

Real-ationship Goals Podcast

Bonus Episode: Apologies

[Upbeat plucking on guitar]

Aleigh: Welcome to Real-ationship Goals, a podcast all about the realities of healthy relationships. Real-ationship Goals is a project of the Advocacy Center for Crime Victims and Children in Waco, Texas.

If you or someone you know has experienced sexual violence or harassment and is seeking support, services, or needs more information, links to resources and our hotline number can be found in the description.

The views expressed in this podcast are those of the hosts and guests and do not necessarily reflect those of their organizations or affiliates.

[Upbeat plucking on guitar]

Aleigh: Welcome to a bonus episode of Real-ationship Goals. We have been talking about healthy and unhealthy characteristics, and we'll continue to talk about them throughout the remainder of the season. We just thought, as we're talking about unhealthy characteristics, we could jump in here during spring break and talk about apologies. That's what we're going to be talking about today. We think it's important to know how to both give and receive apologies, especially as we're thinking about making our relationships more healthy. So you're getting a bonus episode today.

And so my name is Aleigh, and I am the Prevention and Education Director at the Advocacy Center, and the question our hosts are going to answer today is: how do you start your day? So mine really varies depending on kind of the season of life that I'm in. It's been a variety of things in the past, but currently, it is waking up as late as possible that allows me to both do like a 20 minute yoga session and then make some coffee and sit down on my computer and start work.

Blythe: That was incredible. And I'm very the opposite of you in that way [laughs]. My name is Blythe. I'm a co-host, Prevention Educator, my pronouns are she/hers. And I treasure my morning routine. I love mornings. I wake up, sometimes go for a run or do yoga, just kind of honestly depends on what I'm feeling that morning. Because sometimes I have the energy for it and sometimes I don't, and that is okay. And then my husband Luke and I, we eat breakfast together, which is usually oatmeal, orange juice and coffee. And we listen to NPR Mews Now which is just five minutes, usually hosted by Korva Coleman, she's incredible. Korva Coleman, please give me a shout out. And then after that I spend 45 minutes to an hour reading and pondering the Bible. And then after that I get ready for work, and I brush my teeth, and it is a delight, and I love my morning.

Aleigh: Wow.

Katie: A true morning person. [all laugh]

Aleigh: Truly! [Blythe chuckles]

Katie: Well, my name is Katie, and I am a co-host, Prevention Educator, pronouns she/her, and I'm more like Aleigh. [laughs] I am in no means a morning person. If I could sleep until the afternoon, I absolutely would. So, like Aleigh, I try to sleep in as late as I possibly can before I need to get up. And then usually – so I listen to a lot of podcasts, including ours. Be sure to rate and subscribe! – because I listen to a lot of podcasts, I usually have at least one new episode every weekday. And so I immediately start listening to kind of get my brain start moving, the wheels start turning. Make myself a cup of coffee, have some yogurt, and then yeah, sit down and get things going. I'm not someone who can do a lot of physical activity in the morning. I usually save that for the afternoon, but I love that y'all have some yoga or running going on.

[Upbeat staccato plucking on guitar]

Aleigh: Okay, so you already know that today we are talking about apologies. And so my mom was a teacher. She just retired a couple of years ago. So she was a teacher and taught at the same school that my brother and I went to. And so for our childhood, mostly we would go to school with her in the morning. That was our ride to school. And she had to be there early because she was a teacher. Well, my brother and I always made her late.

Just for a season of life, we were constantly making her late. We didn't have any sense of urgency about when she needed to be at work because it didn't matter, because school didn't start for us for another half hour, 45 minutes or something. And so every time we'd be making my mom late, and we would say, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." We would keep apologizing. But the thing was, we never changed our behavior. And so finally, one morning, my mom left us at the house. And this isn't like you gotta walk a few blocks to school. We live like out in the country, miles from the school. There is a bus that comes by our house, but it's at like six in the morning. So she left us because we had been apologizing, apologizing, apologizing and still like didn't mean it and hadn't learned any sort of lesson.

And so we very sort of sheepishly called our grandma, and she came to get us and dropped us off at school. And we yeah, we found out what it meant to not truly mean an apology because meaning an apology means changing your behavior, and we did not do that. And we got left behind and almost were late to school until my grandma swooped in and saved the day. But that's that.

[Upbeat staccato plucking on guitar]

Blythe: Aleigh, thank you for sharing that. My jaw dropped [laughs] when you said that your mom left you. Incredible. So, today we are talking about apologies because, as we have mentioned a lot in talking about healthy and unhealthy relationships, nobody gets it right all the

time. We make mistakes, whether it's one time or, maybe like Aleigh and her brother, it's several times in a row. And so apologies are so essential to establishing and to keeping and maintaining healthy relationships.

So Dr. Harriet Lerner has done a lot of research on apologies. She's incredible. And so we're going to take our definition of apologies from her. So she says that a good apology is when we take clear and direct responsibility without a hint of evasion, blaming, excuse making, and without bringing up the other person's crime sheet. That was a thick definition. So Aleigh, Katie, how can we kind of break down into what a good apology is? Yeah, what'd'ya got?

