

How Not to Apologize in Quarantine

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No matter how hard we try to avoid it, we're all doomed to hurt those we love. In quarantine, despite our best efforts, we're all destined to annoy those we love.

People are [discovering](#) they can't stand the way their partners chew, talk and brush the cat. One woman even told her partner that if he dropped his pen one more time, they'd be heading for divorce. "This entire experience has made me very much aware that I want a man in my life, just not in my house," Chris Enss, a comedian, [quipped](#). "Yesterday the man asked me where we keep the spoons. The spoons, for God's sake! We've been married 31 years. The spoons are kept where they always are kept — in the silverware drawer!"

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Since we probably can't anticipate when our behaviors will irritate others, we need to learn how to make amends afterward. Before the pandemic, the #MeToo movement offered a crash course in how not to apologize. Indeed, some celebrities' apologies were essentially a second insult, making 2017 not just the year of bad behavior — but also the year of the bad apology.

There's the if-pology: I'm not saying I did it, but if I did, I would be really sorry.

Then there's the no-fault apology: Sure, I did something wrong, but I didn't know it was wrong at the time.

There's also the pre-pology: I'm owning up to my sins before anyone accuses me, but I'm the real victim here. I have many childhood demons.

And finally, there's the un-pology: My apology was genuine, but I didn't do the thing I apologized for, so I hereby deny it.

We know a fake apology when we see it. There's [evidence](#) that if executives apologize for corporate wrongdoing while looking happy, rather than sad, their companies have poorer stock returns over the next three months. Investors pick up on the insincerity.

Apologizing seems to be less of a problem in [cultures](#) with stronger norms of collectivism or politeness. In Japan, one company [apologized](#) for a train departing 20 seconds early. And in [Canada](#), if you step on someone's foot, they might apologize.

As a social scientist, I've been curious about how we can genuinely express remorse and repair

relationships. After combing through the [research](#) on [apologies](#), I've learned that a good apology has three components.

First, show regret about the impact of your past behavior. "I'm sorry if ..." isn't an apology. It's an expression of doubt that you did anything wrong. As early as age 5 or 6, children [spontaneously](#) say they're sorry for hurting their [peers](#), and even occasionally their [siblings](#).

A sincere apology acknowledges that your choices negatively affected others. "It's the acknowledgment of the wrongdoing of the hurt, even if you think you were legitimate and justified," Esther Perel, a therapist, said recently on my TED podcast, [WorkLife](#). "The acknowledgment involves an element of remorse or guilt — sometimes for what you've done to the other person, not necessarily for your own action."

We're often so focused on defending our motives that we fail to see and own up to the consequences of our actions. It doesn't matter whether we intended to hurt someone. The reality is that we did, so we ought to fess up to it.

Second, take responsibility in the present. Refusing to accept responsibility is not a sign of strength. It's a sign of narcissism.

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Third, describe how you plan to improve in the future. You can't right your wrongs if you don't explain how you're going to fix or prevent the problem moving forward.

Some people recommend a fourth step of asking for forgiveness. In my view, we should follow through on our commitments first. After all, integrity is about consistency between words and deeds. Forgiveness shouldn't be granted when we promise to change. It should be earned once we live up to that promise.

The three steps are relatively easy to undertake. The hard part is finding the motivation to apologize, because it means feeling guilt about having done a bad thing and maybe even some shame at the thought of being a bad person. Psychologists have [discovered](#) a good solution to that: When you've hurt someone, think about your core values. If compassion, justice or generosity show up on your list, you might realize that apologizing doesn't mean admitting you're a bad person. It's merely a step toward becoming a better person.

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