

How to Apologize in Five Steps

What to Know

Knowing how to apologize—and when—can repair a damaged relationship. To apologize effectively, it's essential you believe you did something wrong and feel sorry for the hurt you caused. When you've made a mistake or hurt someone, a sincere apology:

- acknowledges you were wrong while taking responsibility and owning the mistakes
- communicates genuine empathy
- clarifies what's allowed (and not allowed) in the relationship
- expresses regret and remorse
- allows you to learn from your mistakes and find new ways to deal with difficult situations
- opens a line of communication with the other person
- brings relief from guilt

An apology doesn't erase the hurt or make the wrong OK, but it does establish that you know your actions or words were wrong and you will try to prevent it from happening again.

If you do something wrong and fail to apologize, your personal and professional relationships can be damaged beyond repair.

Knowing *when* to apologize is as important as knowing *how* to apologize. If you suspect that something you did—on purpose or by accident—caused someone else harm or hurt feelings, apologize. But maybe you don't know how to make a real apology. Just saying, "I'm sorry" isn't enough. Here are the five steps of a meaningful and sincere apology. Each step is important to mend the relationship.

1. "I was wrong." Clearly say you made a mistake, showing you understand that what you did was wrong.

Don't try to justify your actions by saying, "I didn't really mean it," "I did that because of what *you* did," or "I was still angry about our last fight." When you start an apology by saying it's not your fault, it's no longer an apology.

2. "I see that I hurt you." Let them know you're taking responsibility for your actions, and you see what you did or said hurt them and that you don't blame them for being upset.

Avoid minimizing the impact of what you've done by saying things like, "You're overreacting," or "It wasn't that bad," or "You're being too sensitive." These statements shift some of the blame to the other person.

3. "I understand how you feel." Show empathy by demonstrating you can see things from their perspective and connect with their hurt.

Don't argue with how the person is interpreting what happened, convincing them they're wrong, by saying, "You shouldn't feel that way," "I wasn't trying to hurt you," or, "You always twist things!"

4. "I won't do it again." Make it clear you've learned from this experience, and you're committed to not repeating the behavior.

The goal isn't to make empty promises; make a sincere effort to change.

5. "I want to make amends." This means you change your behavior, so you don't repeat the mistake. Be open to any ideas the other person has, too.

Don't see the amends as a punishment, something you "have to" do. It's a way to repair the relationship because you *want* to.

Genuine apologies aren't always easy, but they are an important part of mending relationships. Using this worksheet, along with empathy, courage, and authenticity, you can take the steps you need to make a sincere and meaningful apology.

What to Do

Was there ever a situation where you struggled to apologize? Describe it.

What could you have done differently?

Is there a current situation where you owe someone an apology? Describe it in detail.

Next, ask a loved one or your coach or counselor to role play with you. Who can you ask?

With this person, go through the five steps above for the current situation you described above. For each step, write down any difficulties you experienced.

1. "I was wrong." _____

2. "I see that I hurt you." _____

3. "I understand how you feel." _____

4. "I won't do it again." _____

5. "I want to make amends." _____

What are some ways you can make amends to the person you wronged? Be specific.

After role-playing, are you comfortable apologizing to the person you wronged? Why or why not?

If you follow the five steps, do you think you will effectively repair the relationship? Why or why not?

After completing this activity, do you think you are better prepared to offer someone a genuine, meaningful apology? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
