

## Apologies – What they are, What they do, How to make them

Over the past decade, there has been much research and analysis on the subject of apologies. This work has resulted in a much deeper understanding of apologies and what makes them work in a restorative justice context.

This pamphlet has been written to help complainants think about apologies and to help them to prepare for this important step in the restorative process.

### What is an apology?

An apology is one of the ways you communicate to the complainant your genuine inner feelings about the incident that brought you to Community Justice Centre.

A genuine and sincere apology includes five elements<sup>1</sup>:

- ▶ *Expressing regret* (inner sorrow) or remorse for your behaviour (I am sorry)
- ▶ *Accepting responsibility* – acknowledgement of your responsibility for causing the hurt (I was wrong)
- ▶ *Making restitution* – doing what it takes to make things right or repair the harm (What can I do to make it right)
- ▶ *Genuinely repenting/changing* (a decision to change or turn around) for the behaviour (I won't do it again)
- ▶ *Requesting forgiveness* – placing yourself in the hands of the complainant and asking that they decide whether they can get to a place of forgiveness of your behaviours (Can you forgive me)

### What do they do?

Apologies are one of the processes that can lead to a truly restorative experience for both the complainant and the respondent. How they work and what they do is the subject of much research currently underway. The early results indicate that an honest, sincere, and genuine apology:

- ▶ confirms to the complainant that you acknowledge and understand that your behaviour was a breach of the shared set of values that hold a community together
- ▶ ensures that the complainant feels confident that they did not invite you to hurt them in that way and that they are not responsible for your behaviour towards them. This responds to some respondents who suffer from self-blame as an inaccurate way of understanding what has happened
- ▶ conveys that you understand the impact of your behaviour on the complainant's life – that you can “put yourself in their shoes” and understand how they would feel
- ▶ expresses your desire to change your behaviour so that others will not be affected in the same way, so that others will be safe in the community. Many

complainants believe that they have a social responsibility to their community to make sure that no one else will suffer in the same way by your future actions.

► addresses the power imbalance between you and the complainant. Many complainants experience fear and a sense of no longer being safe in their community because you have used perceived power (due to your physical size, gender, ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, etc.) to treat them in unacceptable ways. When you sincerely ask for forgiveness, you are giving the complainant some power to them to make a decision that affects you, and places you in the same position they feel they are in.

Apologies can be expressed in any one, or more, of the “five languages” of apology. Using each of the elements ensures that the recipient of the apology will hear the apology in the language that is most significant to them. Most unsuccessful apologies fail because one, or more elements are missing and therefore they don’t meet the needs of respondent. Another major failing is because they don’t sound sincere. Almost everyone has a built in “crap detector” that tells them when they are hearing something that is not honest, genuine, and sincere.

### **How to make an apology**

1. Start by recalling the events for which you are making an apology and think about what you did to cause the harm, how the complainant would have felt about it, why you are sorry for causing the harm, and other related matters. Spend some time on this step, try to understand **your responsibility** and how you could have behaved differently in that situation.
2. Review each of the elements of a good and complete apology and make notes on each one.
3. Use specific details, and your **own** words, write from your heart. If you don’t feel something inside you, your words will ring hollow and the complainant may reject the apology because it is insincere. If you use someone else’s words or cliché expressions the apology will sound false.
4. Read over your initial draft and ask someone else to read it over as well – look for each of the elements, look for full and complete **honesty** and disclosure, look for enough detail that the respondent will see that you have been thinking about what you did and how it must have affected them.
5. Re-write it so you include things that were missing, and take out things that sound “fake”.
6. Read it out loud to see what it sounds like, how it could be edited to be better, which words need to be changed so that it **rings true**.
7. If you can’t write an honest and sincere apology, then you probably don’t really feel inside that you were responsible, or sorry, or ought to make things right. You also probably don’t feel that you can honestly say you will try not to do such things again, or that you are ready to ask someone to forgive you. If this is the case, then you may not be ready to participate in a restorative justice conference. You should probably talk with the case co-ordinator to see what happens next.

When an apology works, both the respondent and the complainant have an opportunity to move ahead with their lives. When it works, and it does more often than not, you may be able to say:

**Apology is mine, peace is ours**

1. The Five Languages of Apology, Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas, Northfield Publishing, Chicago, 2006
2. On Apology,
3. Moral Repair