

Understanding apologies

How to say you're sorry – and mean it



Why is it that we dread having to apologise? When we know we've messed up or made a mistake, why do we avoid confessing and saying we're sorry? We cover up, we blame, we brush it aside – but we don't use effective communication. We may even go so far as an "I'm sorry" then follow it with a fatal "But..."

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Now let's be clear: we all know someone who apologises at every turn – for the weather, for your cold coffee, for the fact that you're having a bad day or that the traffic was horrible, as usual. We're not talking about unnecessary, excessive, meaningless apologies. There's no personal power in that.

This is about an apology that's owed: for wasting someone's time; for breaking a promise; for discovering you were wrong about something you insisted you were right about; for being unnecessarily irritable or snappy; for taking advantage of someone; for realising you were condescending; for hurting them... There's an endless list of reasons we owe an apology.

According blame

If you've ever waited for a decent apology, you've probably made up loads of reasons why you haven't received one:

- He's too cocky; too arrogant to say sorry.
- She's too ashamed or embarrassed.
- She thinks it's beneath her to apologise.

- He'll never admit a mistake; he's addicted to being right.
- It's just part of the organisational culture around here – nobody apologises.

When we're waiting for an apology, we can only see why they should say sorry... and mean it! We don't just want an admission, we want something far more valuable: to restore our connection with the other person. We want trust and understanding.

But what about when we ourselves owe that apology? What are some of the concerns we have and why do we procrastinate giving a full apology?

Despite what most people think, the reason is simpler than you expect: fear. People avoid apologies out of fear. You see, for an apology to be an effective communication, it must contain three parts:

- **Saying sorry: I apologise; I'm sorry for what I did**

Now there are two major mistakes people make that have them believe later that it's pointless to apologise. They add an excuse. That just ruins everything. An

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apology is about taking responsibility.

They apologise for how the other person reacted or felt. An apology is about one's own actions.

- **Acknowledging the impact of my action or non-action**

I hurt you. I didn't keep my word. I lied to you. I cannot restore your time/energy/emotion.

As you can see, this takes real self-awareness, insight and courage. We need to have reflected on the impact, not merely a justification for why we said or did what we did. How did it affect those around us? What was the quantifiable damage and the unseen damage? If I don't think through and acknowledge this, my apology sounds hollow and repeated regularly.

- **Asking what you need from me to build trust again.**

How can I make this right? What can I do to restore the damage I've done? This is where the risk lies. Am I willing to hear the answer and act on it? This is the test of sincerity. Will I simply be rejected?

Risk rejection

You need to know that rejection is the greatest neurological pain a human being can experience. In fact, MRI scans show that social rejection registers in the pain centre of the brain at the same location and magnitude as the physical pain of breaking your leg!

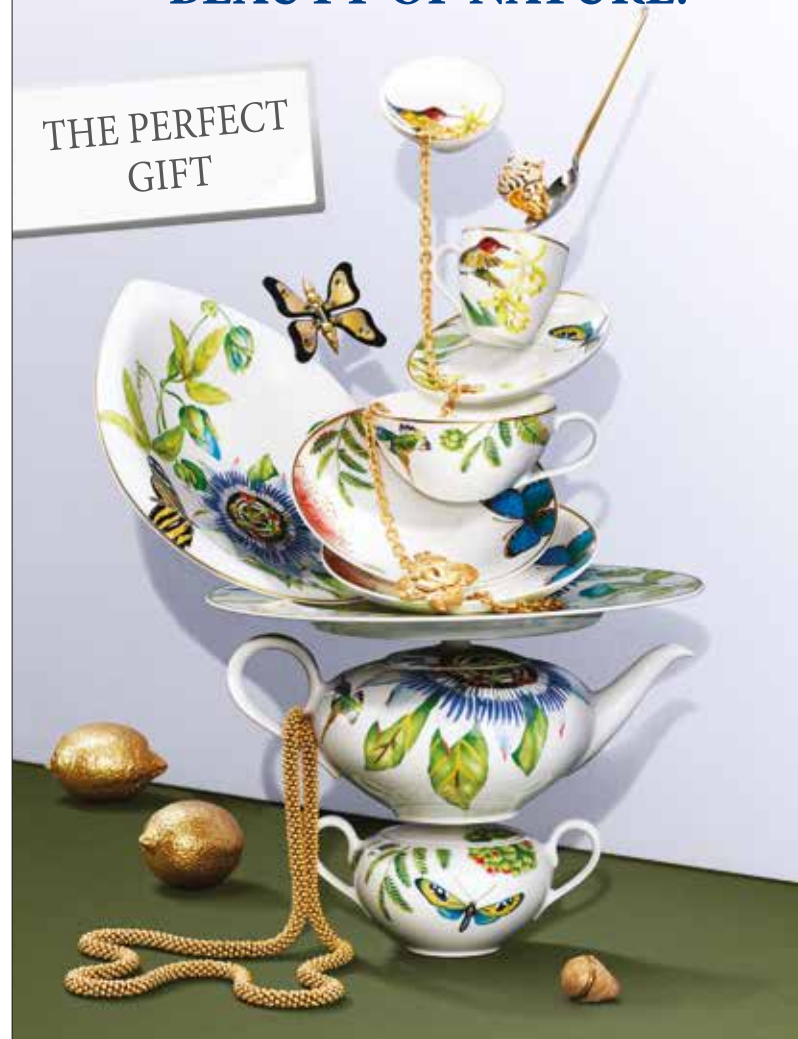
The fear of rejection is in the expectation that you'll say, "Nothing you do can restore my trust in you!" What if despite my best effort, you say you don't accept my apology? What if you brush me aside and invalidate my vulnerability? What if you laugh at or ridicule me?

This fear is the one that keeps us at the surface level of "I'm sorry" and keeps our relationships fractured, while we pretend that we're over it. We all hate being wrong. But more than that, we know that we hurt for a long time when we make ourselves vulnerable and don't get to restore the connection that we were seeking, or we feel that nobody's really listening.

Ultimately, that's what each person, the one seeking an apology and the one needing to make an apology wants – connection. A real apology helps us build a culture of connection.

To receive this, however, we need to be willing to risk vulnerability. And we need to use conversational intelligence, and be gracious and sensitive to the vulnerability of others. It takes courage to apologise and do it right. It takes grace to accept an apology and forgive. When we can each exercise courage and offer grace, we can build relationships that last.

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