“I’m Sorry I Don’t Know How to Say I’m Sorry”
Apologizing to a Romantic Partner in the Aftermath of a Gambling Problem

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Most People Do Not Know How to Offer a Meaningful Apology

This presentation evolved from an experience I had working with a patient. He was trying, he was making efforts to offer an apology to his wife, but she was dissatisfied and resistant to accepting anything less than a substantive and meaningful apology. He broke down crying in a couple's therapy session and said to his wife "I'm sorry, I don't know how to say I'm sorry."

Examples of Bad Apologies

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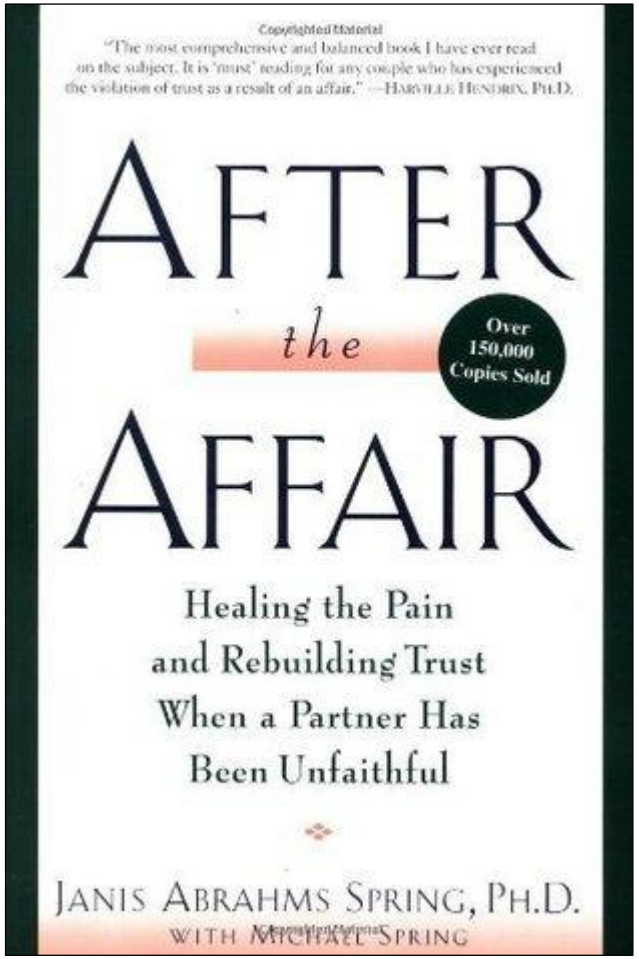
- The two-second apology: “Sorry.”
- The sanitized apology: “I’m sorry for whatever I did wrong.”
- The shirk responsibility apology: “I’m sorry *if* I hurt your feelings.”
- The lack of ownership apology: “I’m sorry your feelings are hurt.”
- The perfunctory apology: “As I’ve said before, I’m sorry.”
- The vindictive apology: “I’ll show you what it means to be sorry.”



Examples of Bad Apologies

- The grudging apology: "I *said* I was sorry. What else do you want?"
- The expedient apology: "I know I'm in the doghouse unless I say I'm sorry, so here it is."
- The "Yes…but," blame-deflecting apology: "I'm sorry I did X, but you're no Mother Teresa either."
- The "Oh, what the hell" apology: "Heh, I'm sorry, pal."
- The obsequious apology: "I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry (but don't ask me why)."
- The contemptuous apology: "I'm sorry for stepping on your big fat ego."
- The exaggerated, manipulative apology: "I hate myself for what I did. Can you ever, ever forgive me?"
- The guilt-inducing apology: "Do you really need me to apologize for *that*?"

Any apology that begins with "I'm sorry, but…" Anything that comes after "but" (e.g., "I didn't mean to hurt you," "I was joking,", "you shouldn't be so sensitive," "you started things") invalidates the apology.

