

# **Demanding an Apology**

**Say your sorry!**

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We are instructed from a very early age to apologize when we have done something wrong. Why? What is the purpose of apologizing? It cannot undo the offense.

Parents explain to their children that when they apologize, they acknowledge having done something wrong, and they are promising not do that thing again. Parents tell their children to apologize as a way of insuring that they know they have done something wrong. They are telling them that having done that particular thing, they should feel sorry. A willingness to apologize is part of the willingness to shoulder responsibility, which is an important part of growing up. A mature person is supposed to feel regret when he or she has offended or upset some other person. Successful relationships are marked by people being attentive to each other's feelings. Someone who rarely apologizes will seem unsympathetic and uninterested in coming to terms with others. He or she will seem overly proud. It may seem to a more dispassionate observer that that person is more insecure than arrogant, and unwilling to admit to a mistake for that reason.

Children learn quickly that apologizing disarms the injured party. Apologizing to someone who has been inconvenienced or offended makes that person less angry. It is a way of insuring that we are not always hitting each other over the head. Or worse. Every few days, there is a newspaper report of strangers getting in each other's way and rather than apologizing, shooting at each other. (See my blog post, "Heading off a Murder," in which I report an implacable murderer whose anger was assuaged by an apology.) Apologies are one of those simple courtesies, such as saying "please" and "thank you" that make more comfortable the ordinary interactions and conflicts of life. We say "sorry," when we bump into each other in a stairwell, without necessarily feeling that we did something wrong. Not saying something of that sort would be considered rude.

There is a value to apologizing, not only to the future relationship between persons who have been quarreling, but also to the way those persons feel about themselves. Alcoholics Anonymous encourages their members to "make amends" to those they have injured because of their drinking. In such a way they feel better about themselves and better able to behave in the future in a self-respectful way.

This is the way the apology business is supposed to work: If someone inadvertently injures someone else, let's say by stepping on his foot, of course he should apologize. The other person might have purposely got in the way; still, he should apologize. He is not apologizing for having done something wrong. He is apologizing for having caused the other person some distress. The apology does not suggest a fault or a weakness. It is an expression of sympathy. It has no more special meaning other than being polite. In that sense it may not be a real apology.

Real, sincere, apologies are important in the resolution of disputes, particularly if those who are involved are close to each other. In the wake of an argument, a person should unhesitatingly apologize if that person, in his or her own opinion, did something wrong. It is a kind of reaching out to the other person. It is a matter of respect. But he or she should not apologize just "to make peace." It is a short-lasting armistice. An example: a man with a wife and children tries to cope with his wife's inclination to sulk following every argument by apologizing. "It costs me nothing," he says. But it does. She continues to make similar demands in the future. The length of time she can sulk grows longer and longer. Apologies lose all meaning when they are divorced from the way the person really feels. They are demeaning to the man or woman who apologizes and unconvincing to everyone else. They are not going to help this particular couple figure out how to get along better. Resentment is the consequence of having to apologize unwillingly.

There are some people who command an apology! "I'm waiting for an apology," a young woman texts her friend. A mother says to her son who forgot to pick her up from the train station: "If you don't apologize, I'm

not going to your graduation.” What good is an apology if it does not reflect an actual feeling of regret? It is simply an exercise of power. One person is dominant enough to make the other shoulder the responsibility for an argument or for something having gone wrong. When a child has grown past the point of knowing what an apology means, a parent should no longer demand an apology if the young person does not feel inclined to give it.

If we feel hurt by something someone else has said or done, it is natural to want an apology. But sometimes we will be disappointed. Even by someone close to us. Someone who ought to apologize may not for any of a number of different reasons. First of all, of course, he or she may feel wronged and that the apology should be going in the other direction. Or he or she may feel angry for other reasons, or too upset or dispirited for any conversation. Or determined not to offer an apology no matter how justified it would be, if previous apologies were not accepted gracefully. It may be that someone we care about has treated us shabbily and should apologize, but will not. There is not much we can do about that. Forcing the person to pretend to be sorry does no good. It makes that person less likely to feel sorry. If someone is disagreeable much of the time and never apologizes, perhaps it would be better not to have that person as a friend or a lover.

Some men and women feel guilty all the time for no particular reason, and they are always apologizing. This annoying behavior makes it hard to know if they actually think they did something wrong. The apology sounds more like they are trying to ward off someone’s anger rather than expressing a true regret. Sometimes, they tell me when I ask, that they do not know what they did wrong; but they are willing to express remorse anyway.

Others apologize as a way of stopping someone from complaining about them. They think that if they offer an apology, the other person should accept it and just leave them alone. Even when they commit the same offense over and over again. “I said I was sorry!” In those cases the words are those of an apology, but no such apology is intended. Pretending to be contrite is unconvincing. “If you’re so sorry,” others say, “stop doing the same thing all the time.”

On the other hand, some people never say they are sorry. This reflects an aberrant pride—or weakness.

I know a psychiatrist who not only does not apologize; he does not say “hello.” Recently, when I gave him his keys, which I had picked up after he dropped them, he did not even thank me. (By the way, I am afraid that all the examples I give in these posts of peculiar psychiatrists might leave someone with the impression that psychiatrists are more disordered than other people. I don’t think that is so. I just know a lot of psychiatrists, being a psychiatrist myself.)

Politicians find it expedient to apologize from time to time, although if you listen closely, the person apologizing does not always seem to be admitting to having done something wrong: “If I offended anyone, I am sorry.” In other words the insulting racial remarks he made were not in themselves reprehensible, but regrettably they might have offended some peculiarly sensitive people. Or, “I take full responsibility for what happened, but I didn’t do it. I was misled by people I trusted.” These are perversions of the process of apologizing. They do not suggest any real regret, and they do not promise any change of behavior.

Friends happy with each other—and happy couples—will inevitably, inadvertently, hurt each other’s feelings every once in a while. Apologizing sincerely should not be difficult. It makes the other person more tolerant. It is central to maintaining trust and allowing close relationships to flourish despite the strains that always occur over time, from time to time.

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