

PODCAST #2 THE POWER OF AN APOLOGY

Today I'm going to talk about the Power of an Apology — why apologies are so hard to give but so profound to receive.

I once taught a psychology class of 100 adults. I asked them for a show of hands in response to the following question: In thinking about your childhood, how many of you, I asked, remember a parent apologizing to you in a heartfelt way, apologizing for something specific and important. After an awkward silence, 10 people raised their hand—only 10. And yet the people who DID have parents apologize to them remembered the experience with crystal clarity—what was going on, where they were, what was said...They remembered because it was profoundly moving and meaningful to them.

Why are apologies so hard to give? And why

are they so powerful to their recipients? And here I'm speaking about real apologies, not phony ones. Phony apologies are pro forma; they are about getting credit; they are sometimes offered so quickly, so off the cuff, that they don't seem to really take the issue seriously. Or they're meant to get something out of the way, off the table, so to speak, rather than really face whatever harm has been done. The apologizer in this case wants to get it over with, wants the other person not to make a big deal about it or to just be quickly forgiving. These are phony apologies, and most of us who have received them know how unsatisfying they are.

These phony apologies should be distinguished from real apologies. In a real apology, the apologizer conveys an understanding, a real appreciation of the harm done to the other person. And The apologizer conveys the sense that he or she cares about the harm done. And, most of all,

the person doing the apologizing doesn't qualify it, but instead, takes full responsibility for the harmful action. Full responsibility — that's the key. And, finally, the apologizer doesn't convey a need to be let off the hook, to be forgiven. The harm has been done and the person apologizing acknowledges that he or she was the one doing it.

An important reason that apologies are hard to give is that the person making the apology unconsciously equates the admission that he or she did a bad thing with being a bad person. In other words, guilt makes apologizing difficult. If admitting you've harmed someone feels the same as an admission that you are a terrible person, then you will understandably be hesitant to apologize. And if you're someone who tends to feel guilty anyway, then an apology might feel like you are rubbing salt in your own wound.

I think that feelings of guilt, albeit likely unconscious feeling , are why apologies are so hard to make.

But to the recipient of a real apology, the effect is often profoundly gratifying and healing. Take the example of a child who has been hurt in some way by a parent, say the child feels scolded, rejected, accused, or abandoned, --in some way, made to feel like a bad kid—which is always how kids feel when subjected to these things. And if you're that child, you may not only feel bad for a moment, but feel bad in a way that usually festers and that, over time, adds up to feelings of low self esteem. Lots of us have felt that way. You're not only hurt, in other words, but you are slowly building up a negative identity; you didn't just DO a bad thing—you are a bad person.

What happens exactly when a parent apologizes to you? Well, if you have been

hurt, an apology makes it clear that it was not something you deserved. The fault lies with the person apologizing---not you-- and this frees you of painful self-blaming. It also validates the fact that something real happened, that you didn't just imagine a slight, rejection, or disappointment. So you don't end up doubting yourself and feeling sort of crazy.

An apology also carries with it the implication that you are worth the amends that are being offered, that you matter enough for the other person to want to make things right. This recognition lifts your self-esteem.

Let me give you an example:

One of my patients recalled a period of his childhood during which his father was having difficulty holding on to a job, resulting in periodic extreme outbursts of temper which my patient found frightening. However, he also remembered that on several occasions, his father sat down with

him and apologized for frightening his son, explaining that the source of his irritability had nothing to do with the boy. The son — my patient — recalled feeling safe and understood during these conversations, relieved that he didn't have to feel blamed, that his feelings were on his father's "radar," and that he wasn't being left alone to deal with the pain and fear that these outbursts created. This was in stark contrast to many other patients who described enduring the traumas of a parent's temper outbursts which were never acknowledged but were, instead, treated as normal or, worse, as the child's fault.

And, you know, when I think about it, some of the most powerful moments in my treatment of couples have come when one partner apologizes to the other without any expectations of reciprocity. It is almost always unexpected and healing.

A real apology can not only help the victim but also the apologizer: the process of

becoming aware of the ways we've injured others and reaching out with contrition to those people helps the apologizer face reality and take responsibility for his or her actions. Apologies can help the person doing the apologizing feel better about him or herself as much as they help the one to whom an apology is offered.

Interestingly, there are examples of genuine apologies offered and received on a social level, as well as an individual one. For example, after the fall of apartheid in South Africa, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission held public hearings during which victims of apartheid gave testimony, as well as perpetrators. The point wasn't to punish perpetrators but to validate the pain and suffering of the black majority, as well as to offer a chance to whites to own up to their responsibility for that suffering. The point was to give testimony, not, like the Nuremberg Trials, to achieve some sort of justice. Facing the harm done to others helped the victims as well as the

victimizeers.