

Life becomes easier when you learn to accept an apology you never got.

~ Robert Brault

Sometimes in life we encounter people that act in ways which are destructive to our sense of wellbeing. At these times, it is not uncommon to seek an apology. As human beings, we are almost hard wired to seek fairness. As such, it frequently feels obvious to us that an apology is due. Yet we are often left mystified when a sincere apology is not forthcoming.

In the person who has aggrieved mind, they often believe that the greater the harm the more an apology will follow. Human beings almost have an inbuilt sense of fairness and our tendency is to see fairness when we can. When it comes to a sincere apology the frequent code of behaviour is that the greater the harm, the less likely it is that an apology will follow. The former is counter-intuitive to many people, but there are good reasons why an apology will often not ensue.

An apology is contingent upon how much self-worth and self-respect a person has. The higher these two variables are the more likely it is that the person has the willingness and readiness to apologize. Unfortunately, our society is not particularly suited to producing individuals who are psychologically healthy.

Most people can and do apologize for smaller indiscretions and wrong doings. This is because these smaller types of wrong doings are not as tied to how people view themselves. For example, if an otherwise loving husband forgets to bring home some milk on the way home, he typically does not take himself to be a bad person. His forgetfulness is viewed as something he has done rather than attributed to something he is. The distinction between identity and behaviour are relatively clear in these types of scenarios and consequently giving an apology becomes easier.

But consider someone who betrays their partner by having an affair. The person is more likely to consider themselves a bad or unworthy wife or husband. The betrayal and the associated lies often become attached to identity. Frequently driving this attachment is shame. Often the non-repentant wrong doer is attempting to keep from being overwhelmed by shame. This is not necessarily a conscious behaviour on their part. Often it occurs at an unconscious level.

It is also important to note that the sincerity of the apology plays an important part. People may apologize but it may be with a caveat or disingenuous intent. Sometimes there is a but involved in the apology. For example, a while back I called out someone on their

distancing behaviour, and they replied with 'sorry, but in my defence'. When we are apologizing it should be heart felt and straightforward. There does not need to be a 'but' tagged onto the apology. The explanations can come later if need be. A good rule to remember is to make apologies short and concise with as much sincerity as possible.

Sometimes people minimize the effect of their behaviour on others. I heard a woman tell her husband that she was surprised that he would be hurt, when she stole money from his business.

At other times, people try and rationalize their own poor behaviour by telling themselves that the other person deserved it. A female client was distraught when she came home to find her husband had left her. His note to her specified that he left her because he thought she was a narcissist. The reality was just the opposite and his contention did not seem to hold much water. Instances, like these occur all too often and are another reason why an apology may not be forthcoming.

As noted, shame often drives the non-apology. Shame can trigger powerful childhood experiences making it more likely the person will feel like they are about to be overwhelmed. In addition, shame quickly eats away at self-worth and self-respect.

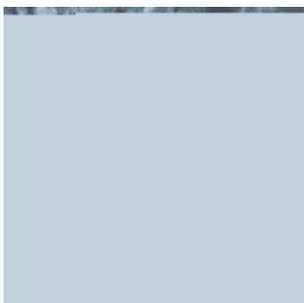
One of the ways people guard against shame is by closing themselves off. Rather than acknowledge the extent of the wrong doing and make some attempt at reparation it is often easier for the person to sit in a defensive framework. For instance, a person can become distant or even attack the other person. I have worked with couples where the betrayer placed the blame for the affair solely on their partners. People who have significantly hurt others may become angry and irritable themselves. This is another way of keeping distance in the relationship which unconsciously keeps more powerful feelings at bay.

Because of these unconscious processes it is highly unlikely that a person who has created serious psychological harm gets to the point in life where they can readily admit their own wrongdoings. Apologising is a further step on the road to repair and consequently becomes an even harder proposition than admittance of fault.

It is never a good idea to demand an apology. A few decades ago someone betrayed me in a significant manner. Feeling very hurt, I could not undly tand why she was not apologizing to me. I began to literally demand an apology. Further, I became manipulative and tried to coerce her into an apology. In retrospect, all I was really doing was trying to shame her. She likely would have felt like she was grovelling if she were to apologize. Such is hindsight.

It is perfectly acceptable to ask for an apology in a respectful and non-shaming manner. We can do our best to allow a space for an apology to occur. Often the best that can be done is to not add to a person's defensiveness. At the same time, it is incumbent of us to not expect an apology, given that very often one is unlikely to occur.

If someone was to sincerely apologize for their hurtful behaviours it's not hard to see that it would require an elevated level of intimacy on their part. In addition, they would expose





The Role of the Pursuer
and Distancer in
Relationships

Manifestation and Clearing
the Unconscious