



Always Apologize, Always Explain

By Martha Beck



Photo: Dan Chaukin

I was a mere child when the classic tear gusher *Love Story* hit theaters in 1970, but I wept along with the adult audience as the dying Ali MacGraw told the darling Ryan O'Neal, "Love means never having to say you're sorry." Two years later, I saw another movie, *What's Up, Doc?*, in which Barbra Streisand's character repeated the very same line to the very same actor. This time, however, O'Neal had an answer. "That's the dumbest thing I ever heard," he said.

For me, that was a light bulb moment. I'd been swept along by the romance of *Love Story*, but even as I'd watched it, I'd felt an uncomfortable tickle in my brain. Young as I was (practically fetal, I swear), something was telling me that real lovers say they're sorry quite often. Sincerely. Fervently, even. This is not because dismal feelings like shame and regret are necessary components of a relationship, but because without apology no relationship would be free of them. Everyone does things that bother or hurt others; a bit of inconvenient procrastination will do it, or a grumpy comment made in a stressful moment. When we lack the ability to say we're sorry, minor offenses eventually accumulate enough weight to sink any relationship. But the simple act of apologizing can reestablish goodwill even when our sins are much, much graver. Of course, it must be done right. A lame, badly constructed apology can do more damage than the original offense. Fortunately, the art of effective apology is simple, and mastering it can mean a lifetime of solid, resilient relationships.

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When to Apologize

I've heard many clients discuss and anticipate the "perfect moment" for an apology, claiming that premature contrition would just be too darn hard on the person they've wronged. Here's what I think: The perfect moment to apologize is the moment you realize you've done something wrong.

This seems obvious when we're contemplating somebody else's sins, but in the harsh light of our own guilt, we often try to protect ourselves from shame or censure by waiting for the heat to blow over. We may try to postpone apologizing or avoid it altogether by lying, blaming others, making excuses or justifying our actions. The impulse to go into such a stall is a big ol' signal. When you really don't want to say you're sorry, it's almost certainly time to do so.

On the other hand, you may be one of those people who apologize when they haven't done anything wrong. This is as false as failing to say you're sorry when circumstances warrant it. If you frequently apologize, it's time to stop. This kind of pseudo-apology may ease awkward conversations, but it's a form of crying wolf—it distracts attention from real issues and weakens meaningful apologies when the time for them arrives.

How to Apologize

Apologizing is rarely comfortable or easy, so if you're going to do it at all, make it count. Aaron Lazare, MD, a psychiatrist and dean of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, has spent years studying acts of contrition in every context, from interpersonal to international. He has found that, to be effective, most apologies need to contain the following elements:

1. Full acknowledgment of the offense. Start by describing exactly what you did wrong, without avoiding the worst truths. Once the facts are out, acknowledge that your behavior violated a moral code. It doesn't matter whether you and the person you've hurt shares the same ethics: If you've broken your own rules, you're in the wrong. Accept responsibility.

2. An explanation. A truthful explanation is your best shot at rebuilding a strong, peaceful relationship. The core-deep explanation for your behavior is your key to changing for the better. Explanations help you and

your victim understand why you misbehaved and assure both of you that the offense won't recur. Excuses merely deflect responsibility. Leave them out of your apology.

3. Genuine expression of remorse. Anyone who has been on the receiving end of the comment "I'm sorry you feel that way" knows the difference between sincere regret and an attempt to avoid responsibility for bad behavior. Few things are less likely to evoke forgiveness than apology without remorse.

4. Reparations for damage. An apology includes real repair work: not just saying "I'm sorry." Often there will be nothing tangible to repair; hearts and relationships are broken more often than physical objects. In such cases, your efforts should focus on restoring the other person's dignity. The question "What else do you want me to do?" can start this process. If you ask it sincerely, really listen to the answer and act on the other party's suggestions, you'll be honoring their feelings, perspective and experience. The knowledge that one is heard and valued has incredible healing power; it can mend even seemingly irreparable wounds.

After Apologizing

When you really apologize, you should feel good about yourself. An effective apology is, as Lazare puts it, "an act of honesty, an act of humility, an act of commitment, an act of generosity, and an act of courage." But there's no guarantee that the other person involved will share your warm fuzzies. The final gallant act of apology is to release your former victim from any expectation of forgiveness. No matter how noble you have been, he will forgive—or refuse to forgive—on his own terms. That is his right.

Anne Lamott refers to forgiveness as "giving up all hope of having had a different past." The same words apply to apologizing. An apology is the end of our struggle with history, the act by which we untangle from our past by accepting what it actually was. From this truthful place we are free to move forward, whether or not we are forgiven. Apologizing doesn't make us perfect, but it shows our commitment to be honest about our imperfections and steadfast in our efforts to do better.

It reminds us of what Ali MacGraw's *Love Story* character died too young to learn: that love means always being willing to say you're sorry.

From *O, The Oprah Magazine*

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