

How to Make a Good Apology

by Marie S. Paxson

SINCE SYMPTOMS OF ADHD may include impulsive behavior and trouble with attention to detail, experts often recommend that adults with ADHD keep an apology nearby at all times. If you are going to be prone to social blunders this makes a lot of sense.

But what does a good apology look like? And when should it be used? I'm no Emily Post, but over the years I've made my share of faux pas and caused ruffled feathers.

My perspective on apologies has evolved over time. I've learned that an important reason for saying I'm sorry is so that I can forgive myself and move forward. Without making an apology, I will feel awful about the incident. So as uncomfortable or awkward fessing up may be, it beats the heck out of carrying guilt and shame.

Let's focus on two occasions when an apology is necessary. The first is when you genuinely regret your actions. The second is when you don't necessarily regret your actions, but you definitely regret the outcome. (I'm not talking about being sorry you got caught. That's not sincere.) An apology is necessary when you want to preserve a relationship or smooth things over, but believe your actions were appropriate.



Apologizing for regrettable actions

Suppose you acted carelessly or did something that your friend asked you NOT to do. A good apology could look like this:

I'm sorry that I _____.
(State the regrettable action.)

I didn't mean to cause _____.
(This shows that you understand the results of your action.)

I should not have done this and it won't happen again.
(Say this only if you are sure of it.)

OR
I'm taking steps so that it does not happen again.
(This statement shows that this will be a work in progress.)

OR
If I had to do things over again, I would _____.
(This statement shows that you are learning from your mistake.)

I value our friendship and I hope you can forgive me.

When you regret the outcome but stand by your perspective

This happened to me a few months ago. I gave my opinion in an email and it was not well received by someone I care about. Sharing my opinion wasn't necessary and I acted self-important. I truly wish I had kept my mouth shut.

An apology in this instance could look like this:

I'm sorry that I hurt your feelings.
(You are stating the outcome of your actions.)

I respect your opinion and would not want to do anything to hurt you.

I value our friendship and I hope you can forgive me.

Nowhere in this example do you try to make your point again. Doing that will look like you are continuing the argument but disguising it as an apology. Don't mention anything about agreeing to disagree; that part is obvious. You are apologizing because you offended the person.

Here's the most difficult part of apologizing: You have NO control whether the person to whom you apologize will forgive you. That part is out of your hands. But at least you know that you have owned up to your regrettable action.

Other considerations to keep in mind

Do you apologize a lot? If so, you may want to take a look at that. Could you be taking responsibility for actions that belong to others? For example, do you apologize when you are dining with friends at your favorite restaurant and the service is uncharacteristically bad? Or for circumstances that are beyond your control, such as hosting a barbecue on a rainy day? You are not responsible for the weather or for how a restaurant assigns their staff. Apologize only for YOUR mistakes or poor outcomes.

If you are having a text-based argument, step away from the keyboard because you are probably making things worse. If it hasn't gotten too heated, you could pick up the phone and have a better discussion. If your blood is already boiling, stop participating.

After a text-based disagreement, a handwritten note or card can be helpful. It shows you took the time to show you care. It is also not an interactive experience, like phone or email. It allows time for your apology to be considered (unless the recipient doesn't open it).

What if you've offended someone you don't know or won't see again—someone you cut off in traffic, perhaps? Some people set things right by doing a good deed as soon as possible after the incident.

Whenever you do make an apology, remember that you are apologizing for your behavior, NOT your existence. Don't beat yourself up for making a mistake. 🗣️

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