



## The Art of Apologies

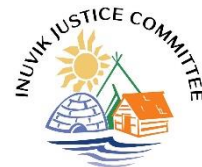
Apologizing is a skill set. It is one that is developed over time, with practice. Apologizing is not something that we are generally taught. Most often, when we think back to our earliest experience with apologizing, it was forced upon us. Parents, relatives, teachers, or other authority figures may have told us it was something that we *must* do, even if we didn't want to, didn't mean it, or didn't believe it was the right thing to do. Generally, it would have consisted of saying "I'm Sorry," and that was it. It may have been followed-up by a comment like, "Was that so hard?" Does this sound familiar?

Now, a little about the word "Sorry" ... This is a word that has been severely overused. Within the Canadian context, apologizing is something that we are credited for saying as a matter of practice. For example, how often do you find yourself saying "I'm sorry" for something that you have absolutely no control over or wasn't your fault at all, or for something that seems like an inconvenience when it really isn't? I bet it isn't hard to think of examples... With the overuse of this word in circumstances that don't merit or warrant its use, "Sorry" loses its apologetic meaning.

Now, why is it so easy to say "Sorry," but also difficult to make an apology when necessary? Are apologies seen as a weakness or a strength? Do you know anyone who does a good job of apologizing? When does an apology lose its sincerity? What if a person apologizes, but continues to do the same things *over* and *over* again? Can you think of anyone who does this? Are there people you know who never apologize for anything? What do you think stops them from apologizing? Have you ever heard an apology that just doesn't sound right, and actually makes things worse? What is it about those apologies that doesn't work?

### What is the purpose of an apology? Why is it important?

- **To restore Trust** ... Trust helps to rebuild relationships.
- **To take Accountability** ... Accountability helps to restore dignity and avoids the victim blaming themselves for what took place.
- **To restore Integrity** ... Integrity helps you to improve your future actions.
- **To provide Relief** ... Relief for yourself to begin to move past this moment of indiscretion, embarrassment, and to commit to doing better for yourself. Apologies are good for your own peace of mind, and you are then able to forgive yourself.



- **To help re-establish healthy boundaries** ... When there is conflict between two people, often it means that a boundary has been crossed, trust has been broken, or a violation of a social rule has occurred (eg. loss of composure). Apologies, if done well, can re-establish expectations for future interactions.

### What happens if you don't apologize?

- Relationships are damaged
- You may develop a negative reputation
- You set a bad example
- You may limit potential future opportunities

### What are the critical parts of a good apology?

- A good apology demonstrates a **remorsefulness** for your actions, or an **expression of regret**.
- **Taking accountability:** This is literally an explanation of what went wrong, and what specific actions you are apologizing for (name them). This does not include making excuses or rationalizing what you did.
- **Taking responsibility:** Acknowledge the hurt your actions caused, or the negative impacts caused by your actions.
- **Making amends:** Ask what you can do to repair the situation and be receptive to what the offended person requires or suggests.
- **A commitment to do better in future:** Be sure that you honour this commitment, to prove that you are trustworthy. Otherwise, your apology just seems empty or hollow.
- **Showing empathy:** It is essential that you try to understand the feelings of the offended individual. If you can empathize with another person, then what you offer as an apology will be considerably more sincere.

**Reflection:** Does a good apology ask for forgiveness? What are your thoughts on this?



## Why is apologizing difficult?

- **Vulnerability:** It may feel like you are leaving yourself open to blame or even possible attack.
- **Shame:** You may feel embarrassed about your actions, making it difficult to face the other person.
- **Understanding:** There is often a desire to understand, “What did I do that was *so* wrong?” Instead, try focusing on the impacts of your actions, regardless of whether you intended to create harm.
- **Individualizing the experience:** You may not be really worried about the other person- *Why should I care?* Or, you may be more worried about your own self image than you are the impacts of your actions. However, taking accountability, responsibility, and apologizing sincerely, helps to mitigate negative perceptions of your past actions.
- You may feel like an apology won’t matter or do any good.
- It’s possible that you don’t want to be the first one to apologize, as you fear being seen as “more wrong” or the “loser” in the conflict.

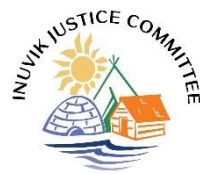
**Reflection:** Is it ever too late to apologize?

## Apologies need to be:

- Effective
- Credible
- Adequate

## Some truths about apologies:

- A 2011 Psychological Science study led by David De Cremer (Eramus University) found that people often overestimate the extent that an apology will make them feel better. Across a series of experiments, people displayed greater trusting behaviour when they *imagined* receiving an apology, compared to when they *actually* received one.
- This tells us that there is a disconnect between what a person wants to hear in an apology, and what apologies often look like in actuality.
- **Reflection:** Why do you think this is the case? Knowing this, how will you make better apologies in the future?



- This does not suggest that apologies are meaningless, but rather that there is more work to be done around apologizing.
- De Cremer and colleagues explain, “An apology seems to be only the first step of the reconciliation process, because people do not react as positively toward an apology as they think they will.”

### **What do you want to avoid doing in an apology?**

- Avoid placing **blame** onto the other person.
- Avoid **excusing** or **defending** your actions.
- Avoid sharing feelings of **resentment** and **defensiveness** (e.g. “I am sorry that you were being so petty or critical”).
- Avoid using the word **“but”** ... “But” cancels-out the apology, as it is followed by excuses or criticism.
- Avoid using an apology as a quick way to end a difficult conversation or dispute (e.g. “Oh my God, I already said I am sorry! Why do you have to keep bringing this up?”)
- **Avoid having expectations:** Avoid having the expectation that you are going to get an apology in return, avoid expecting forgiveness. Sometimes, others are not ready to forgive. This is nothing that you have control over, so it cannot be an expectation when offering an apology.



## The Art of Apologies: Worksheet and Exercise

Are you prepared for how someone may respond to your apology? Here are some things they *may* say to you in response:

- It's okay.
- Let's put that behind us.
- Please don't ever do that again.
- Thanks, but I need more time to think about things.
- Are you kidding me?
- I can forgive, but I don't forget.
- You are just going to do the same thing again, so why bother apologizing?
- I don't accept your apology.
- Those are words, but I want to see action.
- "Sorry" isn't good enough.
- I want to know, why did you do that?
- What were you thinking?
- How do you expect me to forgive you?
- **What if they say nothing?** ... It's okay to ask: "How do you feel about what I have just said?"

Words are hard to find. Some things that you can say in an apology are:

- That was my fault- I made a mistake **(take accountability)**.
- What I did was wrong, and I **accept responsibility** for my actions.
- Is there anything I can do to make it up to you? **(Make amends)**
- I'm sorry for my part in this. **In situations where you are not 100% to blame, this is acceptable. For example, if you feel like you were provoked and responded negatively.**
- I'm sorry for what I said. I know my words hurt you, I should not have spoken to you that way

Some things to avoid saying in an apology are:

- I'm sorry that you felt hurt by what I said. **This implies that the hurt feelings were a random reaction of the offended person.**

