

6 Kinds of Apology and What They Mean

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It seems like almost every day some public figure is apologizing for saying something or doing something that others find offensive. On a private level, people are always apologizing all over the place as well. Maybe we have become an apologizing society. There are different kinds of apologies, depending on the situation. Each has a different motive and a different meaning.

Apologizing to Appease. People often apologize to control somebody's feelings. An alcoholic goes on a drinking binge, and when he comes home his wife is waiting impatiently. Before she can express her anger, he quickly and eagerly apologizes. He doesn't truly feel sorry about what he has done, but instead is apologizing out of fear. He wants to nip her expected expression of anger at the bud.

Therefore, the apology does not come from a caring place or from remorse, and hence its meaning could be stated, "OK, I'm apologizing so just calm down." Such an apology doesn't mean anything and doesn't resolve anything.

Apologizing on Demand. This is one of the most common types of apology. A celebrity writes something on his twitter account that is considered racist, and many people are outraged by this, often justifiably so. People begin tweeting one another and the racist post goes, as they say, viral. The people demand an apology and in a day or two the celebrity thinks better of what he wrote and tweets an apology. This is not a heart-felt apology. It is a response to a loud uproar.

The apology is done out of expediency. He has been punished for his crime and the punishment involves humbling himself by apologizing in front of everybody. Will he stop thinking racist thoughts? No. Will he stop being a racist? No. But he may become more skilled at keeping it secret. Those who elicit the apology feel avenged. But, the apology doesn't resolve the underlying problem.

Apologizing without Apologizing. There is a way of apologizing that isn't an apology at all but is meant to look like an apology and is done out of duty. Generally this happens when people say, "I'm sorry if I hurt you." The key word in this sentence is "if". What the person is saying is, "I don't think I really did anything to hurt you but if you think I hurt you then I will dutifully apologize."

This kind of apology is, in a sense, the minimum kind of apology one can make. It is an apology, but one that is qualified by the "if." Hence is it meaningless.

Apologizing from Guilt. This is a slightly higher level of apology, since it comes from a feeling somewhat akin to caring. A mother tells her young son to clean his room. "I will, Mom," he answers, but he doesn't clean it. She tells him again and again. Stuff piles up. One day she walks into the room and stumbles over one of the piles and breaks her hip. The boy is smitten by guilt and quickly apologizes. "I'm really sorry, Mom."

The apology is not really about empathy for his mother. It is about taking care of his own feelings, assuaging his guilt. Often people don't apologize until it's too late—until somebody dies. Then they go to the grave and say, "I'm sorry." But, again, it is only to relieve guilt. If they had really felt sorry, they would have apologized much earlier. They are like someone going to a priest for absolution of their sins. There's little real emotional connection or resolution.

Apologizing to be Polite. Some people apologize as a way of showing courtesy or to gain approval for how "nice" they are. These are people who are often always apologizing for everything, almost as though they had to apologize for being alive. If they graze past somebody in a hallway, they immediately say, "Sorry." If they cough

on an elevator they turn and say, “Sorry.” If they fall flat on their face, they look around to see if they hit anybody. “Sorry.”

The excessive apologies are not just a way of being polite, but also of gaining approval. They want to be seen as a good person, a considerate person, and they don’t want to make waves or get into a conflict with anybody. The meaning of their apology is, “I’m a nice person and I’m not a threat to you or anybody and let’s all just be friends.” This is a higher level of apology than the preceding four because its purpose is to create positive energy—which is always good.

Apologizing from Love. This is the consummate apology. It is the apology people make when they truly love and care about another person. They are able to empathize with the person (put themselves in the other person’s shoes) and have an accurate sense of how the other person might feel. They want the other person to know that they are cared about and loved. Parents who truly love their children apologize in this way and their kids feel understood and loved. Most spouses say they love each other, but when they apologize from love they show that they really do.

Apologizing from love is voluntary, not forced in any way (such as by a demand or emotional bribe); it brings closeness, while other forms of apology end up creating distance. The apology may be accompanied by tears of sadness or joy and can be cathartic, sometimes even transformative. When people apologize from love they are saying, “I love and care about you and your happiness is my ultimate goal.” If there is anything wrong with a relationship, this is the kind of apology that can truly mend it.