

The Art of Apology in Marriage: How to Say Sorry Like You Mean it

By Celeste

I'll be tackling both today and tomorrow's topics: repentance and forgiveness. One on how you react when you do something wrong (repentance) and the other on how you react when your spouse does something wrong (forgiveness).

In marriage, we tend wrong and be wronged ALL THE TIME, so how we react to both these scenarios is crucial.

Therapist Richard Miller has said it is perhaps the most crucial ingredient to a successful, lasting marriage. He says, "How do couples go from ecstatic levels of love and happiness to frequent conflict, bitterness, and in many cases, divorce? Researchers have identified a number of reasons, but in my professional experience, I have found that most of these explanations boil down to two fundamental factors: a lack of repentance and a lack of forgiveness."

So let's dive in to how we can be truly repentant with our spouses when we've hurt them.

Earlier this summer, we were preparing to have company over for dinner. Ideally, when we have company over for dinner I'd start preparing far in advance- planning the menu, cleaning the house, washing behind my kids' ears, etc. But for whatever reason, this day (and every other time we've had company), I did little to no preparation until about an hour before they were supposed to arrive at 6pm.

This meant that the hour from 5-6pm was basically chaos.

Had Rich come home on time, it would have looked something like this:

Minus the fire. Plus three kids who took some peculiar and intense dosage of crazy pills that day. It was stressful is what I'm saying.

Around this time I was really, really hoping my husband would be home. Earlier that day he said he would try to make it home to help out around 5 or 5:30. Perfect.

Only he didn't.

5:30 No Rich. 5:45 No Rich. 5:55 Still no Rich.

I was rearing and ready with my list of complaints that made it perfectly clear who was in the wrong and who was in the right in this situation and I was ready to spout them off Mount Saint Helens style. Oh-oh I was ready. I had my stink eye ready to launch the minute he returned.

But then, he came home right at 6U00. He dropped his backpack, immediately came over to me, put his hands on my shoulders, looked me in the eye and said, "I'm SO sorry I'm late!! I got caught up in my experiment and my co-worker needed help right as I was going to leave, but I still should have finished earlier- I'm so sorry."

Then he hugged me and said, "What can I do?"

Well, shoot. My steam engines cooled, I cleared my stink eye from it's launch pad and together we finished throwing dinner together, appeasing the children and picked up the house in the nick of time.

It was a darn good apology. So good that it cleared up my anger and a fight before one even happened. That is the power of a good apology.

That is the power we all need to harness once we realize we've done something to hurt our spouses.

Here's a few tips on how to do that:

4 Ways to Say Sorry Like You Mean It

1. Value their perception

Remember when you've done something hurtful, your spouse's perception of the situation is more important than the reality of the situation. Rich could have very easily stated why he was very justified in being late and how I was in the wrong to be so upset. He could have correctly reminded me that I should have started preparing earlier. He could have suggested I order take out instead of making a time-consuming meal. But he didn't. He valued my perception of the situation and spoke to my state of frustration. He showed me he valued my feelings whether or not I was "justified" in having them at all.

Because he did this, the hurt and frustration were gone and dead in about 30 seconds instead of lasting potentially for days if we had fought about it.

2. No buts about it!

Do not add a "but" after your apology. For example, "Sorry I didn't take the trash out, but you know I did take it out the last two times." Or

"Sorry I blew our budget this week, but we really needed new shoes and they were on sale!" Or

"Sorry I hurt your feelings, but next time you could be more sensitive to me too."

Whenever we add a "but" to our apology, it tends to negate anything we say before the "but." Adding it highlights the justification and weakens the apology. Try changing the above scenarios to these:

"Sorry I didn't take the trash out. I'll do that now. Maybe we can make more of a schedule next week?"

"Sorry I blew our budget this week. I really should have planned our purchases better."

"Sorry I hurt your feelings. What can I do to make you feel better?"

Remember, you don't have to be a doormat. If something is really bothering you, bring it up in a safe time and place for discussing issues like companionship inventory. This way if you need to apologize for something when your spouse is hurting, then you can apologize sincerely and then bring it back up when feelings have calmed down a bit and you're both in a better mood for problem solving.

3. Use complete sentences

Is there anything worse than an apathetic "sorry" with little to no expression behind it?? Ugh. It's like nails on a chalkboard to me.

Therapist Richard Miller has said,

"I have found that effective apologies usually come in complete sentences. A simple "sorry" or the far more eloquent "sorry about that" rarely provides the necessary evidence that you feel remorseful and that you are taking appropriate responsibility for your actions. Even the current fad of saying "my bad" (with the dutiful patting of your chest) is usually inadequate—unless, I guess, you are in the middle of a coed intramural basketball game. It is much more healing to say: "I'm sorry that I didn't do the dishes last night like I agreed to. It wasn't right, and I apologize"—two full and complete sentences. A full and complete apology that comes packaged in complete sentences will do wonders in healing hurts."

If you need to apologize, look them in the eye and apologize in a complete sentence.

4. Be friends

We'll be slower to take offense and quicker to forgive if we are making daily efforts to be friends with our spouses. Renowned marriage psychologist John Gottman says this is the key to not getting divorced.

Treat your spouse like your best friend – talk to them, value their opinions, give them breaks and have fun together.

Repenting of a wrongdoing will go over MUCH better if you put in those daily efforts to be friends.

This article can be found online at:

<http://www.marriagelaboratory.com/blog/the-art-of-apology-in-marriage-how-to-say-sorry-like-you-mean-it/>