

How to Say 'Sorry' and Mean It

Admitting that you did or said something wrong, and then apologising to someone for it, can be nerve-racking and scary. Here are some tips that can make it a little easier.

This guide can help if:

you need to make a sincere apology to someone

you don't know the best way to express yourself in a difficult situation

you want to know how to ask for forgiveness after an apology

you find it hard to get stuff off your chest.

Girl talking to her upset boyfriend

Why is saying 'sorry' is hard?

Everyone behaves badly sometimes, even good people. Unfortunately, when you're faced with owning up to jerk-like behaviour, your brain has to work overtime to convince you that you're the one in the wrong. That's not a pleasant experience.

Apologising is hard because we don't want to feel bad about ourselves. We try to have a positive image of ourselves, and our need to protect that can make sincerely apologising quite hard.

Why acknowledging your mistakes is important

Not being able to own up to our mistakes or make a sincere apology to someone when we need to can harm every area of our life, including in the workplace, the classroom and our relationships. It can also prevent us from growing and learning from our experiences.

Steps for saying you're sorry

1. Before you do anything, practise self-affirmation

It's important to start by saying a few positive words to yourself. This is known as 'self-affirmation' and has a positive impact on the way you see yourself. Self-affirmation has been shown to improve self-confidence and self-esteem, while reducing stress and anxiety.

Reflect on your values and your great personal qualities – such as your talents and hobbies, your successes at work or at school, or the positive ways you treat family members and friends. For example, you could say to yourself something like: 'I'm great at coming up with creative ideas,' or 'I'm kind towards everyone I meet.'

Using self-affirmation before offering someone an apology can actually help make your apology more genuine and sincere. By reminding yourself of your good qualities, you're letting your guard down and showing yourself that 'Hey, there are so many great things about you, one mistake doesn't change anything.'

2. Take responsibility for the hurt you've caused

It might sound obvious, but the first part of an apology is to clearly state what you have done before saying you're sorry for it. It also shows the other person that you understand what you did wrong. It

might be helpful to rehearse exactly what you're going to say before you apologise.

For example, you might say: 'I snapped at you yesterday.'

3. Admitting you were wrong

It's important to show the other person that you're willing to take responsibility for your actions and to admit that you were wrong.

For example, you might say: 'It was wrong of me to talk to you the way I did.'

4. Acknowledge the other person's feelings

A meaningful apology includes showing you're aware of how your actions have impacted the other person. This tells them you understand why they feel hurt.

For example, you might say: 'I understand you must have felt really upset, angry and confused.'

5. Say you're sorry

Show that you're sincere with a plain ol' 'I'm sorry.' Keep it simple, and don't tack a 'but...' onto the end of that sentence.

6. Ask for forgiveness

Ask for forgiveness by saying: 'I know it will take time, but I really hope we can still be friends,' or 'Is there anything I can do to make this right?' This lets the other person know that your relationship with them is really important to you.

How to show someone you're sorry

Showing, not just saying, that you regret what you have done is an important part of apologising. If possible, think about how you can fix the problem and make things right. For example, if you lost or broke something that belonged to someone else, you could help them replace it.

However, some things can't be fixed, such as when you've said something hurtful to a friend. In this instance, the best thing to do is to make sure it doesn't happen again, and to show by your actions that you're sincerely sorry. If you've realised that there's a problem that you can work on, you could also mention this, to show that you're taking steps to make sure it doesn't happen again.

For example, you might say: 'I realise that I struggle with controlling my anger, and it's not fair to other people when I snap at them. I'm trying to be more aware of when this happens.'

It takes a lot of courage to admit that you've made a mistake and to apologise for it. It'll be scary at first, but in the long run, learning how to do this sincerely can really improve your relationships with the people around you. You've got this.

What can I do now?

Rehearse what you're going to say before you start to apologise. If you want to say 'sorry', but you feel too anxious, you might think about putting your apology in writing.

After you've apologised, give the other person some time to think about what you have said, then check in with them later to see how they are feeling.