Any apology that begins with "I'm sorry if…" Similarly, what comes after "if" ("anything said upset you," "anyone was bothered by what I did;" "you thought I meant x or y") suggests that the apologizer doesn't really take responsibility for any actual injury.

"I'm sorry that…" ("you were hurt by how things unfolded," "that unfair things were allowed to happen," "that I was forced by a bad situation to do what I'd promised not to do"). Use of passive voice, fails to show that you hold yourself accountable for actions of the results of what you did.

An apology statement that ends with "not my fault" or "I didn't mean it" decidedly doesn't take personal responsibility.

A statement that skips the actual effect on the other person and focuses on their (misguided) reaction: "I'm sorry that…" ("you got so mad at me," "you see it that way," "you're so upset by this") might sound like an apology; but it isn't one.

Vagueness also is a big drawback, "I'm sorry ..." ("for what happened," or "for any hurt caused," or "for poor communication").

An attempt to stop the conversation, rather than understand the injury ("I said I'm sorry; what more do you want?"), or to require that the other person move on ("Please forgive me; I can't stand you being mad at me anymore") won't be satisfying and won't resolve the problem. Apologies intended to silence the other person are manipulative, not curative.

"Sorry about that!" conveys an informal attitude of "Oops, too bad, dude! Do I look like I care?" It diminishes both the apologizer and the hurt person.

No rationalizations or justifications are part of a good apology. Save them for later if you still need them.

Lengthy, complex statements· that are so obscure no one can tell what's being said, like the government's "Whereas" statement to Native Americans or statements that explain the circumstances or any other considerations at length, are not real apologies.

Summary

Collectively, cheap apologies are bad apologies, they are ineffective, hurtful, prolong the healing process, and make situations worse. No apology may actually be better than a bad apology.

Why Do We Fail at Apologizing?

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Shame and defensiveness. People often deflect, minimize, or justify because they feel too ashamed or afraid to face the harm they caused. This can be especially true for problem gambler who respond to, and defend against shame in maladaptive ways.

Misunderstanding the purpose. Some apologize just to “move on” or to “silence their partner” or because “it’s expected” rather than to help the other person heal, restore trust, and because it’s an important part of accepting responsibility. As a society, we have failed at teaching children from an early age the “why and how” of effective apologies.

Why Do We Fail at Apologizing continued….

Fear of Consequences. The fear that a partner won't forgive or might leave can cause people to water down or avoid an apology. Some have been concerned that an apology may have consequences if the marriage is dissolved (this latter reason may be naïve given Nevada marital waste statues.)

Poor Communication Skills: Without tools for emotional expression and active listening, people may fall back on defensiveness, sarcasm, increased conflict, or silence. Some communication skills may include:

- Active Listening
- Sustained Interactions
- Curiosity
- Validation
- Non-Verbal, Body Language
- Empathic Responding
- Differentiating Thoughts/Feelings
- Open Ended Questions
- Summarizing, Clarifying, Interrupting
- Direct, Clear, Concise

Preparing the Gambler to Embark on the Journey and Process of Apologizing

Precursors for an Apology

It’s often necessary to spend time helping a gambler cultivate skills at empathy, validation, and other effective listening/communication prior to starting the apology process. Additionally, gamblers should have also acquired the ability to regulate their feelings (e.g., shame) and stress coping strategies before they embark on the journey and process of apologizing.

Why Do Apologies Matter

Why Do Apologies Matter?

- **They acknowledge harm**. Apologies validate the partner's pain, signaling that their feelings matter and their experience is real.
- **They rebuild trust**. Trust is broken by deception and secrecy – key components of gambling problems. A genuine apology is a first step in restoring that trust.
- **They foster emotional healing**. For both the injured partner and one apologizing, apologies can relieve guilt, reduce resentment, and reopen communication.
- **They show accountability**. An apology says: "I take responsibility for what I did, and I want to make it right."

What Makes an Apology Effective?

