

## **The Essential Role of Apology**

It is part of the human condition to offend and to be offended. As long as we recruit our friends, partners, employees, colleagues, and neighbors from the human race, we will inevitably face disappointment, frustration, and worse. The reality is that fallible humans strive for something more than we can reliably deliver. Apology makes it possible for us to live together and strive for the common good. Apology is necessary to secure our cultural survival—it is that important. Without the healing powers of apology, our impulse for vengeance, grudges, feuds, and other hostile behaviors would make the development of healthy individuals and healthy societies all but impossible.

The lesson of history is that the majority of these offenses relate to our sense of standing in the community. There is something about our makeup that is acutely sensitive to our relative status, power, or respect. For many people, the offenses that hurt the most and are the hardest to get over are experienced as insults against their dignity or honor. We experience these insults as humiliation.

We resent the means that are employed to bring humiliation about (such as bullying, intimidation, deception, and embarrassment), but it's the experience of humiliation—of being reduced to submission—that many people find unbearable. The stakes couldn't be higher. There are no limits that humiliated human beings will accept in their attempts to restore the self-respect that has been taken from them. The hardest challenge of apology is to reverse the effects of humiliation by restoring to the victim the dignity that person once enjoyed. Apology is the process humans have developed to mitigate the devastating effects of humiliation. It doesn't always work, but it is definitely worth the effort. If there's anything more effective than apology in countering the effects of humiliation, it hasn't been discovered yet.

Apology meets the needs of both the person who has been mistreated and the person who accepts responsibility for doing the mistreating. Though their requirements are different, both parties look to apology to address their fundamental needs. Apology, as we will see, has evolved ritualistic properties that benefit both the one who offers the apology (the offender) and the one who receives the apology (the offended). Let's start by considering what the offended person requires of apology—especially when the offense compromises his or her sense of standing in the community—and the benefits it delivers.

### **Benefits to the Offended Party**

Almost all the research on apology centers on its benefits to the offended party. Indeed, for those who have been mistreated the power of apology can soothe painful wounds, heal broken hearts, drain away resentment, and restore strained relationships, sometimes so thoroughly that the mended relationships are stronger than before. When victims of an offense receive an apology, they no longer tend to perceive the wrongdoer as a personal threat. We all need to feel visible to others. Apology acknowledges that, yes, we had a reason to feel hurt and a right to be angry, even as it helps us move past our anger and keeps us from being stuck in the past. Let's look at a number of other benefits that apology offers victims.

### ***Apology Restores Dignity and Honor***

The number one requirement of a person humiliated by another is the restoration of dignity and honor. Compounding the problem is the reality that many victims deny being humiliated. In our society, it is humiliating to even acknowledge one's humiliation. An effective apology, as we will see, levels the playing field. What makes apology work is the dramatic evidence of the offender figuratively (and sometimes literally) prostrating him- or herself, restoring to the victim the dignity that the offender had unfairly appropriated, and thereby equalizing the relative power of the parties to what it was before the offense. In subsequent chapters, we will see dramatic examples of this power of apology to restore self-respect.

In addition to restoring dignity and honor, apology also addresses four other fundamental needs of those who have been mistreated. Victims need reassurance that (1) they are not at fault, (2) they are safe, (3) both parties continue to share the same values, and (4) the offender is seen to suffer. Let's look at each of these needs.

**No Blaming the Victim.** First, an effective apology, by assigning responsibility to the offender, reassures the victim that he or she was not at fault. This is important because our society has a historical tendency to blame the victim. In many situations mistreated parties are encouraged to question whether they were somehow at fault. "Was I in the wrong place at the wrong time?" "Perhaps I'm just too sensitive." "Was I asking for it?" "Was I dressed too provocatively?" These thoughts undermine our reliance on our senses and our view of the universe. An effective apology signals that we as victims were not at fault and that we did not invite the mistreatment.

