

# The Power of Apology

*“All I want is an apology!”*

## Why apologize?

When a relationship has been strained or broken, the participants often want to receive or to give an apology to begin the process of repair. They hope that an apology will restore dignity, trust, and a sense of justice. But remember:

*A thoughtful apology can mend a relationship  
while a thoughtless one may cause further hurt.*

## What makes an effective apology?

- **A specific definition of the perceived harmful behavior.** Both parties should have a clear understanding of the behaviors that felt hurtful.
- **An acknowledgement that the behavior caused hurt.** The one apologizing should express recognition that the other felt hurt, embarrassment, fear, or harm.
- **Taking responsibility.** The person apologizing should recognize that their behavior caused harm. “I made a mistake. And that mistake hurt you.”
- **A statement of regret.** Although saying “I’m sorry” is generally not enough for a complete apology, it is a necessary step to rebuilding trust.
- **A commitment not to repeat the behaviors.** The one apologizing should indicate how they intend to improve their behavior and develop better self-restraint.
- **An explanation as to why the behavior occurred.** Explaining why the behavior occurred often helps mend a relationship. But be careful! An explanation is only helpful if it does not come across as an excuse or blaming or minimizing the significance of the behavior.

## Responding to an apology.

The key to responding to an apology is sincerity. If the apology can be genuinely heard and accepted, the one receiving an apology may want to demonstrate acceptance with a handshake or a statement of forgiveness.

If the person receiving the apology is not ready to accept the apology or to respond in kind, it is helpful to acknowledge the importance of the apology having been made, but indicate that more time is necessary to heal before the apology can be fully accepted.

## Exchanging apologies.

When misunderstandings occur, people often hurt each other. Often people feel misunderstood and poorly treated. To completely repair a relationship, it is often necessary for people to exchange apologies – each party acknowledging responsibility and regret for their part of the conflict and agreeing to a mutual plan to avoid such hurtful behaviors in the future.

*Mark R. Otis, Ph.D.  
Clinical and Family Psychologist*