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- **Sincerity**. The person apologizing must truly feel remorse—not just say what they think the other wants to hear.
- **Responsibility**. Demonstrates taking responsibility for wrongdoing, harm caused, mistakes.
- **Specificity**. Taking accountability by clearly stating what you did wrong and how it affected your partner. Vague or generalized apologies can seem dismissive.
- **Empathy**. Acknowledge how your actions made the other person feel. This requires many discussions to acquire an understanding of the impact, their feelings, how it has affected them, how it continues to impact them, what's been the worst part of their experience, what makes it better or worse. This is where healing begins.

What Makes an Apology Effective?

- **Focus on the Partner, Not the Gambler.** Focus remains on the gamblers' actions, choices, behavior.
  - Avoids blaming, fault finding, excuses, or justifying behavior (this will redirect focus on others and undermine the apology.)
  - Avoid phrases like "I only did it because…" or "You made me feel…" and any apology followed by the word "but" is not an apology.
  - Avoids self-serving agenda of making gambler feel better at the expense of the injured person
  - Non-Manipulative. The apology avoids any effort to manipulate to the gamblers benefit (e.g., not intended to silence others, avoid consequences)

What Makes an Apology Effective?

- **Focus on the Partner, Not the Gambler continued…**
  - Does not demand something from the injured person (e.g. forgiveness, reconnection, mood changes or behavior modification).
- **Commitment to Change**. Apologies without clear follow-through plans feel hollow. Effective apologies include a commitment and plan for different behavior.

Putting the Apology in Context of Reconciliation

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Self-reflection. Understand what you did and why. Be honest with yourself before addressing the other person. Sometimes this can be the focus of therapy to create insight and perspectives.

Sincere apology. Speak openly, take full responsibility, and validate your partner's feelings.

Give space for emotional expression. Let your partner respond—even if it's anger, descriptions of their pain, suffering, or bewilderment. Listen without becoming defensive.

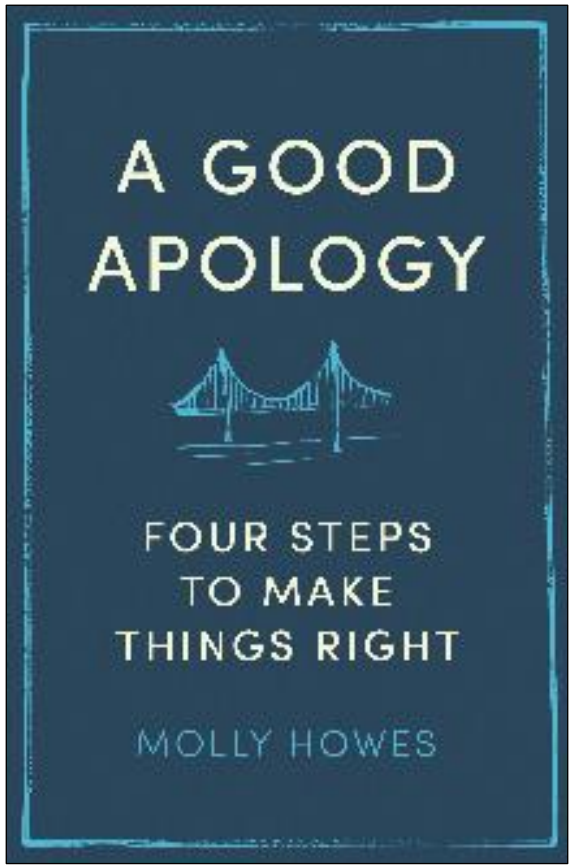
Putting the Apology in the Context of Reconciliation

Demonstrate change. Show through consistent actions (not just words) that you are addressing the issue (e.g., therapy, support groups, financial transparency).

Establish boundaries and rebuild trust. Ask what your partner needs and agree on clear boundaries (e.g., shared finances, check-ins, counseling).

