

How To Apologize Reading 25

Relationship Skills & Healthy Relationships

Many conflicts could be de-escalated, and some could be prevented if we apologized for making a mistake or hurting someone. Although not essential, it may be helpful if you are skilled in active and passive listening and in using “I Statements.” If an apology brings up other hurts, misunderstandings, and/or real or imagined past transgressions, it is important to be skillful in conflict resolution.

When Apologizing Avoid:

1. Trying to convince the other person of your position and that you were justified in doing or saying what you did.
2. Discounting their feelings, such as “I don’t know why you are so upset” or “It was not a big deal.”
3. “You statements,” such as “you misinterpreted what I was saying.”
4. Saying “but.” When we say “but,” we contradict what they are saying. For example, “I understand that you are feeling...but.... When we say ‘but,’ people usually stop listening because we discount what they are saying and place the responsibility on them.
5. Saying, “I understand”. We may not understand them, and saying this may cut them off. We demonstrate understanding by paraphrasing, identifying their unspoken feelings, and summarizing.
6. Asking a question that tries to cross-examine or convince them. For example: “You seem to think...but certainly agree that you...”
7. Asking why angrily or interrogatively: “So why are you angry at me?” A more effective response would be: “Please help me understand why you are angry with me.”
8. Bringing your perspective and needs into the conversation, such as: “Well, I’ve been hurt by this as well.”
9. Blaming them: “Well, if you wouldn’t have done...or said...I would never have...”
10. Apologizing for their feelings. For example: “I am sorry that you are feeling ... or “I’m sorry you feel that way.” It makes it seem like it is their fault for feeling this way.
11. Saying anything to make them feel defensive, threatened, and/or attacked.
12. Assuming that you have all the information about the situation.

Essential Skills When Apologizing

1. Self-awareness. We need to be aware of how we think the other person feels, their needs, and how our words or behavior impacted them. We need to put ourselves in their shoes. We must also be aware of our feelings and thoughts and why.
2. Unless you apologize immediately after saying or doing something hurtful, determine when would be a good time to apologize that is best for both of you. Select a time when you think neither of you will be stressed, both of you are under no time constraints, and there are no distractions. Find a quiet place to have a conversation. Going for a walk with them can be very effective, but do it as soon as possible.
3. Script what you will say beforehand.
4. Be an effective passive and active listener (identify their feelings even if unspoken and paraphrase/summarize the content of what they are saying) and use “I Statements.”
5. If you sense someone is upset with you but unsure why, ask. For example, “Are you upset with me?” If they say yes, ask them to explain why they are upset. For example, “Please tell me why you are upset with me.” Often, when we think someone is upset with us, they aren’t. They may be tired, cranky, distracted, or upset with someone else or things in general. In addition, they may take their feelings out on us. Because of this, it is always a good idea to check it out so that we do not think someone is upset with us when they aren’t. If they are upset with you, it allows you to apologize or work through a misunderstanding or conflict.
6. Continue to listen for understanding and paraphrase/summarize their feelings and what they are saying. Continue to use “I Statements”.
7. The conversation may bring up past hurts, misunderstandings, and/or actual or imagined transgressions that may or may not be related to the current situation. If this happens, continue to actively listen (paraphrase/summarize) and ask genuine inquiry questions until they are done speaking. You may need to have a more extensive conflict conversation about these issues.
8. If you feel defensive or attacked during an apology, focus on their feelings and what they are upset about, not the accusations or put-downs. Remember: anger is usually a secondary feeling (they may be disappointed or hurt), and their feelings are legitimate even if their accusations and judgments are not. Translate their attacks into legitimate concerns. Do not attack back or say anything to make them feel defensive or attacked. Remember, you are the one who needs to apologize.
9. Remember: an apology is about their feelings and needs, not yours. An apology is for them.
10. Accept responsibility for what you said or did. Acknowledge the hurt or damage you caused. Share your feelings using “I Statements.” If you feel regretful, terrible, or guilty, share that: “I so regret what I did. I feel terrible.” I am so sorry.”
11. Be specific about what you said or did. “I should never have…”

12. If the situation warrants it, say how you will be in the future to prevent it from happening again. For example, “In the future I will...” If it requires you to change your behavior, say how you will be in the future. For example, “I understand how this is important to you (e.g., that I will be on time), and in the future, I will...to make sure I am on time”).
13. Make sure you do what you say you will. An apology is not genuine if you continue to engage in the behavior.
14. Realize that the person may not initially forgive you and may take time to process and consider your words. Don’t expect immediate forgiveness. Don’t try to force them into forgiving you.
15. Depending on what you said or did, they may never forgive you. Or they may forgive you but not want to continue in a relationship with you.
16. Whatever happens, end the conversation on a positive note. Express your appreciation for their listening and the importance of the relationship to you.

Examples of What to Say When Apologizing

When Inviting Them Into the Conversation:

"I would like to talk with you about what I said (or did or didn't do). Is now a good time?"

"I want to start our conversation by apologizing for what I said (did, didn't do). I've felt really bad (guilty, regretful) ever since I said (did, didn't do). I wish I had apologized sooner."

If You Sense That Someone Is Upset or Angry With You But Are Not Sure:

"Are you upset with me?"

"It seems like you are angry with me? Can you help me understand why?"

"I'm not sure I understand completely. Would you say some more about...?"

"Tell me about what led you to that conclusion."

Use "I Statements When Apologizing:

"I am sorry".

"I am sorry for what I said (did, didn't do)."

"I so regret saying.... I am sorry".

"I feel terrible about.... I apologize".

"I should never have... I am so sorry."

Be Specific About What You Said Or Did Or Did Not Do

"I should never have..."

"I wish I would have..."

"I know I said... I shouldn't have said that. I was acting out of anger. I know that is no excuse. I am truly sorry."

"I know I didn't...when I said I would." I am sorry. In the future, I will do what I say I will do".

Say How You Will Be In The Future:

“In the future, I will....”.

“I understand how this is important to you, and in the future, I will...”.

End the Conversation on a Positive Note

“I appreciate you listening to me. I also want to say how important our relationship is to me (that you are in my life) and that I am truly sorry that I... and in the future I will...”