

There's more than one way to say "I'm sorry," according to apology expert **Aaron Lazare**.

Some apologies encourage forgiveness and reconciliation; others only make things worse. Here's how to tell the difference.

Making Peace through Apology



In April of 2004, televised photographs revealed to the world the abuse of Iraqi prisoners held by the United States military in the Abu Ghraib prison. These photos, and many other images that followed, showed soldiers taking pleasure in torturing and mocking naked Iraqi prisoners. The prisoners' treatment drew criticism from around the world; it was described as cruel, humiliating, appalling, and unacceptable. Iraqis, understandably, were enraged. As details unfolded, Americans, including government and military officials, expressed shame that their country's democratic and humanitarian values were being undermined.

The U.S. government, as the responsible party, sought forgiveness—not only from the Iraqis, but also from the American public. Toward this end, President George W. Bush, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice offered public comments, including what some might call apologies. President Bush told the American public how he had apologized to King Abdullah II of Jordan. "I was sorry for the humiliation suffered by the Iraqi prisoners and the humiliation suffered by their families," he said. "I told him I was as equally sorry that people seeing those pictures didn't understand the true nature and heart of America.... I am sickened that people got the wrong impression." In an appeal on an Arabic-language television station, the president said that Iraqis "must understand that I view these practices as abhorrent. They must also understand that what took place ... does not represent the America that I know.... Mistakes will be investigated."



Left: Jordan's King Abdullah II and President Bush in the White House Rose Garden discussing the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison with the media on May 6, 2004.

we offended, or as a gift we unconditionally extend to someone who offended us, regardless of an apology. Yet my own analysis has convinced me that forgiveness and apology are inextricably linked. Indeed, especially after a party has been humiliated, as in the case of Abu Ghraib, apology is a vital, often necessary, step toward assuaging feelings of humiliation, promoting forgiveness, and restoring balance to a relationship.

I believe there are up to four parts to the structure of an effective apology. (Not every apology requires all four parts.) These are: acknowledgment of the offense; explanation; expressions of remorse, shame, and humility; and reparation.

Of these four parts, the one most commonly defective in apologies is the acknowledgment. A valid acknowledgment must make clear who the offender is (or has the standing to speak on behalf of the offender) and who is the offended. The offender must clearly and completely acknowledge the offense. People fail the acknowledgment phase of the apology when they make vague and incomplete apologies (an apology "for whatever I did"); use the passive voice ("mistakes were made"); make the apology conditional (an apology "if mistakes have been made"); question whether the victim was damaged or minimize the offense (an apology "to the degree you were hurt" or "only a few enlisted soldiers were guilty at Abu Ghraib"); use the empathic "sorry" instead of acknowledging responsibility; apologize to the wrong party; or apologize for the wrong offense.

The U.S. apology for Abu Ghraib contained several of these deficiencies. For a national offense of this magnitude, only the president has the standing to offer an apology. It appeared that other spokespersons were apologizing on behalf of President Bush, or even to shield him. That was the first deficiency. Second, the apology must be directed to the offended people, such as the Iraqis, the American public, and the American military. Instead, in President Bush's most widely publicized comments, he apologized to the King of Jordan and then reported his conversation secondhand to the offended parties. He never directly addressed the Iraqis, the American public, or the American military. Third, the person offering the apology must accept responsibility for the offense. Neither President Bush nor Condoleezza Rice accepted such responsibility.

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Instead, they extended their sorrow to the Iraqi people. Feeling sorry does not communicate acceptance of responsibility. The president also avoided taking responsibility as the Commander-in-Chief by using the passive voice when he said, "Mistakes will be investigated." In addition, he failed to acknowledge the magnitude of the offense, which is not only the immediate exposure of several humiliating incidents, but a likely pervasive and systematic pattern of prisoner abuse occurring over an extended period of time, as reported by the International Red Cross.

The next important phase of an apology is the explanation. An effective explanation may mitigate an offense by showing it was neither intentional nor personal, and is unlikely to recur. An explanation will backfire when it seems fraudulent or shallow, as by saying, "The devil made me do it," or "I just snapped," or "I was not thinking." There is more dignity in admitting, "There is no excuse," than in offering a fraudulent or shallow explanation.

President Bush, and others in his administration, tried to explain prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib as the work of a few bad apples. Rather than discussing any broader explanation for the abuses—or outlining how he would make sure they did not happen again—he just stressed that they did not represent "the true nature and heart of America."