Practice patience. Rebuilding a relationship is a process, not a single event. Trust is earned gradually through accountability and empathy.

The Four Steps of a Good Apology



Four Steps of a Good Apology

1. First, you must come to **understand the other person's injury**, including the effects and impact of your actions (e.g., gambling, lies, financial devastation). This involves asking questions, several conversations, and listening with curiosity and empathy.
2. Second, you must **articulate a sincere statement of regret**. You must acknowledge what you did and how it affected the other person.
3. Third, you must **make amends, reparations**, wherever possible. This can include material restitution or doing whatever is necessary to restore or make the partner as whole as possible again.
4. Fourth, a **convincing prevention plan** must be developed to ensure how the problem will not be repeated or happen again.

Embarrassment and Humiliation

At the Grocery Store

Step One: Understanding the Non-Gambling Partners Experience

It is important that there is an acknowledgement of the impact of gambling and associated issues before the gambler can apologize.

Emotional damage: Fear, betrayal, broken trust. This may be especially damaging when gaslighting has been chronic. Effects of gaslighting for partner can include chronic self-doubt, anxiety/depression, diminished self-esteem, and feeling dependent on the gaslighter for "truth."

Financial strain: Loss of savings, debt, secrecy, credit ratings diminished, stress of meeting financial obligations.

Erosion of Intimacy and Communication. Disconnection, conflict, deceit, emotional distancing, diminished trust.

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which one person tries to make another doubt their own perceptions, memories, or sanity. It's often used to gain power or control in personal, professional, or social relationships.

Step One: Understanding the Non-Gambling Partners Experience…

This step is all about **listening** with curiosity, asking purposeful questions, acknowledging hurt/harm or **any consequence** experienced by the non-gambler, being empathic, validating, taking responsibility, being vulnerable, transparent, acknowledging, being accountable, with the goal of:

Understanding the pain, suffering, and damage caused by the gamblers choices so the apology can uniquely and specifically address the diverse ways the non-gambling partner has been impacted.

Step One: Understanding the Non-Gambling Partners Experience…

This step requires multiple discussions, gathering additional information, and putting energy and effort into understanding the partner's experience.

Note: One sign that insufficient time has been devoted to Step 1, is that a partner will often continue to bring things up. The gambler may need to ask, in essence, “What part of your injury, pain, suffering, or your experience am I not understanding?”

Caution: Just because we may have worked with numerous gamblers, don’t assume we understand or know the impact or pain they have personally experienced.

“I didn’t get my kitchen…”

Step One: Understanding the Non-Gambling Partners Experience…

STEP 2: Articulate a sincere statement of regret, say it and mean it!

Gambles must articulate a sincere statement of regret and responsibility. There needs to be an acknowledgment of what was done and how it affected the partner. Step 2 is what most of us think about when we hear the word "apology." The apology must demonstrate understanding, empathy, validation, and accountability for actions and the consequences of behavior.

There are no magic words, but words are important, but perhaps even more important is the tone and feeling that accompanies the words that are said.

The apology is given with sincere concern about the hurt someone else experienced, remorse for causing harm, is far more important than any technique or way it is expressed.

Step 2: Considerations

Take responsibility for restoring trust. The gambler has broken the trust and it is their responsibility to restore it.

It's about the partner, not the gambler. The essence is compassion for the injured partner, not redemption for the gambler. Don't present defensive details.

Harvard Medical School training for doctors in "disclosure and apology" after medical errors, HMS proposes several guidelines for how to talk with patients. TRACK: transparency, respect, accountability, continuity, and kindness, but the overarching principle that trumps them all is "**the needs of patients and families come first**."

Step Two: Considerations

Be humble. Have courage. Lean into what might be an unpleasant experience and be vulnerable. It takes bravery and fierce resolve for a gambler to be humble in the face of their regret and guilt.

