

Apologies 101

Apologies are critical to maintaining relationships. Unfortunately, they are also complex, and the source of much conflict. For a neurodivergent person, apologies can feel like a constant expectation to accept that they are wrong, that they inadvertently did something bad and it is their fault, or that they simply are broken. It is important to recognize that apologies do not always mean accepting responsibility for a wrong, and that others should also be expected to apologize for their part in the interaction, including a need to recognize and/or accommodate different neurotypes.

To begin, here are some thoughts on the nature of apologies:

1. **Apology As Source of Connection:** Apologies are a tool for maintaining goodwill between people. They help people to feel seen, understood and valued by the person apologizing. The apology is a way of saying to another person that they matter to you, and the fact that they might be hurting *is in turn upsetting to you*. It suggests that you value them enough to make a repair. Note that some people will use them generously, even when they have not done anything particularly wrong, simply to maintain goodwill. (Sometimes apologies will be overused when individuals have low self-image and want to make sure everything is okay between you. You can begin to address this by offering more frequent positive feedback and validation.)
2. **Apology As Empathy:** Note that while apologies typically involve taking responsibility for one's actions, one can also be "sorry" for how another is feeling. This is a show of empathy, that you feel and understand how the other is experiencing a situation. It does not mean that you think you did anything wrong. Your partner will likely feel more understood and connected (closer) to you if you can show empathy when they are hurting. (Examples: I am so sorry that you have to get surgery. I am sorry that your dog is dying. It must be hard. I am sorry that what I did impacted you that way. etc.)
3. **Apology To Take Responsibility:** In most of these situations, an apology is designed to show four things:
 - a. That you understand that your actions were hurtful.
 - b. That you wish you had behaved differently.
 - c. That you plan to behave differently in the future. (You may need to ask for assistance to accomplish this.)
 - d. That you will take steps to "make it right."

Showing these things will help the other person to recover from the hurt and to reconnect with you moving forward. When apologies are not complete, residual negative emotions may build up over time. Residual emotions can contribute to conflicts or reactions that appear disproportional to the situation because they are triggering past hurt in addition to whatever is happening in the present.

NOTE: IF YOUR BEHAVIOR PATTERN CONTINUES AND DOES NOT CHANGE AS SUGGESTED IN PART C OF YOUR APOLOGY, RESIDUAL EMOTIONS WILL BUILD AND CONFLICT WILL PREDICTABLY ESCALATE.

Also note that the absence of an apology can also lead some people to blame themselves for whatever happened even if you were the one responsible. This can be damaging to their self-esteem, increase their depression or anxiety, or potentially result in their withdrawal or distancing from you in the relationship.

4. **Apologies are hard.** They can require some courage as we often have to get vulnerable to being further criticized or hurt ourselves as we take responsibility for our wrongdoing, and re-engage with a “hot” issue. Sometimes this courage is hard to muster.
5. **Can Apologies be too much?** Yes. Apologies can be overdone, offered too frequently, or so readily that others may conclude you are capitulating to accommodate low self-esteem. Over-apologizing is sometimes (misogynistically) associated with women, as a tool to keep the peace or to submit to more powerful males in the situation. The key is to apologize when warranted, and to check oneself if you have concerns about always appeasing others. Ask a trusted person for feedback if you have concerns.
6. **What if the criticism is unfair?** Sometimes criticism comes to you undeservedly. The other person may have incorrect information or jump to conclusions based on past history or their own emotional “baggage.” They may expect an apology, but be unwilling to look at their own mistakes. In such situations, it is important to listen and validate their experiences so that you can ideally help them feel less hurt/defensive and open up to different explanations of events. Sometimes an empathy apology is needed, while in other cases this will fall short and leave them feeling angry. In such cases, there may be a history of behaviors by you that is really underlying the current identified problem. In these cases, look hard at your own behavior to see if there is anything that you need to take responsibility for and, if so, then apologize. For a detailed look at managing unfair criticism, check out this link: [Unfair Criticism - Communications Skills from Mind Tools](#)

Steps for making an effective apology:

1. **Before you apologize, make sure that you understand the person’s grievance from their perspective.** If your apology does not match what they perceive to have been your mistake, your apology could actually increase the level of conflict in the relationship. Use active listening to gather information about what they are thinking and feeling about what happened. Reflect it back in your own words to make sure that you correctly understand the impact of your actions—as they see it.

2. **Ask to ensure that it is a good time for your partner to receive the apology.** If your partner is busy with other activities or thoughts, your apology might feel intrusive or insensitive.
3. **Admit your responsibility for what happened.** Show your partner that you understand how your actions impacted them, and that you feel remorse. Be sincere, and share your own feelings of embarrassment or regret about your actions.
4. **If possible, take steps to make it right.** Offer a suggestion for how to make it right for them, and make sure that they agree that this resolution would be good for them. If you don't know what would help, ask your partner for their input. Make sure that you can do what they are requesting and that it is proportionate to the mistake before you commit to doing it.
5. **Make sure you follow through on your commitments.** If you continue to make the same mistakes over and over without changing your behavior, trust will be broken and the relationship will likely be impacted for the long term. Past conflicts will pile up and cause the other person to react out of proportion to current challenges. Check in with your partner regularly to show your intention to respect your partner's needs and to change your behavior.

For additional information on apologies, try this link: [How to Apologize - Communication Skills Training From MindTools.com](#)