

How To Apologize To Someone You've Hurt & Actually Move Forward

1. Take responsibility

By this point, you've identified someone to whom you need to make amends. In some way, you've already taken responsibility by admitting that you caused the other person harm. But it also might help to name the actions you took that caused that harm. In addition, if you're not sure you're completely responsible, make an honest assessment of your part in hurting that person. You can still make amends for even a small amount of harm.

2. Decide on the content and conditions

Next, you need to decide how you're going to make amends and what you're going to say. The conditions for making amends can take many forms. This is *how* you're going to make amends, such as writing a letter, making a phone call, sending an email, or setting up a face-to-face meeting. When making your decision, consider what is going to be easiest for the person receiving the amends. For example, don't insist on a personal meeting if the person lives far away or if the last interaction with the person was very unpleasant.

Also, allow the other person some privacy when making amends—don't post an apology to her Facebook page for all of her friends and family to see. Regarding the content of the amends, keep your statement simple, direct, and focused on what you did wrong. Use "I" statements: Start your sentences with your actions, feelings, and responsibilities—not the other person's.

For example, "I want to apologize because I realize I hurt you when I yelled at you last night at the restaurant. I now feel really upset and guilty about what I did and I want to take responsibility for my actions. I want to make it up to you in some way." Even if you're going to speak directly on the phone or meet face-to-face, write down what you are going to say and practice saying it. Keep it short, direct, and focused on your own actions—not what the other person did.

In addition, consider another good piece of advice from Alcoholics Anonymous: Do your best to make amends to someone you've harmed unless doing so would cause that person more harm. So again, think about the other person, not just yourself. For example, if you had an affair with someone who was married, and now you want to contact that person to make amends, but you suspect that person's spouse might find out if you do make contact, then don't do it! Again, be respectful of the other person's feelings and needs.

So in cases where contacting another person might cause them more harm, or in the case of not being able to contact someone because he is either dead or living somewhere unknown, what can you do?

One suggestion is to make the amends anyway, either on paper or by saying the words out loud. Make your statement to the person's spirit or memory. You might also imagine what he would say in return and further make a commitment to his spirit or memory to take healthier values-based actions in the future. Make a pledge to change your own behavior to avoid someone else suffering in similar situations. And if there is still some way to fix the harm you did, even in his absence, consider it.

3. Create intentions without expectations

Creating intentions without expectations means that you make amends without expecting anything in return. Period. Just because you are apologizing and offering to relieve the person of suffering in some way, that doesn't mean that the other person is going to listen to you, has to care, is going to accept your apology, or wants to repair the relationship. Making amends is not a guarantee that anything between you and the other person will change or improve. And yet, our suggestion is that you should still do it.

Why? Because making amends is like relieving yourself of a burden, a burden of knowing that you caused someone harm and failed to do anything about it. You stood by while the other person suffered in some way, and for many people who do this, their own actions often cause feelings of guilt, shame, anger, self-hatred, and depression. When we offer amends, there is often an unburdening of those feelings. It is like a spiritual detoxification process. So in addition to making an offer to help relieve the other person of suffering, making amends can help you feel better, too.

4. Make a commitment to yourself

An atonement is a commitment you make in response to your harmful actions. You make an offer to the other person to help relieve her suffering somehow, or you promise to change something about yourself so you won't commit that same type of harm in the future—to avoid additional future suffering.

5. Check in regularly

Finally, the last step of making amends is to engage in the practice regularly. Making amends is an ongoing process that should be a part of your daily spiritual practice. Recognizing your mistakes and making amends is an integral part of your spiritual growth. Ideally, with practice, you will begin to notice more quickly when you've harmed someone, and you'll make amends more quickly, too.