Be accountable. This means full disclosure and transparency. [Story of Boston surgeon, reached out to all his patients and informed him he had been the doctor who made the mistake, and told them they would be helped to find a different doctor if understandably they wanted to. Not a single one did.]

Say It and Mean It, Whole Heartedly. Express remorse, accountability, responsibly, humility, honesty, transparency, remain focused, genuine, and sincere. One of the most important things a partner needs to feel is that their pain is understood and sincerely cared about.

Step Two: Considerations

Have gamblers write their apology, deliver it verbally using what they have written as a reference sheet.

The apology is usually a series of apologies for each specific way that harm has been caused including associated harm (e.g., gaslighting)

Step Three: Making Amends, Reparations

The gambler must do whatever is within their power to amends, reparations, wherever possible. This can include material restitution or doing whatever is necessary to restore or make the partner as whole as possible again. **Information gathered from Step 1 will help a gambler understand more specifically things they might do to make amends**.

Efforts in Step 3 and 4 will vary from situation to situation. While there are applications for this step beyond a partner, amends for harm and relapse/recovery plan (reassurance plan) should consider:

Financial Harm: Repayment or Reparation Plan.

- Itemize what was lost or damaged financially (if possible).
- Create a realistic plan to repay debts or make up for losses. [Pt 401(k), part-time work]
- Even small repayments can be symbolic of accountability.
- Legal contracts for marital waste for future problems
- Sometimes gambler may take on a second job to make amends
- Restore credit, retirement funds, joint assets, savings as much as possible
- Address legal issues if necessary for fraud, theft, or illegal activities tied to gambling
- Debt and bankruptcy: Joint assets, savings, or retirement funds may be drained or misused
- Ruined credit: A gambler might take out loans or open credit cards in both partners' names
- Housing instability: Missed mortgage payments, rent, can lead to eviction or foreclosure

Emotional, Psychological, and Relational Harm

Betrayal and Broken Trust: Repeated lies or hidden gambling behaviors can lead to feelings of betrayal.
Anxiety and Depression: The unpredictability of finances or partner behavior may cause chronic stress, depression, or anxiety.
Shame and Isolation: Spouses may feel embarrassed or unwilling to talk to others about the situation, leading to social withdrawal.
Loss of Emotional Intimacy: The gambler may become emotionally unavailable or consumed by the addiction. [Wife who had to postpone children, ended up with smaller family]
Increased Conflict, Arguments: Financial strain and deception often escalate conflicts.

Emotional, Psychological, and Relational Harm

Neglect of Family Responsibilities: Time and energy spent gambling can lead to neglect of parenting or household duties. The partner may have taken on both parental roles, increasing exhaustion and resentment; Children may witness fights, experience emotional neglect, or suffer from instability at home.

Loss of Mutual Goals: Dreams such as buying a home, vacations, or retirement may be derailed.

Gaslighting or Manipulation: The gambler may deny, minimize, or deflect blame, distorting the spouse's sense of reality.

Emotional Abuse: Anger, blame-shifting, or emotional withdrawal can constitute abusive dynamics.

Hypervigilance and Control: The spouse may become overly controlling or obsessive in monitoring the gambler's behavior and finances.

Increased Transparency, Accountability, Disclosure to Others

- Open access to credit reports, phone, computer
- Tracking for phone to identify location
- Polygraph once a year
- TrueFinancialLink
- Disclosure to others to elevate problems for the partner

Physical and Health Consequences

- **Stress-Related Illnesses:** Chronic worry can lead to headaches, insomnia, hypertension, or gastrointestinal issues.
- **Neglected Health Needs**: Financial strain and emotional distress may delay medical or psychological care.

