

“Lo Siento” - The Anatomy of a Good Apology by Rachel Christensen, LCSW
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I love how direct translations of other languages into English provide significant depth and meaning to words. I spent eighteen months as a missionary in Chile and learned to proficiently speak Spanish. In the process of learning a new language, I gained an appreciation for both Spanish and English vocabulary and the meaning behind our words. One such phrase, “lo siento,” is how you say “I’m sorry” in Spanish. However, the direct translation is “I feel it.” I’ve thought a lot about how this meaning in Spanish is a beautiful guide in how we should approach our apologies. If you are genuine in your apology, your process will include “feeling” what the hurt must have been like for the other person.

Saying I’m sorry is acknowledging and taking accountability for the intentional or unintentional harm caused to acquaintances or the people you love the very most. There are some basic components to an apology, but the “I feel it” part is going to be of most significance in demonstrating your sincerity. Saying, I’m sorry should be a genuine attempt at easing the burden of the person you hurt or let down in some way. Offering an apology is an invitation to connect to that person and renew safety and comfort in your relationship.

First, let’s mention some not-so-effective (and even damaging) apology attempts. In Dr. Sue Johnson’s book, Hold Me Tight, she has a chapter dedicated to forgiving injuries. She identifies these specific “token” apologies that may work for small hurts, but generally only increase the wounded person’s pain:

- the four-second “where is the exit” apology. “Yes, well, sorry ‘bout that. What shall we have for dinner?”
- the minimizing responsibility apology. “Well, maybe I did that, but . . . “
- the forced apology. “I guess I am supposed to say . . . “
- the instrumental apology. “Nothing is going to work till I say this, so . . . “

Imagine being on the other end of any of the above mentioned apologies. Do they bring any relief? Again, if you care about another person’s pain, you will “feel it” and the person you have hurt can see the impact their pain has on you. Start with a clear “I’m sorry,” or “I apologize” statement. Be humble and sincere. Acknowledge the thing you did wrong and be specific. Hand in hand with the acknowledgment is showing empathy. Empathy is the “I feel it” part and it’s at the heart of a sincere apology. Without the feeling or emotion, it’s like dancing without the music. It looks and feels awkward and comes across as inauthentic.

For example, you can say things such as, “I pulled away. I let you down.” “I didn’t see your pain and how you needed me. I was too caught up in my own fear and anger. I just shut down and shut you out. I left you all alone.” “I betrayed you and left you to think I didn’t care about you. I can see how deeply this must have hurt you.” You may find after making a statement like this, the injured person comes back with more expressions of hurt, or even anger. In this moment, you may naturally want to run or get defensive . . . Stick with it, you just provided them some safety. Let them drop deeper into their feelings; they need to be heard. Finally, ask for forgiveness and reassure them you will be there to help them heal.

More often than not, the hurt we inflict on others is a response to how we may have felt hurt by them. In our day to day interactions, we are constantly responding to the behaviors and cues of those around us. We can get caught up in the “I’m not going to apologize until they apologize” dance. It is emotionally risky to be the first one to acknowledge wrong-doing, however, if you take the steps outlined above, you’ll have a really good chance at clearing the way for the other person to take accountability for their actions and ask for forgiveness as well. As one of my clients wisely shared with me, “You have to risk it to get the biscuit.” Allowing yourself to “feel” someone else’s pain, acknowledge it and validate their feelings is not an indication that their hurtful actions towards you are okay. It may seem counterintuitive, however, taking that first step towards reconciliation can open the way to healing injuries in your relationship. So, if you want to say “I’m sorry,” use the wisdom of the Spanish language and “feel it.” It’s the best place to start!