Remorse, shame, and humility are other important components of an apology. These attitudes and emotions show that the offender recognizes the suffering of the offended. They also help assure the offended party that the offense will not recur, and allow the offender to make clear that he should have known better.

Speaking on the same television channel, Condoleezza Rice said, "We are deeply sorry for what has happened to these people, and what the families must be feeling. It's just not right. And we will get to the bottom of what happened." Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "These events occurred on my watch. As Secretary of Defense, I am accountable for them and I take full responsibility."

These attempted apologies and expressions of consolation failed to elicit forgiveness from the Iraqi people or the Arab world in general. In fact, the words may have aggravated feelings of hostility and resentment. What was missing from these so-called apologies? Why were they flawed?

What makes an apology work?

For the past 10 years, I have studied the structure and function of public and private apologies. My goal has been to understand why certain apologies succeed or fail to elicit forgiveness and bring about reconciliation. During my analysis, I have been surprised that most writers and researchers overlook the relationship between forgiveness and apology. Forgiveness is often portrayed as a generous gift bestowed on us by someone

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President Bush failed the humility test when he suggested that his critics did not know "the true nature and heart of America," and that he was as sickened by people getting the "wrong impression" of America as he was by the abuses at Abu Ghraib. In my opinion, he was implying that the U.S. was a victim in the incident.

Finally, reparation is a way for an apology to compensate, in a real or symbolic way, for the offender's transgression. When the offense causes damage or loss of a tangible object, the reparation is usually replacement or restoration of the object. When the offense is intangible, symbolic, or irreversible—ranging from an insult or humiliation to serious injury or death—the reparation may include a gift, an honor, a financial exchange, a commitment to change one's ways, or a tangible punishment of the guilty party.

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How apologies heal

Within the above structure of apology, an effective apology can generate forgiveness and reconciliation if it satisfies one or more of seven psychological needs in the offended party. The first and most common healing factor is the restoration of dignity, which is critical when the offense itself is an insult or a humiliation. Another healing factor is the affirmation that both parties have shared values and agree that the harm committed was wrong. Such apologies often follow racial or gender slurs because they help establish what kind of behavior is beyond the pale. A third healing factor is validation that the victim was not responsible for the offense. This is often necessary in rape and child abuse cases when the victim irrationally carries some of the blame. A fourth healing factor is the assurance that the offended party is safe from a repeat offense; such an assurance can come when an offender apologizes for threatening or committing physical or psychological harm to a victim. Reporative justice, the fifth healing factor, occurs when the offended sees the offending party suffer through some type of punishment. A sixth healing factor is reparation, when the victim receives some form of compensation for his pain. Finally, the seventh healing factor is a dialogue that allows the offended parties to express their feelings toward the offenders and even grieve over their losses. Examples of such exchanges occurred, with apologies offered, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in South Africa.

In the U.S. government's apologies for the Abu Ghraib incident, there was not a full acknowledgement of the offense and an acceptance of responsibility, so there could be no affirmation of shared values. In addition, there was no restoration of dignity, no assurance of future safety for the prisoners, no reparative justice, no reparations, and no suggestion for dialogue with the Iraqis. So it should not come as a surprise that the Iraqi people—and the rest of the world—were reluctant to forgive the United States.

A causal relationship between apology and forgiveness is understandable based on this analysis of apology. The apology repairs the damage that was done. It heals the festering wound and commits the offender to a change in behavior. When the apology meets an offended person's needs, he does not have to work at forgiving. Forgiveness comes spontaneously; the victim feels like his offender has released him of a burden or offered him a gift. In response, he often wants to return

the gift by downplaying the damage done to himself, sharing part of the blame for the offense, or complimenting the offender in some way. Commonly, the relationship becomes stronger with a bond forged out of the honesty and courage of the offending party.

Getting it right

For an example of this type of apology, it is useful to compare the Abu Ghraib incident with another case of prisoner abuse and its aftermath.

Eric Lomax, a Scotsman in the military during World War II, was captured in Singapore by the Japanese and held prisoner at Kanburi, Thailand, from 1940 to 1944. In his book *The Railway Man*, Lomax describes his experience of being caged like an animal in a tiny cell, beaten, starved, and tortured. His captors broke his bones. The interpreter, Nagasi Takashi, who appeared to be in command, became the focus of Lomax's hostility.

