

## What Makes an Apology Work – Dr. Aaron Lazare

### Why apologize?

Apology is one of the most profound modes of healing and restoration we have. For the offending party, it can release them from guilt and shame. For the harmed person, it can restore their dignity. But a bad apology can create harm.

### Four parts of an apology

There are up to four parts to an effective apology, though not every apology requires all four parts. They are as follows.

1. A valid **acknowledgment** of the offense that makes clear who the offender is and who is the offended. The offender must clearly and completely acknowledge the offense.

A valid acknowledgment must make clear who the offender is (or has the standing to speak on behalf of the offender) and who is the offended. The offender must clearly and completely acknowledge the offense. People fail the acknowledgment phase of the apology when they make vague and incomplete apologies (“for whatever I did”); use the passive voice (“mistakes were made”); make the apology conditional (“if mistakes have been made”); question whether the victim was damaged or minimize the offense (“to the degree you were hurt”); use the empathic “sorry” instead of acknowledging responsibility; apologize to the wrong party; or apologize for the wrong offense.

2. An effective **explanation** of why the offense occurred. It is crucial that the explanation does not blame the victim for the offense. The explanation is not an excuse. Its purpose is to give insight as to how the offense occurred. An explanation is not an excuse. An explanation may not be appropriate as part of an apology.
3. Expressions of **remorse, shame, and humility**, which show that the offender recognizes the suffering of the offended.

Remorse, shame, and humility are other important components of an apology. These attitudes and emotions show that the offender recognizes the suffering of the offended. They also help assure the offended party that the offense will not recur, and they allow the offender to make clear that he should have known better. Failure to express remorse reinforces the idea that there are no shared values, and even that the offender is outside of the human family.

4. A **reparation** of some kind, in the form of a real or symbolic compensation for the offender’s transgression.

Reparation is a way for an apology to compensate, in a real or symbolic way, for the offender’s transgression. When the offense causes damage or loss of a tangible object, the reparation is

usually replacement or restoration of the object. When the offense is intangible, symbolic, or irreversible—ranging from an insult or humiliation to serious injury or death—the reparation may include a gift, an honor, a financial exchange, a commitment to change one’s ways, or a tangible punishment of the guilty party.

**After Apologizing (by Martha Beck, 2004)**

“When you really apologize, you should feel good about yourself. An effective apology is, as Lazare puts it, ‘an act of honesty, an act of humility, an act of commitment, an act of generosity, and an act of courage.’ But there’s no guarantee that the other person involved will share your feelings. The final act of apology is to release your former victim from any expectation of forgiveness. No matter how honest, and remorseful you have been, he will forgive—or refuse to forgive—on his own terms. That is his right.”

“Anne Lamott refers to forgiveness as ‘giving up all hope of having had a different past.’ The same words apply to apologizing. An apology is the end of our struggle with history, the act by which we untangle from our past by accepting what it actually was. From this truthful place we are free to move forward, whether or not we are forgiven. Apologizing doesn’t make us perfect, but it shows our commitment to be honest about our imperfections and steadfast in our efforts to do better.”

**An effective apology must also satisfy at least one of seven psychological needs of an offended person.**

1. The restoration of dignity in the offended person.
2. The affirmation that both parties have shared values and agree that the harm committed was wrong.
3. Validation that the victim was not responsible for the offense.
4. The assurance that the offended party is safe from a repeat offense.
5. Reparative justice, which occurs when the offended sees the offending party suffer through some type of punishment.
6. Reparation, when the victim receives some form of compensation for his pain.
7. A dialogue that allows the offended parties to express their feelings toward the offenders and even grieve over their losses.