Aleigh: You know, Harriet Lerner, we will provide a link in our description, she has what she calls nine ingredients of an apology. We're not going to go over all nine today. We'll leave that for you to do, but we do want to talk about at least three of them, I think, as we think about apologies.

But before we get to those, you know, I think it's important to think about good apologies are rooted in the courage and vulnerability, right? Because you are having to go to someone and to admit that you have made a mistake, that you have done something wrong, that you have done something to hurt them, maybe. And so that requires an amount of vulnerability and courage. And so, with that sort of groundwork, Katie, do want to start us off talking about some of these ingredients of an apology from Harriet Lerner?

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. She really is the queen of researching apologies as well as really implementing these strategies. So yeah, let's go over the three of these ingredients that she, you know, highlights in her work. One being **a good apology focuses on the issue and acknowledges the impact on the hurt party.** That means we're taking ownership of our actions, of our words. It also means that we are focusing on the issue or problem at this moment, and we're not bringing up something that happened a few months ago or a few years ago or a few days ago. We are saying, "This is what I did. I'm going to be held accountable for it. I'm gonna own it. It was my fault."

There is no trying to deflect responsibility, as we have talked about in this podcast, but we take ownership and then we also focus on what's actually happening in that moment. So we're not gonna be bringing up past things. We're talking about what is happening right now because it's really easy to deflect responsibility by talking about past things, about saying, "Well remember when you did this, and this is why I'm..." That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about what is right in front of us.

And that's really hard to do because, you know, our brains work on narratives. Our brains store different information, and when we're hurt, we want to share all the info that we have that defends us and says, "You know what, I was right in doing this, and I don't have to take the blame." We try to push that away.

So when we actually take ownership, that is a huge demonstration of respect for the other person, but also just maturity and courage as well because it's not easy to do, right? It's not easy to say like, "I did this wrong." But it is important, especially in healthy relationships.

Blythe: And it does show so much, right, that you respect the other person. And that's so at the center of a good apology. I think, going off of that, I want to also add, when we talk about acknowledging the impact on the hurt person, but we don't mean – and what mostly Harriet doesn't mean by this – is saying like, "I'm sorry that you feel..." "I'm sorry that you felt hurt or upset by what I said or by what I did."

It's more about the heart of really acknowledging the thing, like whatever I said or that I did, like my actions have caused someone to experience, whether it's hurt or feeling left out or something like that. And so when we can center it on like, Okay, this is the issue at hand, the thing that I did, and this is the impact, that's also part of what makes a good apology. Just wanted to add that.

Aleigh: Yeah, and I think when we're thinking – I wanna add one little thing, too, and then we can move on. But it doesn't really matter how you perceive it, or if you feel like you would be hurt by that. It is about how it impacted them, like Blythe said. So it's not, "I'm sorry that you felt hurt." It's like, "I'm sorry that I hurt you." Whether I understand all of the nature of that hurt for whatever the apology is about or not.

Katie: Yeah. "I'm sorry you feel that way" is not an apology.

Aleigh: Correct.

Katie: So don't be gaslit being told that is an apology. [all chuckle]

Aleigh: The second ingredient that we want to talk about about a good apology is: a good apology does not include the word "but." So we've already said, "I'm sorry you feel..." is not an apology. And so "I'm sorry, but..." also is not a good framework for an apology because that "but" tends to cancel out an apology and usually sort of introduces an excuse or criticism, like "I'm sorry that I did that, but I did it because of this." And it's like, that's not an apology, or is not a good apology, at least. I guess it is technically an apology but it's not...

Like if I go back to the example between my brother and I and my mom, we were probably saying, "I'm sorry I made you late but, you know, I had to grab a Pop-Tart before I ran out the door" or "I'm sorry, I made you late, but I couldn't find my book in my room" or something, you know. And it's like, well, there's lots of things you could do to remove that excuse sort of in that situation, right?

Katie: I think just like a lot of our podcasts are going to be interconnected, these characteristics and how they overlap. That is the same with you know these nine ingredients, even though we're just having three, but you know, "I'm sorry, but" is a good tool for deflecting responsibility.

And it can also be a tool that's used when we don't want to focus on the problem in this moment, right? It's like, "Well I'm sorry, but you made me upset." It's really easy to fall into that trap and not have an authentic apology.

Blythe: We touched on this when we were talking about the first one, but I think language that's really helped me to kind of wrap my brain around this one is the idea of intent versus impact. Just because I maybe did not intend to cause harm in some way did not mean that an impact was not there. And so even if I say like, "I'm sorry but that wasn't my intent. So I'm sorry, you feel that way." Being able to go back to that idea of ownership and say like, "You know what, that might not have been my intent, but that was the impact, and that's good enough for me to be able to apologize for you, or not for you, to you, sorry." [chuckles]

Going off of that, or moving onto the third that we're taking again from Harriet Lerner's 9 ingredients of a good apology, is what Aleigh talked a lot about in her story, this idea of reparation or restitution or also just corrective action. The idea that a true apology is more than just words; it also has to incorporate action. It has to incorporate a change in behavior and just trying, I guess for lack of better words, not to do the thing that required you to apologize in the first place.

