

# [An Apology Please](#)

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*Our public leaders are also our teachers. This week, Representative Ted Yoho delivered a paradoxical lesson on apologies. It reminded me of the “opposite game” I played with my kids when they were little. We picked a topic and said the opposite of what we thought and felt to be true until things got so outrageous that we burst into laughter.*

Is ***THIS*** an apology?



[Video Credit](#)

*Mr. Yoho’s apology was like watching an overgrown child play the opposite game, but there was nothing funny about it. Too bad. A sincere apology has huge upside, and a failed apology has huge cost. So what makes it so hard to apologize? And what are the mental health implications?*

**1. Why don’t we apologize?** Maybe we don’t agree with the person we have hurt. Maybe we don’t like the person we have hurt. Maybe we don’t care about the person we have hurt. Maybe we minimize the hurt. Maybe we think it will go away if we don’t talk about it. Maybe we think apologizing means that we are saying the person we hurt is right, and we are wrong. Maybe we are just too proud. Maybe we think we are above apologizing. From a mental health perspective, these are rationalizations and avoidance strategies that practically guarantee ongoing distress and conflict, and in highly technical terms, they are also simply wrongheaded. Apologizing pulls open a curtain that makes us vulnerable. Paradoxically, our capacity to be vulnerable gives birth to humility, strength and empathy, which serve our mental health much more effectively than arrogance, hubris, and antipathy.

**2. Apologizing is validating for the aggrieved.** A proper apology restores dignity for those we hurt. A sincere apology conveys to the injured person that we see them and respect them. Their feelings matter. Apologizing restores trust. When we apologize for renegeing on personal promises or public misconduct, we acknowledge that we know what the “rules” are, and we agree that they should be upheld. Such apologies reaffirm the social contract and restore feelings of safety.

**3. Apologizing benefits the giver.** By apologizing and taking responsibility for our actions, we effectively address the remorse that we feel for hurting another person. Left unaddressed, these feelings can lead to

shame, guilt, and loss in self-esteem, all of which negatively impact our mental health and wellbeing. Apologizing calls on us to be emotionally open and interpersonally connected. Psychologist Michael McCullough and colleagues have conducted a series of studies that show that [a sincere apology increases empathy for the wrongdoer](#), which engenders respect and heightens our ability to forgive.

**4. Apologizing provides a path forward.** Yes, apologies are about what happened in the past, but what they are really about is opening the way to move forward. Sincere apologies do not eliminate the past hurt, but by validating the past hurt, a sincere apology promotes closure and forgiveness. Resolving not to repeat the offending behavior - or committing to make whatever change is possible - is all about envisioning a future that may help make the past more bearable.

**5. Apologizing in three steps.** Regret. Responsibility. Remedy. These are the three essential elements of an effective apology according to psychotherapist Beverly Engel, author of [The Power of Apology: Healing Steps to Transform All Your Relationships](#). Regret is about communicating loud and clear that we know we have caused pain and hurt to another person. Something simple like, "I'm so very sorry for the pain I've caused you." Stating clearly that we take full responsibility for our actions (or lack thereof) that caused the hurt is step two. This can sound like, "I'm so sorry, I did something inexcusable and I realize that it hurt you deeply." Since we cannot change what was done, the last step of a good apology is clearly stating a commitment to make amends. This can include articulating how we plan to limit the effects of the harm we caused and how we will work on not making the same mistake again. Something like, "I am sorry I said what I did on the steps of the capitol building. I promise never to do that again."

*Three steps makes apologizing seem simple. Of course, apologizing can also be profoundly challenging and complex in practice depending on why and to whom we are apologizing. Competing agendas and emotional conflicts frequently trip us up. It can take time and hard work to get to a place psychologically that enables us to truly apologize. Although sooner is usually better than later, later is usually better than never. Failing to apologize sincerely, we become our own worst enemy. We lose. The person we caused harm loses. Those in our orbit to observe and learn lose. Mr. Yoho, I cede the floor.*