

What do you mean when you say 'sorry'?

We bump into someone – and say 'sorry'.

Our children do something we don't like – and we expect them to say 'sorry'.

We encourage perpetrators of crime to write to their victim – and say 'sorry'.

It's such a simple word. A necessary word. But a word that says so many different things.

It might convey 'Oops – I didn't mean to do that' or 'OK, I'll apologise because that's what you want me to do.' or 'Please don't think badly of me' or 'I sincerely and deeply regret what I've done. Or many shades of meaning in between.

See if you recognise your experience in any of the scenarios below.

At the end, you'll find my suggestions for making an apology meaningful.

Context	Comment
You accidentally bump your supermarket trolley against someone's heels.	<p>Every-day incidents like these elicit the word 'sorry' from almost everyone.</p> <p>I see this as 'social lubrication'. It's a way of letting someone know that I was aware that I'd done something minor, unintentionally. I don't know of a better way to do this in the moment, over very small issues.</p>
<p>Child does something that parent perceives as 'bad behaviour'.</p> <p>So parent says: 'Just look at the mess you've made – say sorry this minute!'</p> <p>OR</p> <p>'Go and sit on the 'naughty step until you're ready to say 'sorry'.'</p> <p>OR</p> <p>'You can't have an ice-cream until you've said sorry.'</p> <p>OR</p> <p>... something else that says 'you've done something wrong'.</p>	<p>The parent is thinking in terms of 'good/bad behaviour'. When the child has done something 'bad', he/she should apologise – because this is what polite, considerate people do.</p> <p>I imagine that underneath this way of thinking is a wish that children learn to recognise that their behaviour might affect other people and an assumption that saying 'sorry' demonstrates this awareness.</p> <p>However, when the parent is in an emotionally charged state and feeling angry, frustrated, upset or fearful about the long term consequences of the child continuing to behave in that way, asking a child is told to 'say sorry' comes across as a demand.</p> <p>So how does a child respond – and what significance does its response have?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compliance. The child says 'sorry' simply because it has been asked to. The child might not be feeling at all sorry. • Playing the game. The child says 'Sorrreeee' in a drawn out, sing-song way that says 'I know this is what you want me to say, so I'll go along with it. It doesn't really mean I'm sorry. (And I think you're making a fuss about nothing.)' • Silence. The child might not agree that s/he's done anything to apologise for. This might well be an authentic stance for the child to take. Unfortunately for the child, it can enrage the parent, who interprets the silence as insubordination.

<p>'Sorry – would you just pass me the salad.'</p> <p>'Sorry – would you call in on the post-office on your way home?'</p>	<p>'Sorry' sometimes precedes a small request. It's a way of saying 'I don't want to impose on you – but there is something you could do for me'. When I hear this sort of 'sorry', I sometimes interpret the speaker as believing that they have no right to ask for the small favour.</p> <p>When I pick up that this is where they're coming from, I feel uncomfortable and want them to claim a stronger sense of themselves.</p>
<p>Two friends agree to meet. One turns up at the appointed time. The other doesn't. The conversation beings like this: 'I'm terribly sorry. What can I say. I don't know what came over me. It must be old age creeping on. I mean... I had it in my diary but forgot to check this morning. And then I got absorbed in my project and time just flew by. You know how it is. I thought about it last night – but today.... I don't know why. It went clean out of my head. I'm not normally like that. I'm usually quite efficient and on the ball. I'm really, really sorry. What must you think of me.'</p>	<p>If the punctual friend (PF) hadn't been feeling some irritation at the beginning of this torrent, she surely would have been by the end.</p> <p>The forgetful friend (FF) is feeling guilty and he fears that his friend will think badly of him. Notice, though, that his attention is on himself. He wants to explain, justify, seek forgiveness and regain his standing in her eyes.</p> <p>I believe that his friend would have preferred a more succinct apology followed by an inquiry into how she has been affected. Empathy for her experience of the incident can clear the air and then lead into a conversation about what to do in the future.</p> <p>For example, the conversation might go like this:</p> <p>FF: 'I'm really sorry. Reliability is important to me and yet here I am, one hour after the time we agreed. Are you feeling irritated?'</p> <p>(PF) <i>'Yes. I made a special effort to be here on time and then I couldn't even get you on your mobile.'</i></p> <p>FF: 'Ah, so you were worried as well, wanting to know that I was OK?'</p> <p>(PF) <i>'Of course. How was I to know that you hadn't been run over by a bus?'</i></p> <p>FF: 'So you'd like me to know how anxious you feel when things don't go according to plan. I guess you want to know as soon as possible if things change. Right?'</p> <p>(PF) <i>'Absolutely. It would help if your phone was switched on so that I could ring you.'</i></p> <p>FF: 'So what's bugging you is not so much that I forgot about our meeting. It's more that you were worried and wanting some way of contacting me. So if I remember to leave my phone switched on, it would make a big difference to you if ever I forget our arrangements again.'</p> <p>(PF) <i>'Yes, that would be a big help.'</i></p>

