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Why Is It So Hard to Apologize?

“I’m sorry.” Those two little words can be so hard to say. Research reveals why we struggle to apologize.

BY [SHARON BEGLEY](#) APRIL 30TH, 2019



Illustration by Edmon de Haro

Apologies are the Brussels sprouts of relationships. Research says they’re good for us, and, like a dinner of the green stuff after a lunch of burger and fries, they can erase or at least mitigate the ill effects of a transgression. But there’s something about both apologies and tiny bitter brassicas that makes us often choose something else on the menu, thank you very much.

When psychologist Karina Schumann began studying apologies, she noticed something odd: Psychologists had barely investigated why they can be so hard to make. Studies have focused almost exclusively on the victim’s perspective, especially how apologies can trigger forgiveness and healing.

“It’s been less about the transgressor,” said Schumann, an assistant professor at the University of Pittsburgh. “That hasn’t been completely ignored, but what causes someone to apologize or not has been a much more recent area of study.”

It’s about time. If people can understand what makes (or breaks) a decent apology, they might offer more of them. Bring on the healing, forgiveness, and stronger relationships.

The Likely Offenders

There are many reasons why people don’t apologize. One is the “magnitude gap” between how each side describes an offense. Compared to victims, transgressors are more likely to justify their transgression, describe it as inadvertent, or minimize the resulting hurt. Believing the offense was a mere slip-up (But I remembered your birthday every other year!), understandable (I’ve been so busy at work), or the victim’s fault (If you gave me more freedom, I wouldn’t feel the need to be dishonest) reduces the emotional and cognitive impetus to apologize.

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Another reason an apology might be MIA is that the transgressor simply doesn't care. Apologies can be a way to reconnect with the victim and repair a damaged relationship by communicating remorse and sympathy. If you're not concerned with any of that, there's no motivation to apologize. Did the boss make you work late into the night, weekends, or holidays without so much as a "sorry" (or "thank you")? She likely doesn't really care about your dinner plans or vacation time with family.

Then there's narcissism. Lack of empathy and an inability to recognize personal missteps (Me? Impossible!) are traits that make narcissistic people less likely to apologize than those who aren't as self-absorbed. People who don't or can't see things from another's perspective (How could my saying that dress makes you look fat hurt your feelings?) and those who believe personality is fixed rather than malleable also tend to apologize less.

As Schumann reeled off these barriers to apologizing, I thought, *Not me, nope, not that one either*. Then, there it was: Apologizing, she explained, is hell on one's self-image as a decent, caring, sensitive, moral person.

A Long, Hard Look in the Mirror

If a wrong reflects poorly on something insignificant to a person's sense of self, it's easier to apologize for it. For most of us, having the body control of a ballet dancer isn't critical to our sense of self, so accidentally bumping into someone usually triggers an immediate "I'm sorry, excuse me."

"If the transgression doesn't reflect on your character or your morality, it doesn't threaten your self-image to acknowledge it with an apology," Schumann said.

But failing to help a loved one, insulting a friend, not living up to expectations—there's a long list of misdeeds that can reflect poorly on our sense of who we are, or who we wish we were. "To the extent that something you did threatens your self-image, especially as a moral person or a good partner, apologizing puts you in a tough situation," Schumann said. "It calls additional attention to negative aspects of your behavior" (bad enough that you did it; now you're reminding someone of it) and keeps it front-of-mind, where it can insidiously and insistently declare, That's what you're like; stop fooling yourself!

Apologies bring us face-to-face with the fact that we have something to apologize for, triggering a sense of guilt and its close partner, shame. While it's true that after an apology we tend to feel better and have a stronger sense of integrity, the prospect of apologizing undermines the sense that the apologizer is a good person. Saying sorry puts one's shameful behavior out there for all (or at least the victim) to see. "That's why transgressors often view an apology as threatening to their self-image and consequently hesitate to offer one," Schumann said. Or, viewed the other way, that's why withholding an "I'm sorry" is an effective way to mitigate the threat to one's self-image as a decent person.

The self-image hit explains why people with a fragile sense of self-worth are also less likely to apologize: If you don't have much to begin with, something that reduces what you have is especially painful.

People who failed to apologize saw a rise in self-esteem and an increased sense of control and power over others, compared to people who did apologize, a 2012 study found. (In both cases participants followed instructions from the researchers, not their own druthers.) Why? It gives the recipient of the "I'm sorry" an opportunity to twist the knife (Ha! You realize you were in the wrong!). It also undermines "value integrity," the confidence in one's goodness and the soundness of one's core beliefs.

The Chance to Move Forward

This long list of barriers to apology, which Schumann explored in a 2018 paper, shouldn't be taken as a convenient excuse or as cause for despair. Instead, it might be leveraged to make apologizing easier.

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For instance, when people focus on their core values, they seem to become more willing to sincerely apologize. In one of Schumann's studies, she and her colleagues had participants write about why the personal value they ranked most highly (e.g., justice, love, compassion) was important to them. That simple exercise has been shown to boost self-image as a moral person by affirming commitment to a treasured value. Compared to the participants who did not do this self-affirmation exercise, those who did offered more sincere apologies for remembered transgressions when writing what they would say to the person they hurt.

This was an artificial, laboratory setting rather than a real-world one; people knew they were in a psych experiment, which can skew their behavior. So we should take it with a grain of salt. But by understanding the many barriers to apology—indifference to another's pain or to the fraying of a relationship, or avoidance of a threat to self-image—we can glimpse what's holding us back from saying "I'm sorry" in a particular situation. From there, we have the opportunity to change course and let the healing begin.

How to Make a Good Apology

A high-quality apology has three elements:

1. It accepts responsibility for the wrong and doesn't even hint that outside forces, or the victim, caused the offender to do what they did.

What to say: I'm sorry I didn't show up to help you move when I said I would.

What not to say: You were asking too much of me and I just couldn't do it, so I flaked.

2. It's unqualified. If the apology contains a "but," it fails. There's time later—after the injury has had time to heal—to bring up any qualifications that might be relevant to future interactions.

What to say: I broke your trust and was inconsiderate of your feelings.

What not to say: I'm sorry I made you feel abandoned, but I didn't realize how big a job it was and I had other things I needed to do that day.

3. It offers to make amends, such as offering help to someone you previously blew off or making a sincere effort to avoid the transgression in the future.

What to say: I know I bailed on the move, but can I help you unpack or clean up? If not, next time you ask me for help I won't leave you hanging. I will do everything I can to be available, and if I can't make it I will tell you well in advance.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Begley

Sharon Begley, our long time science columnist, died of cancer on January 16, 2021, at age 64. Our thoughts and good wishes go out to her family and her wide circle of colleagues, for whom she was an exemplar of the highest standards of the journalistic profession. Sharon was a senior science writer with The Boston Globe Media Group, author of *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*, and co-author with Richard Davidson of *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*.