Possible Outline for Reparation and Reassurance Plan

1. Financial reparations and reassurance [GamFin, TrueFinancial Link]
2. Stick to any recovery plans or agreements you make. Consistency rebuilds trust, relapse doesn't just hurt you, it can retraumatize your partner.
3. Living above suspicion contract, safeguards, complacency resets
4. Engage in treatment, recovery communities
5. Show consistent behavioral change
6. Respect boundaries your partner sets
7. Allowing partner time and space to heal
8. Rebuilding trust, intimacy, and connection
9. Accept that some consequences may be permanent
10. What does John/Sally 2.0 look like? What will be different and how will you make changes
11. Ongoing apologies may be necessary as additional harm or consequences arise

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Don’t Rush the Process of Apologizing. Cheap apologies beget cheap forgiveness. A wound that isn’t properly cleansed, irrigated, and sutured and with antibiotic cream is at risk for further infection. The rule is: by slowing things down you speed them up.

Stay Focused on the Injured Person. Don’t make the apology about yourself. Any attempt to mask ulterior motives that are self-serving (conscious or unconscious) feels insincere and is likely to fail.

Common Pitfalls to Avoid

Avoid People Pleasing, Over-Promising, Love-Bombing. People pleasing and love-bombing are substitutes and distractions from doing the hard work required to offer a meaningful apology. Like anything counterfeit, it has no value and will eventually be discarded or resented in time.

Ignoring the Need for Continued Effort and Action. A meaningful apology is the beginning, not the end, to the process of healing and reconnection with a partner after the discovery or disclosure of a gambling problem.

Educate Gamblers about their Partners Anger

SIDEBAR: UNDERSTANDING ANGER

Understanding Types of Anger among Romantic Partners

1. Anger used to assert "I matter, I'm worthy of respect, I'm important, I deserve to be loved."
2. Anger used to punish the gambler, "I want him to suffer because if he suffers, *he might understand what it's been like for me*"
3. Anger used to get attention, "I'm not feeling understood, I'm not feeling heard, I'm feeling dismissed, I'm feeling silenced," so anger is used to bring attention to issues that are important and the function of anger is to turn up the volume and be heard.

4. Anger used for self-blame, “I noticed things, and I ignored them, so I’m responsible for this situation” or “I enabled them through my silence” or “I allowed them to gamble so I could have my vice.”
5. Anger used to protect, “When I get angry, I keep them at a distance, it keeps them vigilant, it gives me power, and I don’t have to be vulnerable which would create closeness, connection, and put myself at risk of being hurt again.”

Sample Apology from a Problem Gambler to His Wife

Sample Post Nump Agreement

Additional Resources

- A perfect apology in three steps, Jahan Kalantar [TedTalk]
- Wny won't he apologize? Harriet Lerner [TedTalk]
- The power of the apology, Robert M. Gordon. [TedTalk]
- Why is it so hard to apologize, Michael Ballard [TedTalk]
- Getting the last word with apology, Dr. Jennifer Thomas [TedTalk]

Dan Harmon Apology to Meagan Ganz: Time Magazine Story

Additional Resources: Books

1. How Can I Forgive You?: The Courage to Forgive, the Freedom Not To by Janis Abrahms Spring
2. A Good Apology: Four Steps to Make Things Right by Molly Howes
3. Getting to Sorry: The Art of Apology at Work and at Home by Marjorie Ingall and Susan Mcarthy
4. How to Listen, Hear, and Validate: Break Through Invisible Barriers and Transform Your Relationships by Patrick King
5. On Apology by Aaron Lazare
6. How to Listen with Intention: The Foundation of True Connection, Communication, and Relationships by Patrick King
7. Why Won't You Apologize? Healing Big Betrayals and Everyday Hurts by Harriet Lerner
8. Healthy Communication With Your Partner: Discover the Benefits of Communicating with Emotional Intelligence, Empathy & Effective Listening Skills to Turn Conflict into Connection by Amanda Thomas
9. Rebuilding Trust: Guided Therapy Techniques and Activities to Restore Love, Trust, and Intimacy in Your Relationship by Morgan Johnson and Gina Senarighi
10. I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships by Michael S. Sorensen
11. You're Not Listening by Kate Murphy

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