



Illustration by Nicolás Ortega; Photographs by Getty Images

## How to apologize like you mean it

Most of us can remember receiving an unsatisfying apology. A friend of mine recently got a text message after a Bumble date stood her up: “Sry,” it read. (“He didn’t even spell out the whole word,” she told me.)

When my kid was in preschool, an email arrived in my inbox. “Sorry your daughter was bitten,” it said. (The sender’s child had done the biting.)

Why is it so hard to apologize? Why do so many of us get it wrong? Saying you’re sorry involves vulnerability, said Lisa Leopold, a former associate professor at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey who researches apologies.

“We also have to admit our own wrongdoing, our own failings,” she added, “and that requires tremendous humility.”

But it’s worth making the effort, Leopold said. A [meta-analysis](#) of 175 studies found that apologies did, indeed, influence forgiveness. Other research suggests that apologies can benefit the giver as well as the receiver by reducing guilt, fostering self-compassion and [strengthening relationships](#).

But not all apologies are equal. For a show of remorse to be truly effective, it should be focused on the other person’s feelings and needs, not your own, said Karina Schumann, an associate professor of social psychology and head of the Conflict Resolution Lab at the University of Pittsburgh who researches [the topic](#).

The ingredients of a successful apology can vary, but here are ones that many experts agree on.

### **Express regret.**

Do not say “I want to apologize,” or “I would like to apologize,” Leopold said. “A lot of people use that language,” she explained, but expressing a desire isn’t as effective as apologizing. Instead, simply say “I apologize,” or “I’m sorry,” she said.

Using an “I” statement strengthens your apology by taking responsibility, Leopold said. “I’m sorry for my outburst this morning,” for example, is more effective than saying “that shouldn’t have happened.”

### **Explain — but keep it brief.**

Being specific about what you’ve done can make the other person feel understood, said Beth Polin, an associate professor of management at Eastern Kentucky University, who studies apologies. But, she added, you should keep it sincere and short.

Skip justifications and excuses, she said, because an apology “should not be to make us feel better or defend our actions.”

And while you are explaining, Leopold said, avoid conditional words like “but,” which can weaken the apology (“I apologize for the delay, but I had multiple deadlines to meet”).

“If” is another conditional that helps us dodge responsibility. “I apologize if I offended anybody” implies that there may have been no victims and hence, no transgression,” Leopold said.

### **Acknowledge any harm you’ve caused.**

Dr. Polin has found [in her research](#) that taking ownership is one of the most vital components of an apology. “We really do care about someone admitting their wrongdoing,” she said.

And while it’s tempting to say that you didn’t *mean* any harm, Leopold suggested keeping your intentions to yourself. “People don’t want to hear these justifications,” she said, “because it weakens the responsibility.”

Instead, convey exactly how your actions have affected or hurt the other person. “This feeling of being understood is another critical factor in forgiveness,” Dr. Schumann said.

### **Say you’ll try not to do it again.**

Reassure the person that you’ll do your best not to repeat the offense, Dr. Polin said, adding that this “builds back trust and confidence.”

But this step is often left out of apologies, she explained. “People hope to not repeat an offense, but it can be difficult to put themselves on the line and make such a promise,” she said.

It’s critical, though, Dr. Polin said. “When you explicitly say that you will try not to do something again, this looks to the future rather than the past, and also reduces that nagging doubt,” she said.

### **Offer to repair.**

Pairing an apology with a vow to correct the wrongdoing is more likely to lead to forgiveness than the statement alone, Leopold said.

Be specific about how you’re going to make it up to the person, Dr. Polin said, adding that you can ask them for suggestions.

Don't just tell yourself that the damage is done, she added. Maybe you can't repay in kind, she said, but there is almost always something that you can do.

### **Ask for forgiveness (but let go of expectations).**

The final step, said Dr. Polin, is a gentle request for forgiveness. She recommended asking a collaborative question like, "How can we get back to where we were before this happened?"

"That invites the other person into that trust-repair process," she said.

You can say something like "I hope you'll forgive me," but it's important that you don't pressure someone to do so, said Dr. Schumann. "Give them time and space to forgive," she said.

And let them know that you desire their forgiveness not because you want to wriggle off the hook, she added, but "because of how much you care about them."

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