<p>'Sorry to bring this up – but there's something I want to say to you.'</p>	<p>In this case, the speaker sounds a bit nervous about broaching a topic. Maybe he fears that he will provoke a fierce response and so is seeking to soften the impact of what he wants to say. It can sound like appeasement.</p> <p>I would prefer a more direct and authentic statement such as: <i>'There's something I want to talk about and I'm feeling nervous about bringing it up. It would help me to express myself clearly if you would listen without comment until I've finished. Are you willing to do that?'</i></p>
<p><i>Person A: 'You've upset me. You shouldn't have said that.'</i></p> <p><i>'Person B: 'Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. That was very tactless of me. I'm always putting my foot in it.'</i></p>	<p>In this context, Person A (PA) is upset and holds Person B (PB) responsible. Person B appears to accept responsibility and most probably feels guilty. So he tries to make things better by putting himself down.</p> <p>But this isn't likely to help Person A to feel any better. What Person A most probably wants is some sign of understanding from Person B. But Person B is thinking about himself and his habits and because he's feeling guilty, he's abasing himself in front of A.</p> <p>And then Person A too feels guilty and holds herself responsible for B's self-criticism. The conversation is likely to reach a stalemate, leaving both parties feeling dissatisfied and wanting a different quality of connection.</p> <p>So what could PB have said? Maybe something like this:</p> <p>PB: 'I'm really sorry to see you upset. Would you tell me just what I said that triggered that for you?' <i>(This is a request for a clear observation)</i></p> <p>PA: 'You said "why are you doing it like that"? It sounded as though you thought I was stupid.'</p> <p>PB: 'Ah, I see. You heard my question as implying that you didn't know what you were doing – and you wanted to be seen as fully competent. Is that right?</p> <p>PA: 'Yes – of course. I've been doing this for years, and I know what needs doing.'</p> <p>PB: 'Yes. I can see that. And I've seen lots of examples of how well you do it. So I'm sorry that my question provoked that upset in you. Would you like to hear where I was coming from?'</p> <p>PA: 'All right then – tell me.'</p> <p>PB: 'Well, actually I was curious. I hadn't seen it done that way before and I thought I might learn something new.'</p> <p>PA: 'Oh... Well... that puts a very different complexion on things. Why couldn't you have said it like that in the first place?'</p> <p>PB: 'So if I gave a bit of context before firing a question at you, would that help?'</p> <p>PA: 'Yes. Definitely. Thank you.'</p>

How to make an apology sound meaningful

1. Acknowledge what you did. This means that you have to let down your defences and show some vulnerability. For example:
 - a. 'I didn't call you when I said I would.'
 - b. 'I made light of something really important to you.'
 - c. 'I lost my temper.'
2. Show that you've seen the impact on the other person, and that you care about this.
 - a. 'I didn't call you when I said I would. Did that mess up your plans?'
 - b. 'I made light of something really important to you. I guess that you'd have liked some understanding and empathy from me.'
 - c. 'I lost my temper – and I saw the hurt in your face.'
3. Say 'I'm sorry' in a tone of voice that conveys real regret.
4. If you want to explain why you did what you did, make it brief. Don't go into repeated self-criticisms.
5. Take responsibility for what you did. – and keep well away from anything accusatory or judgmental about the other person. Avoid saying things like
 - a. 'Well, if you hadn't changed the arrangements, I might have remembered to call you'
 - b. 'If you'd told me how worried you were, I might have been a bit more sensitive.'
 - c. 'You made me so angry.'
6. Invite the other person to say what's going on for them now that you've apologised. For example:
 - a. 'Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?'
 - b. 'Is there anything you'd like from me right now?'
7. Notice when you want to justify yourself. (For example: 'I only did it because I thought you'd want me to...')

If you don't want to apologise...

There may be times when you say to yourself: 'I haven't done anything to be sorry about. Why should I apologise just because someone is oversensitive.'

In that case, try to understand the other person. For example: 'You're sounding very angry. Are you reacting to something I've said?' And then listen empathically.