**Safety.** A second need we have when we have been mistreated is for assurance of safety in our relationship with the offender. An effective apology does this by answering a number of questions. The most important is, "Am I safe?" Related questions are "What are the chances that the mistreatment will be repeated?" "Was the offense accidental or purposeful?" "What can I do to make myself less vulnerable?" Sometimes the offender's apology must address these questions explicitly. Other times it is sufficient for the

apology to signal that the offender continues to share the same perspective as the victim and that the offense was a “one-off,” a mistake and an aberration.

**Shared Rules and Values.** By apologizing, the offender reaffirms that the rules and values that governed the relationship in the past will continue to govern it going forward. Again, this serves to reassure victims that their good estimation of their offenders was essentially sound and that their trust was not, in the end, misplaced. When such an assurance of shared values is not forthcoming, relationships often terminate. Ironically, the more intimate the relationship, the greater the need for an apology that affirms the shared values of the offender and the victim.

**Seeing the Offender Suffer.** It’s natural for victims to say, “You hurt me and now it is your turn to see how it feels.” In the vast majority of apologies, the offenders’ suffering is evident as they say the words “I’m sorry” or “I was wrong,” express remorse for what they did, adjust their future behavior, and pay restitution or otherwise make amends. Sometimes these amends come with the authority of the criminal justice system or another third party such as a disciplinary board. Courts frequently recognize the legitimacy of victims’ desire to see their offenders suffer by imposing conditions, such as making offenders write letters of apology, pay fines, or perform community service.

### **Benefits to the Apologizer**

We have seen that apology benefits the victim. But the benefits are no less significant for the offender. The willingness to apologize reminds us that the facts are friendly. The facts may not always be convenient or attractive, but they are helpful in that we are always more successful when our lives are aligned with the objective reality. Apology demonstrates to offenders that acknowledging the facts—including those that make us look bad—is really the healthiest way to go. Apology is a way of honoring what we know to be true while at the same time honoring ourselves and those we care about.

Apologizing permits us to be imperfect. It’s not a get-out-of-jail-free card by any means. Nor does apologizing provide absolution for the hurt our imperfection causes. What it does do is provide a healing process that involves saying we’re sorry, making amends to those we have mistreated, and resolving to do better. This is far more sustainable than pretending that we are perfect. By acknowledging, naming, and ultimately accepting our mistakes, we embrace our humility and make room for our true selves, imperfect and all too human, just like everyone else. The advice columnist Carolyn Hax puts it best: “The highest-quality human beings earn that distinction not by being perfect, but by recognizing when they’ve acted like jerks and doing their best to clean up whatever messes they create.”

The price offenders pay when they hold on to arrogance and refuse to admit it when they are wrong is very dear. Arrogance breeds blindness, blindness breeds stupidity, stupidity breeds disaster. Offenders lose marriages, careers, and the respect of children and colleagues. Most of all, they lose themselves.

The willingness to apologize benefits offenders in practical ways. When you develop the courage to admit you were wrong and work past your resistance to apologizing, you develop a lasting sense of integrity. Ultimately the act of apologizing brings a healthy dose of self-awareness: awareness of your actions and the effect of those actions on other people. In hoarding the blame for your actions, you reinforce the power that you have to impact the world around you. Wholehearted apologies actually generate clarity about who you are in this world.

Apology has an important social context. Abandoning the need to be an all-knowing, infallible expert will allow you to be more curious and empathetic. Having been honest in your assessment of what you did and how that conduct injured another person, you will naturally be much less likely to repeat the offense. By confronting your own mistakes, you relinquish the effort required to hide your errors. Hiding your mistakes not only does a disservice to the organization but also exacts a terrible price from those with secrets to hide. Apologizing releases you from constant guardedness and gives you a better shot at taking corrective action faster, so you don't have to distance yourself from those you have wronged. Apologizing keeps you connected to your friends, family, and colleagues. You'll experience much more alignment with the people around you, who will sense that you're available for authentic two-way communication.

The physical and mental health benefits of apology are significant. Managing apology productively may be an essential dimension of wellness, a good quality of life, and a positive sense of well-being.