And what I really like about some things that Harriet has said and detailed in her lists of nine ingredients is that the action response that goes along with the apology should be related to the thing that you apologized for. So like if I told a friend that like, "Hey, I feel like whenever we hang out, you're not really present with me because you're always on your phone." And if she apologizes to me and then bakes me a cake but doesn't actually change the behavior of being present with me whenever we're hanging out, then that's not the greatest apology in terms of action. It would be a good apology, and she could follow that with good action by keeping her phone in her pocket most of the time when we're hanging out so that I would feel present with her.

Katie: And I think that goes back to respect, right? She, in this case, she would respect what you said and take that to heart and say, "I'm sorry. I didn't realize that that was bothering you. I'm gonna do my best to make sure that I'm more present in our conversations." I would say that's an apology, but then following it with the actions – very important.

Aleigh: Yeah, in my brother and I's case from that story, the corrective action would be to start being on time and not just saying, "I'm sorry" every day and not making it result in getting left.

But I think as we're thinking about apologies, I want to make sure that we say, too, that good apologies are essential. End of sentence. Good apologies are essential for healthy relationships, and especially across power imbalances, which we'll talk about later in the season when we talk about inequality and equality and safety and things like that. But so when we think about a power imbalance, we're thinking about a parent and a child, a boss and an employee, a coach and a player, a teacher and a student, right? And so apologies are really important in those relationships, too, because not only is it... It's modeling, right? It is modeling what a good

apology looks like or what being in a healthy relationship looks like for the person who is in the lower power position. But it also just sort of establishes that respect that we talked about in season one and how important that is in relationships. And understanding that no one is perfect, and we all make mistakes, no matter your title or age or anything like that. I think understanding that as a leader or the person who holds the most power in whatever relationship is really important, too.

Blythe: Going off of that, Aleigh, I'm so glad you brought that up. We've talked a lot about getting apologies: "I'm sorry..." I think it's also really important, and Harriet talks a lot about the, too, of what it means to receive an apology. I know my go to response upon someone apologizing to me is, "Well, it's okay." And are there times when that's appropriate? Sure. If I'm at a restaurant, for example, and it's really busy, and the host comes over to me it's like, "Hey, I'm so sorry it took me a minute. We're just really busy." A great time to say, "You know what, it's okay, that's out of your control. It's really okay."

But when we're really talking about apologies that stem from, you know, being hurt by something, someone being harmed, etc, etc., sometimes the thing that we're saying "it's okay" to, well, it actually wasn't okay that I was harmed or hurt in that way. And so she really encourages – she being Dr. Lerner – people to think about the phrase like, "Thank you for that apology. I appreciate it." And acknowledging like you just apologize for something, and that means a lot to me, thank you for that.

Katie: Yeah. And I think along with that, apologies are vulnerable, right. So we're thanking the person for taking a step into vulnerability and saying, "Thank you, I see you. I'm gonna process this.: Yeah. And then you know, go from there. Because I think that makes a big impact in relationships.

Aleigh: Yeah, great. Well, Katie, would you like to share our bonus relationship goal for this week?

Katie: Oh, we can always have relationship goals people, but we are glad it is a bonus. [all laugh]

Each and every one of us messes up sometimes. So we want this week's goal, this bonus goal, to be to apologize sincerely in all of your relationships. Instead of blame shifting, focus on your own actions and work towards change. And, you know, be sure to check out those resources that we have posted in our show notes, Harriet Lerner's 9 ingredients, because they really are fantastic. And the better we become at apologizing, the better we can be in relationships. And I think Blythe has a recommendation for this.

Blythe: I do! Okay, so most cell phones have either a reminder app, or they have a calendar app. I think most of them do have one or the other. And so beyond their intended purposes for like reminding you to do things, I really like to set little surprise reminders for my husband, Luke. Usually they're simple things like "Hey, I love you. I hope you're having a good day" or like "I'm

sure today's been busy, but I'm really proud of you, and I'm excited to see you at home after work.” And then like just a little message pops up on his phone at 10am or whatever time I set it for. And so my recommendation is to use the reminder app or calendar app on a friend or a partner or family member’s phone – get their consent first. Get their consent first to use their phone. But use those apps just to send them a fun little note. I think it's really fun and exciting. So that's your recommendation.

Aleigh: I love that. That's really fun. Okay, well thank you for joining us for this bonus episode. We hope you're having a fun, relaxing, safe spring break. And tune in next week for our next episode!

[upbeat guitar strumming and some soft violin transition music that plays as the credits are read]

Aleigh: Thanks so much for tuning into Real-ationship Goals. This episode was produced by the Prevention and Education Department of the Advocacy Center for Crime Victims and Children in Waco, Texas. You can follow us on Instagram at @ACCVC_Prevention. See you next time!

[upbeat guitar strumming with soft violin and a few xylophone notes]