

Giving and Receiving Apologies

“All I want is an apology!”

People who have been hurt or humiliated often hope for an apology. They may hope that an apology from the person who caused them harm will restore dignity, trust, and a sense of justice. Whether you are requesting an apology or considering giving one, it is important to realize that a thoughtful apology can mend a relationship while a thoughtless one may cause further conflict.

What makes an effective apology?

Explain the perceived offense. The person offended and the perceived offender need a clear shared understanding of the behaviors (or omissions) that felt hurtful, rude, or wrong.

Acknowledge that the perceived offense caused harm/hurt. The person offended needs recognition that their pain or embarrassment was legitimate, even if others might have felt differently. A statement of regret. While “I’m sorry” is generally not enough for a complete apology, it is a necessary part of any apology and is imperative for re-building trust.

Make sure you don’t do it again. The offender needs to offer a clear plan for self-restraint, improved behavior, and how to work with the offended person to address possible future misunderstandings.

An explanation of why the offender acted this way. Be careful! An explanation can be risky as it can sound defensive or seem to be an excuse for bad behavior. Sometimes it is useful for healing a broken relationship and may set the groundwork for re-establishing trust and respect. An explanation is only effective if combined with all the above elements.

Timing can be crucial. An apology delayed may be an opportunity lost.

You may want to tell the offended person that a future apology might be possible if you both are willing to participate in some form of conflict resolution, such as mediation, where you can further discuss both of your needs, interests, emotions, and behaviors.

Responding to an apology: How you receive an apology can determine the future of the relationship. Sincerity is a key element here as well. You may want to demonstrate acceptance of the apology or extend forgiveness by a handshake or other method, if you are ready to do so. If not, you may want to acknowledge the value of the apology and the offender’s regret and ask for more time to heal. Or, if appropriate, you might want to offer an apology for your own role in the misunderstanding (“I’m sorry for my part, too...”).