

End The Excuses and Stop Apologizing!

By Valerie J. Shinbaum, MS, LPC, MAC, NCC

I'm sure I haven't heard them all, but I've certainly heard lots of them. And they go together, don't they? I'm talking about the whole "I'm sorry I'm late, but I have an excuse," type of statements from people. Think of how much time we waste throughout our lives when it would be just as easy to say "I made a mistake;" "It's my fault for being late;" or "I take responsibility." So why aren't we willing to own that for ourselves?

And here's another thing about "I'm sorry;" some people say it all the time, apologizing for everything. I might call on a student in class who raises his/her hand, and when they respond, they start with "I'm sorry." Why are they sorry? For what? They raised a hand; they have a question or a comment; so why are they apologizing for whatever they have to say? Here's another one - people who make a statement such as "I'm sorry, but that's just how I feel." Why are they sorry? If they feel however they feel, isn't it all right to have their feelings? We seem to be conditioned to apologize for everything. For some, it's a habit of speech, a conditioned response. But once it's identified, it can easily be corrected. Think of how much more confident a person sounds if, when expressing an opinion or thought, or asking a question, the "I'm sorry" qualifier is eliminated.

Naturally there are times when you may be having dialogue with someone else and an apology from either of you is warranted for behaviors or words that are causing hurt feelings, anger, or blame. The ability to apologize for being wrong is important. For some that is next to impossible. I can remember times in my life when I have been in arguments with people that were caused by my expressing my hurt or angry feelings and instead of the other person admitting the error or saying they were wrong, I found myself being shouted at and told that I was the wrong one for being hurt or angry! At other times, people I have known would bring up some counter situation in the past to throw back at me as a justification for their current behavior toward me about which I feel angry or hurt. It's the classic "Well, one time you did this thing to me, so therefore you don't have the right to be angry at me now for whatever I did to you." Those are hard situations to manage, and emotionally painful. I'm still developing coping strategies for how to handle them myself - definitely a work in progress. These days I'm much better at understanding myself, and by doing so, I am more selective in my relationships with others, and it's helped me be less tolerant of negative behavior toward me.

To explain what I mean: sometimes a person will say "I'm sorry" to me for something they did and I know they are not the least bit sorry. Here's a true story from my own experience, and a behavioral technique you're welcome to utilize yourself. It works wonders. A few years ago I met a group of new people and there was a woman in this group who for whatever reason took an instant dislike to me. She said something that hurt my feelings and others in the group who knew this woman told me, "That's just how she is." Right there, that's another excuse that I don't have any time or patience for. Am I supposed to excuse this woman for making a hurtful comment toward me? I don't think so. I shared with the folks who told me that's just how she is that I didn't care about that nor did I need to. These other folks must have repeated what I said to this woman,

because she came up to me at another time and said “I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings with what I said.”

Now here comes the behavioral technique for your future use: give this one a try next time - I promise it works. When that woman was apologizing, instead of saying “That’s okay,” which is what she expected from me, I said “Thank you for saying you’re sorry, I appreciate the effort.” A second time, the woman said “No, I’m telling you I am saying I’m sorry.” And I replied that I had heard what she said and appreciated her effort. The woman made a THIRD attempt to say she was sorry, with the expectation that I would tell her it was okay. Well, for me, it wasn’t okay and I wasn’t going to tell her it was. So on this woman’s third attempt, I once again said thanks for saying she was sorry and that I appreciated the effort. The woman walked away in a fury. She had expected to be “absolved,” and I had no intention of giving her that at my own expense.

I didn’t perfect this technique overnight. For years I was one of those “it’s okay” type people, or I just swallowed my hurt and anger and tried to move on. A part of me doesn’t ever really move on in certain instances. Figuring out for myself what I have the right to expect and deserve helped me realize if someone has to say they are sorry to me for something they have done which caused a hurt or angry reaction from me, then obviously whatever they did is not okay and that’s why they feel the need to apologize. And if I say it’s okay, then I am inviting them to do it to me again. See the point? If we pause to think about what we do before we do it, then maybe we won’t find ourselves in the position of needing to apologize. More importantly for me, if I’m dealing with someone who verbally rages at me to intimidate me with the goal of getting me to back down, I distance myself from that person. After all, the person’s behavior toward me caused hurt and anger. If I attempt to address these feelings with the person who caused them, and I am met with a bullying response, I know this is not someone who deserves my time or consideration.

Right about now I can imagine some of you are saying, “It’s not always intentional.” And in many instances you are correct. Sometimes an “I’m sorry” is warranted in certain situations. But in others, to say it is not always intentional is making more of an excuse for unacceptable behavior that needs to be corrected. Here is an example: I’m sure each of us knows someone who is chronically and annoyingly late for appointments, meetings, dinners, school events, you name it. There may be a phone call saying they are running late, but perhaps not. Regardless of the phone call, the message this person is sending, whether intentionally or not, is their time must be more valuable than yours, whatever they “had to” do that is making them late is more important than you are, and it’s okay to keep you waiting. And if you are frustrated or angry at this person, here come the excuses and the apologies. Neither of them means much when the behavior continues, and the negative result is the friction/conflict created in the relationship.

We can’t be perfect all the time, but think about how important words are to us, and how easily the “I’m sorry” can be misinterpreted. I am suggesting it might be helpful for us to be more careful with how we use “I’m sorry.” At the same time, we can shape our language to take better ownership of mistakes or that sends anything other than a positive

message to others, rather than throwing some excuse out there to try to justify our actions.

And the next time you think you have enough time to do the last things on your list before leaving, that's the moment to think of the reaction of people who may be waiting for you, and with whom you might want to maintain a positive relationship. That's the moment to get on your way to be on time. A phone call to say you'll be late is a good idea, but making an effort to stop using that call as your crutch is an even better one. Saying something like "At least I have a cell phone and called you to let you know" is still nothing more than an excuse for the unacceptable behavior people already told you they don't like. And for those of you unfortunate enough to have involvement with the kind of people who can't go to "I'm sorry" but rather they go to raging words and actions to intimidate you, remember you have every right to walk away from someone (either figuratively or literally depending on the situation and the relationship) who is treating you this way, because it is unacceptable and inexcusable. Be prepared to hold up your hand up to the person and calmly and quickly remove yourself from the situation as soon as possible (again, either figuratively or literally depending on the situation and the relationship). In this way you will hold onto your dignity and your self-respect. Knowing you have the right to what you expect and deserve comes with positive benefits.

These changes take practice and won't happen overnight. The only way for others to change how they behave toward us starts with our changing how we react toward them. If we start by eliminating unnecessary excuses and unacceptable apologies from our own behaviors, we model for others how we expect and deserve to be treated. In the best case scenario, the others whom you hope will change will do so by taking their cues from your changed reactions. There are no guarantees for this outcome unless we remain consistent in our own efforts. Regardless of the changes in others, taking action to change ourselves is an investment in our own lives, with the end results of better balance and greater happiness.