” The failure of Yolanda’s doctor to even comment on her lateness felt like a small crack in a relationship with someone on whom she profoundly depends. A simple “I’m sorry” would have allowed Yolanda to feel respected, cared for, and validated.

A MEDIUM-DIFFICULT “I’M SORRY”

An apology is more difficult to offer when we *do* have something to apologize for and we regret our earlier behavior. Here even a short, sweet, and belated apology can sometimes matter a great deal.

Deborah, a therapy client of mine, missed her younger sister’s wedding because it conflicted with a professional conference where she was presenting a paper. The conference had been scheduled long before her sister, Skye, decided on her wedding date, and Deborah was angry with her sister for expecting her

to be there, and for insisting that the date she chose to marry was the only one that worked. But on the day of the wedding, Deborah felt awful about the choice she had made, and wished she were with her family at such an important time.

Though they moved on, the incident rankled both of them. At first, Deborah had no intention of apologizing to Skye. For one thing, she thought Skye should offer the apology. There was no excuse, Deborah told me, for announcing the wedding date as a “done deal” rather than factoring Deborah’s schedule into the equation. Later, after feeling like she had made a colossal mistake in choosing to be at the conference, Deborah didn’t want to reopen the issue for a different reason. Apologizing, she believed, would only amplify the issue and make them both feel worse.

Years later, in a flash of sudden affection for her sister, Deborah spontaneously sent Skye an email that said: “I’ve never told you how bad I felt about missing your wedding and how sorry I am about my decision. The day I was giving my paper at that conference, I kept thinking to myself, WHAT AM I DOING HERE? I have no explanation or excuse for making such a stupid decision.” Her sister wrote back, “Yeah, Deb, you were a real asshole. :-)”

Email is generally not a good way to offer an apology. In this case, however, Deborah told me how everything felt lighter between them after this exchange. “It’s like some bit of trust or closeness has been restored that I didn’t even know was missing.”

**JUMPING OFF THE HIGH DIVE—
THE TOUGHEST APOLOGIES**

It can take great courage to open a conversation and apologize for something we wish we had handled differently in the past. Perhaps we don’t want to be intrusive, or we’re concerned about how our apology will be received and what would happen next. If the other person hasn’t brought the subject up we may assume that we shouldn’t, either. But, as Margaret’s story illustrates, it’s best to leave open the possibility of talking about our earlier behavior that we now regret.

Margaret has a daughter, Eleanor, a single mother whose second child, Christian, died when he was sixteen days old, having never left the hospital. Margaret had been helpful in practical ways, taking care of Eleanor’s three-year-old son, and keeping up the household during the two weeks Eleanor practically lived in the hospital.

Margaret was absent, however, at the emotional level. In true British fashion, she had a “no mess, no fuss” attitude toward life’s difficulties, and a long cultural tradition of “Don’t fret, plod on.” She loved her daughter enormously, but she didn’t want Eleanor to get bogged down in grief. She also wanted to avoid her own deep sorrow. Out of her wish to protect both Eleanor and herself, Margaret failed to express her pain or inquire how her daughter was doing with this profound loss. The few times she saw Eleanor crying

or depressed, she said things like, “Your son needs you. Be strong for him.”

A decade later, Margaret’s coworker and friend, Jorge, had a son who was born stillborn. His loss understandably brought up Margaret’s own buried feelings of grief about her grandson Christian and the life he never had. When she observed the tremendous outpouring of love that Jorge received, and the openhearted way that he embraced the caring that surrounded him, something shifted in Margaret. She asked herself for the first time if she had done right by her daughter in the way she had responded to Christian’s tragic death.

Soon thereafter a newspaper article about untimely loss appeared on the front page of their local paper. Much to her own surprise, Margaret worked up her courage and asked Eleanor if she’d read the piece. She also told her that she thought about Christian all the time. Margaret went on to say that she regretted never talking about her feelings because she didn’t know what to say and was afraid of making Eleanor feel worse. She said she was sorry that she had not made a space for them to talk about something so important, the saddest thing that had ever happened in their lives.

Eleanor’s initial response was predictable. “There’s nothing you could have done,” she said flatly. “It wasn’t something you could fix. Don’t worry about it.” Eleanor was very much her mother’s daughter.

Often the most interesting part of an apology is what happens later. Neither brought the subject up again, but Margaret told me that after the initial awk-

wardness passed she felt better about having spoken up. Months later, as the anniversary of Christian's death was approaching, Margaret felt the desire to bring flowers to Christian's grave. She hadn't been there since the funeral. She casually mentioned this to Eleanor, who matter-of-factly replied that she planned to make the trip, and they could go together if Margaret wanted a lift.

Only on the way to the cemetery did Margaret learn that Eleanor had been to the graveside twice a year for the past ten years. As they stood by Christian's small gravestone, Margaret suddenly started sobbing. This surge of emotion took her totally by surprise because she had never cried about Christian's death, and hardly ever about anything else. More unexpected still, Eleanor put her arms around her mother and they cried together.

In Margaret's case her apology felt like a great risk. She had been raised in a family where cheerfulness was one of the few permissible emotions, and competence and independence (defined as not needing anybody) were next to godliness. Her apology required her to share vulnerability and take a big leap into the unknown. She had no role model from her past to look to as a guide, so pioneering a new path required great courage on her part.

BEYOND THE "HOW-TO'S"

There are, of course, far more difficult situations in which to apologize than Margaret's. For example, we

may be faced with a person who wants us to apologize and we don't think we should. It's a profound challenge to sit on the hot seat and listen with an open heart to the hurt and anger of the wounded person who wants us to be sorry, especially when that person is accusing us (and not accurately, as we see it) of causing their pain. Yet both personal integrity and success in relationships depend on our ability to take responsibility for our part (and only our part) even when the other person is being a jerk.

In the following chapters, we'll take a fresh look at the power and potential pitfalls of apologies. For example:

- * *Why is it so difficult for humans to offer clear expressions of responsibility and remorse for our hurtful words and actions?*
- * *What drives the non-apologizer—and the female over-apologizer?*
- * *Why are the people who do the worst things the least able to own up?*
- * *How do we sort out who is responsible for what?*
- * *How do we (the hurt party) unwittingly contribute to the other person's defensiveness and refusal to apologize?*
- * *How can we get past life-draining anger and bitterness when the wrongdoer distorts reality or reverses blame?*

* *The Many Faces of “I’m Sorry”* *

* *What’s the real reason you can’t stop hating your ex (or whoever)?*

Perhaps the most painful issue in the apology lexicon is coming to terms with the nonrepentant wrongdoer. This is a universal human challenge for which forgiveness is the prescribed solution of the day. Yet as we’ll see, you do not need to forgive the person who has hurt you in order to free yourself from obsessive anger and bitterness. Indeed, sometimes you have to be brave enough to resist pressure from the forgiveness police.

The need for apologies and repair is a singularly human one—both on the giving and receiving ends. We are hardwired to seek justice and fairness (however we see it), so the need to receive a sincere apology that’s due is deeply felt. We are also imperfect human beings and prone to error and defensiveness, so the challenge of offering a heartfelt apology permeates almost every relationship.

We take turns at being the offender and the offended until our very last breath. It’s reassuring to know that we have the possibility to set things right, or at least to know that we have brought our best selves to the task at hand, however the other person responds.