After his release from prison at the end of the war, Lomax was a broken man, behaving as if he were still in captivity, unable to show normal emotions or maintain important relationships. He frequently thought about exacting revenge on the translator and was unable to forgive, even though he knew his vengeance was consuming him. In 1989, Lomax discovered that his nemesis was alive and was writing about his repentance and his desire to be forgiven for his wartime activities. Lomax wanted revenge. He wanted to reconstruct his story of those war years. He wanted to see Takashi's sorrow. He wanted to have power over him.

Lomax and his wife wrote to Takashi, who then asked for a meeting. Both men and their wives met for two weeks near the site of the prison camp in Thailand and at Takashi's home in Japan. With Takashi's help, Lomax was able to piece together the story of his prison existence. Takashi acknowledged with sorrow and guilt the wrongs for which he and his county were responsible. He said he had never forgotten Lomax's face, and admitted that he and others in the Japanese Imperial Army had treated Lomax and his countrymen "very, very badly." He explained how, since the war, he had argued against militarism and built memorials for the war dead. During their meetings, Lomax observed Takashi's suffering and grief.

Before they met, Lomax had been unable to forgive. He was controlled by his grudges and vengeance. It took a heartfelt and extended apology on the part of Takashi to

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meet Lomax's needs—the need to have his dignity restored, to feel safe, to understand that he and Takashi had shared values, to grieve, and to learn that Takashi suffered perhaps as much as he did. After the two weeks, Lomax said his anger was gone. Takashi was no longer a “hated enemy” but a “blood-brother.” Lomax wrote that he felt like “an honored guest of two good people.”

Although apology and forgiveness between these men occurred in private, their story serves as a microcosm of what can happen after public apologies between groups or nations. Whether an offended party is an individual or a collection of individuals, an apology must meet the same basic psychological needs in order for it to bring about forgiveness and reconciliation.

Exceptions and conclusions

There are situations in which it is useful to forgive without an apology. One obvious example is where the offending party is deceased. Forgiveness then helps the aggrieved get on with his life. In other situations, where the unrepentant offender shows no signs of

remorse or change of behavior, forgiveness can be useful, but reconciliation would be foolish and self-destructive. For example, a woman who has been abused by an unrepentant husband may forgive him but choose to live apart. On the other hand, without an apology, it is difficult to imagine forgiveness accompanied by reconciliation or restoration of a trusting relationship. Such forgiveness is an abdication of our moral authority and our care for ourselves.

These situations aside, effective apologies are a tool for promoting cooperation among people, groups, and nations in a world plagued by war and conflict. Although the apologies of the U.S. government to the Iraqis for the abuses at Abu Ghraib fell short, we must keep in mind that it is rare for apologies to be offered and accepted during war. In such times, emotions run high, preserving face and an image of strength are critical, and it is all too easy to demonize the enemy. But in the decades since World War II, several nations (or individuals or groups within nations) from both sides have apologized for their actions during that war. In 1985, Richard von Weizsacker, then the president of Germany, apologized to all of Germany's victims of the war. The U.S. government apologized to Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II. Additionally, in the wake of the Holocaust, Pope John XXIII eliminated all negative comments about Jews from the Roman Catholic liturgy. He followed this effort by convening the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, which marked a turning point in the Church's relationship with Jews, Muslims, and others. These and many other successful apologies, both private and public, require honesty, generosity, humility, and courage.

We can only hope that current and subsequent administrations in the United States, Iraq, and other nations can, in the decades ahead, acknowledge their offenses, express their remorse, and offer reparations for acts committed during wartime. Without such apologies, we may be left with grudges and vengeance for decades to come.

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What an Apology Must Do

by Aaron Lazare

There are up to four parts to an effective apology, though not every apology requires all four parts. They are as follows.

1. A valid acknowledgment of the offense that makes clear who the offender is and who is the offended. The offender must clearly and completely acknowledge the offense.
2. An effective explanation, which shows an offense was neither intentional nor personal, and is unlikely to recur.
3. Expressions of remorse, shame, and humility, which show that the offender recognizes the suffering of the offended.
4. A reparation of some kind, in the form of a real or symbolic compensation for the offender's transgression.

An effective apology must also satisfy at least one of seven psychological needs of an offended person.

1. The restoration of dignity in the offended person.
2. The affirmation that both parties have shared values and agree that the harm committed was wrong.
3. Validation that the victim was not responsible for the offense.
4. The assurance that the offended party is safe from a repeat offense.
5. Reparative justice, which occurs when the offended sees the offending party suffer through some type of punishment.
6. Reparation, when the victim receives some form of compensation for his pain.
7. A dialogue that allows the offended parties to express their feelings toward the offenders and even grieve over their losses.