

Learn Your Spouse's Language of Apology

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Note: This is a Christian perspective.

Have you ever apologized to someone, but found that person still upset with you? In your frustration, you may have thought there's nothing more you could have done. But since people have different ways of apologizing, the way you expressed your apology may just not have gotten through to the person you offended.

If you speak a different apology language than the person you're trying to reach, he or she will likely view your apology as insincere. But if you translate your apology into that person's language, you can pave the way for forgiveness and reconciliation in that relationship.

Here's how you can become fluent in the languages of apology and experience healed relationships:

Learn the first language: Expressing regret.

This says, "I am sorry." When you speak this language, you let the person you've offended know of your own guilt, shame, and pain over the fact that your behavior has hurt him or her. You don't simply correct problems without acknowledging your remorse; instead, you verbalize your regret in specific ways. In your apology, give as many details as possible to show you understand how your wrong behavior affected the offended person.

Don't tack on a "but ..." to your apology, either blaming your actions on something the person did to provoke you or making excuses for what you did. Make sure you don't try to use an apology to manipulate the offended person into reciprocating. To give your apology more emotional weight, consider writing it in a letter that the offended person can read again and again.

Make it clear to the offended person that you feel hurt because your actions have hurt him or her, so you can identify with the pain he or she is experiencing.

Learn the second language: Accepting responsibility.

This says, "I was wrong." When you speak this language, you accept responsibility for your failures and refrain from rationalizing your own bad behavior or blaming others for it. Show the offended person that you fully own up to what you did and understand that it was wrong.

Learn the third language: Making restitution.

This says, “What can I do to make it right?” When you speak this language, you try to right a wrong by making amends for what you’ve done. Realize that any offense causes the person who’s been hurt to lose something – perhaps something tangible, such as a promotion after being publicly humiliated, or something intangible, such as self-esteem.

Make it your goal to try to repay the person you’ve offended to restore a sense of justice and let him or her know that you still care. When apologizing to a friend or family member, try to express the sincerity of your love in ways that reflect that particular person’s love language: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, or physical touch.

Beyond expressing your love, do whatever you can to restore something your wrong behavior took away, such as by repairing a damaged item or speaking to others to restore the person’s reputation. If you’re not sure what the offended person might consider appropriate restitution, ask for suggestions.

Learn the fourth language: Genuinely repenting.

This says, “I’ll try not to do that again.” When you speak this language, you decide to change your behavior so you won’t repeat the offense. Tell the person you’ve offended that you intend to change, develop a specific plan for doing so, and ask him or her to be patient with you while you go through the process of changing from destructive to healthy behavior.

Write down your plan for change so you can keep referring to it, and when you fail, get up and try again. Show the offended person that you’re making a concerted effort to change, and ask him or her to support and encourage you to help the changes last.

Learn the fifth language: Requesting forgiveness.

This says, “Will you please forgive me?” When you speak this language, you show the offended person that you want to see the relationship fully restored. Let the person know that you realize you’ve done something wrong, and that you’re willing to put the future of the relationship in his or her hands, since the relationship depends on that person’s choice to either forgive or not forgive.

But never demand forgiveness; understand that it’s a gift that must be given freely. Don’t expect the person you’ve offended to forgive you immediately, because forgiveness can be costly and take some time. Ask God to help you be patient as you wait.

Discover your primary apology language.

As you consider the five languages of apology, think about which one is most natural for you. Ask yourself: “What do I expect a person who has offended me to

say or do that would make it possible for me to genuinely forgive him or her?”, “What hurts me most deeply about this situation?”, and “When I apologize to others, [what do I say or do?] Which of the five languages do I think is most important?”

Discover someone else’s apology language.

When you realize you’ve offended someone, ask: “What hurts you most about what I said or did?” In general, you can also ask: “Describe an apology someone once gave you that you considered insufficient. What was lacking?” and [“When someone apologizes to you, what do you expect to hear him say or do?”] [Also,] “When you express an apology to someone for something you have done that hurt him or her, what do you think is the most important part of an apology?”

Overcome barriers to apologizing.

Realize that all relationships are worth the effort to apologize. Ask God to motivate you to value your relationships enough to apologize whenever you’ve offended someone. Understand that even when the other person is most at fault in a certain situation, you can’t justify your own wrong behavior based on that fact.

Be willing to apologize for your own part in marring the relationship. If you view apologizing as a sign of weakness, recognize that you have low self-esteem and seek counseling to develop a healthy self-image. Know that apologizing actually will enhance your self-esteem, because it will lead people to respect and admire you.

Don’t cheapen apologies.

Recognize that you don’t need to apologize anytime there’s any tension in one of your relationships, or anytime you simply irritate someone. Understand that apologies are designed to deal with moral failures.

Don’t just assume that a stressful situation is your fault without truly thinking about it, and don’t apologize simply to avoid conflict and get an issue settled quickly. Know that a “peace at any price” mentality will only lead to simmering resentment.

Don’t forgive someone too easily for seriously negative behavior that he or she should deal with; instead, hold the person accountable for it. Ask God to give you the courage you need to face issues honestly and wisely.

Learn to forgive.

Realize that it’s just as important to accept an apology as it is to offer one. Know that choosing to forgive someone will open the door to reconciliation between you.

Remember that forgiveness isn't a feeling; it's a decision. Ask God to help you forgive, and rely on the strength He will give you to do so.

Understand that you can still pursue reconciliation with someone who has offended you even if that person doesn't apologize: First, lovingly confront the person – several times if necessary. If, after several attempts, the person who offended you is unwilling to apologize, you should trust God to take care of justice in the situation rather than trying to seek vengeance yourself. Remember that God is even more concerned about righteousness than you are, and He will take the best possible action on your behalf.

Be realistic about forgiveness.

Recognize that, while forgiveness can occur as soon as you make the choice to forgive, trust sometimes takes a long time to reestablish in a relationship. Don't expect forgiveness to remove natural consequences of wrong behavior or the painful emotions and memories that have resulted from it. But know that forgiveness is always worthwhile, because it's the only way your relationships can heal.

Teach your kids to apologize.

Help your kids develop the ability to successfully apologize in life by teaching them underlying lessons. Train them to accept responsibility for their actions. Let them know that their actions affect others, and that there are always rules in life.

Set healthy rules for your family. When determining whether or not a particular rule you're considering is good for your family, ask yourself: "Is this rule good for my child?", "Will it have some positive effect on my child's life?", "Does this rule keep my child from danger or destruction?", "Does this rule teach the child some positive character traits, such as honesty, hard work, kindness, or sharing?", "Does this rule protect property?", "Does this rule teach my child responsibility?" and "Does this rule teach good manners?"

Be sure to enforce consequences when rules are broken. Teach your kids that apologies are necessary in order to maintain friendships.

Explain the five different apology languages to them. Model how apologies should work by apologizing to your children when you hurt them and letting them see you apologize to other people – such as your spouse, other family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers.

Apologize to yourself.

Ask God to help you remove the emotional distance between the person you want to be (your ideal self) and who you are (your real self). Write out a self-apology statement that details mistakes for which you haven't yet forgiven yourself. Then, in front of a mirror, read your statement to yourself. Pray for God's peace to fill your soul. Learn from your past failures and look forward to a brighter future.

Gary Chapman is the author of the best-selling Five Love Languages series and the director of Marriage and Family Life Consultants, Inc. Gary travels around the world presenting seminars, and his radio program airs on more than 100 stations.