

## **SORRY/NOT SORRY, or I'M SORRY I HAVE TO SAY I'M SORRY**

I hate to apologize. I do it a fair amount, but I have historically not done it well. The subtext of my apologies has usually been “I made a mistake/I hurt your feelings/I did something wrong. I really wish I hadn’t done so because I hate the way it makes me feel. Can we please expunge this from our collective memory as quickly as possible and never refer to it again?” As you can tell, my approach to apologies has frequently been that of an insecure, self-centered jerk. Guilty as charged. But I am working on it.

One of the ways I am working on not being a self-centered jerk is to try and improve my apologies. An apology is an attempt to heal, to make things better, to make amends. It is — a hard lesson for me — not about the person making the apology; it is about the person receiving the apology. Therefore, when you apologize, what you were thinking, how you felt, what was going through your head, etc. is of less importance than what was going through the head of the person affected and how they felt. Consequently, avoid attempts to explain or excuse your behavior and phrases that minimize or invalidate the other person’s feelings. An apology that starts “I’m sorry, but…” is not an effective apology. Neither is an apology that starts “I’m sorry if you felt hurt…”

To make an effective apology, it helps to be clear about what happened/what you said/what you did and to reflect that back to the person affected. You can mirror back to them (to the best of your ability) what they are feeling. You can express what you wish you had done/said instead. You should admit you were wrong.

So, not “Hey, sorry about your ferret, but it started to bite me and I just snapped.”

Rather, “I am so sorry I threw your ferret off the balcony. You must be heartbroken. I wish I had asked you for help in handling him. I was wrong.”

What we are all hoping for after we apologize is for the other person to say, “Aw, that’s okay. No biggie. Forget about it.” This doesn’t happen nearly as often as we wish, and if you have just murdered their pet ferret, it is a pretty unreasonable expectation. The truth is, you have no power over the other person’s response. All you can do is clean up your side of the street, as they say. Just make sure you are thorough in your cleaning and don’t attempt to assuage your own feelings by throwing dirt on the other side: “You should have had a muzzle on that ferret.”

The apology is about making the other person feel better, acknowledging and validating their feelings, and taking steps to heal the relationship. If you follow through on these suggestions, you stand a decent chance of not only making the other person feel better, but making yourself feel better as well — and isn’t that secretly what we’re really after?