

The Power of an Apology

Nicolas Franz-Pattillo

2026-09-26

Most of us learned to apologize as children, and most of us learned it badly. An adult pointed at the person we had hurt, and we said “sorry” as fast as possible so the moment would end. The word was a toll we paid to get out of trouble.

A real apology is something else. It is one of the few tools we have for repairing harm after it has already happened. It is also hard to do well, and the difficulty is exactly what makes it work.

An apology starts with agreeing that something was wrong

An apology begins with a shared recognition that a wrong act occurred. Without it, every later step rests on two conflicting stories about what happened. The person apologizing thinks they are making amends, and the person receiving it hears a negotiation. So the first job is simply to agree, clearly and without qualification, that what happened was not okay.

The work is in the details

Say exactly what you did. A vague “I’m sorry for everything” costs nothing, and the other person knows it. Naming the specific act shows that you know what you did and aren’t hoping it gets forgotten.

Explain why, without passing the blame. This is the hardest part. The instinct is to explain our behavior by pointing at the other person: *“I reacted that way because you yelled at me.”* That sentence looks like an apology but works as an accusation. It moves responsibility outward. Compare *“I reacted that way because I couldn’t control my anger.”* The event is the same, but now the cause is yours, which it was all along.

The “why” matters to the person you hurt. It shows you’ve looked past what happened to what drove it. It is often slow and uncomfortable to find, because the honest answer is rarely flattering: fear, insecurity, pride, a habit we picked up long ago.

Sit with the suffering you caused. After you’ve explained yourself, stay present while the other person tells you what it was like for them, without defending, minimizing, or rushing to the resolution. It hurts. It is also the only way to actually understand the harm, and you can’t take responsibility for something you haven’t understood.

Take responsibility and make amends. If you’ve done the previous steps honestly, this one mostly follows. Taking responsibility means committing to do better and then showing it with concrete actions over time.

Why go through all this?

A sincere apology is a gift to the person harmed. It is also, less obviously, a way out for the person who caused the harm.

People who hurt others often carry a burden of their own: they refuse to be vulnerable, they fear looking weak, and they live with guilt they never deal with. That armor is heavy. Punishment hardens us, but it

doesn't teach us, and humiliation doesn't bring insight. Being punished or shamed rarely changes anyone. Understanding what you did can.

Many religious traditions¹ have a ritual built on this idea: naming your wrong out loud is what releases its weight.

An apology makes both people human again. It shows the person you hurt that you can see them, and that you are more than the worst thing you did to them.

Learning to apologize

If apologizing is this hard for adults, it is worth being patient with children who are learning it. When a child struggles to apologize, the difficulty is rarely a lack of empathy or goodwill. The steps above demand skills that are still growing in them: regulating emotions, identifying their own feelings and other people's, thinking flexibly, and tolerating vulnerability. It can be very hard to:

- find words for what they felt in the moment,
- tell an explanation apart from an excuse,
- tolerate intense feelings of shame or guilt,
- work out how the other person felt,
- or stay in an emotionally demanding conversation without being overwhelmed.

That's why learning to apologize usually needs support, time, modeling, and emotional containment more than punishment or on-the-spot demands. The patience we ask of them when they apologize is the patience we owe them while they learn.

Conclusion

Apologizing is hard because it requires exposure, self-examination, and humility. That's also why it works. By taking responsibility, acknowledging the harm, and letting ourselves feel what the other person felt, we make it possible to rebuild trust. We also take a step, not only toward repairing a relationship, but toward becoming better people.

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- **Catholicism:** the sacrament of reconciliation, once called confession. You name your sins to a priest, feel real sorrow for them, and take on a penance, a concrete act of repair.
- **Judaism:** *teshuvah* means recognizing the wrong, regretting it, confessing it aloud, and resolving not to repeat it. Yom Kippur atones only for wrongs against God. For a wrong against another person, you must first ask that person's forgiveness.
- **Islam:** *tawbah* is made directly to God. It asks you to stop the wrong, regret it, and resolve not to return to it. If someone was harmed, you must also make it right with them.
- **Buddhism:** monks confess their offenses to a fellow monk before the twice-monthly recitation of the monastic rules.
- **Other Christian churches:** the Orthodox Church keeps private confession, and Anglicans and Lutherans say a general confession during the service. The Letter of James asks believers to "confess your sins to one another... that you may be healed."
- **Hinduism:** *prāyaścitta* are rites of penance meant to cleanse the consequences of a wrong act.