

WHY WE DON'T RECOMMEND APOLOGIES

By Marlene and Bob Neufeld

Many clients come in irate, wanting their partners to apologize. We usually tell them that apologies are over-rated and that we don't actually recommend them, especially between partners or close friends. The reaction is often one of shock. When we explore further why they want an apology, the reply is often that it would be an acknowledgment by their partner of having done something wrong.

Exactly! Being right or wrong has very little to do with healthy happy relationships. It sets up a victim – villain scenario, which does not make people feel like allies. We often ask our clients, “Do you want to be right? Or have a relationship with this person?” When people perceive themselves as wrong, they feel less than others. And people who perceive themselves as right, feel higher than others. Neither of them is curious or open to learning from whatever happened.

Sometimes it is accurate that one person has made a mistake or genuinely wronged another. Authentic regret can help heal. But it needs to happen within a context of learning and dealing with emotions. Apologies can also ease our way through social situations when we don't know someone, like when you accidentally bump into someone in the grocery aisle.

But how often do you say or hear someone else say “sorry, but...” Sometimes this is said in the context of “I'm sorry, but I'm going to do it anyway” which indicates that the person isn't really sorry. Saying “I'm sorry” may actually mean, “Please don't be angry.” In this context, sorry is actually a mixed message in that it is saying, “I'm wrong but I don't want you to have any feelings about what I did.”

So, if you really care about someone you've hurt, we recommend you replace apologies with the following steps:

1. Acknowledge what happened,
2. Both parties need to express their core emotions (fear, anger, sadness) about what happened,
3. Both parties need to listen to each other's feelings without blame or judgment,
4. Both parties need to take full healthy responsibility for what happened, asking themselves the question “how did I participate in creating what happened”
5. Deal with the consequences of what happened, and
6. Eliminate the source so it won't happen again.

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