

Lead with Relief

When you create distress in your partner you must relieve that distress as soon as possible. Distress is defined as hurt, pain, sadness, frustration, shame and even anger. Your cue to apologize, or repair, is not whether you did something wrong but that your partner has been hurt by something you did or said. Saying you are sorry is uncomfortable. It is hard to admit shortcomings and acknowledge mistakes. But when you hurt your partner, taking responsibility is the key to restoring trust in the relationship.

When your partner is hurt they **ARE** able to tell you how they feel in a non-threatening way.

"It hurts when you talk to me that way."
"That didn't feel very good"
Even better, "I know you didn't mean it but...."

When your partner is hurt they **ARE NOT** able to tell you how they feel. They either attack or withdraw.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to _____"
"What is wrong with you? You are so _____!"
"I just need to get away from you. I'm leaving!"

Path to Relief

You feel shame that your partner is in distress and it is difficult to repair. You don't know how to take responsibility without being overcome with self-blame.

If your partner is not reactive tells you how they feel, you hear your partner's pain and you see your role in it. You don't them to feel that way with you.

If your partner is reactive, you don't it personally and understand that it is due to hurt that you caused.

They withdraw and give you the silent treatment or pretend nothing is wrong. You do nothing in return.

They attack your character and call names. You get triggered and attack in return or withdraw.

Your focus turns to how you can never be good enough for your partner. You must develop some shame resilience so you can relieve the pain of your partner. There is no shame in feeling shame. Be curious about where it comes from.

As soon as distress emerges, you apologize. When you look through your partner's eyes it makes sense to you why they would feel hurt by what you did. An apology is meant to repair damage done to a trusting relationship by acknowledging pain caused, accepting responsibility, and expressing sincere regret at having done something hurtful to a person you care about. You don't assess whether you did anything wrong; you relieve the pain.

You must pursue your partner and find out what is going on so you can relieve the distress. Be curious and ask them how you hurt them.

You must learn how to interpret the attack as pain and not respond to their reaction. Nobody gets angry alone so be curious about how you hurt them.

HOW TO REPAIR

Be specific about what you are apologizing for.
Acknowledge that what you did hurt your partner.
Apologize unreservedly and quickly. The longer you wait, the deeper the hurt will be.
Your partner needs to know that you understand how they feel and that you are sorry for making them feel that way.
An apology has to reflect your true concern for the other person and sorrow and remorse for your actions.
Look your partner in the eye. Take an open stance. Speak calmly. Listen. Take your time.
Put yourself in your partner's position. How did your actions make them feel? Empathize. Let them know you understand.
Stay focused on feelings of your partner without overshadowing them with your own pain and remorse.
Understand that your apology may not be accepted.
Do not ask for forgiveness. They may not be ready. The best chance you have to be forgiven is to apologize well.
It takes strength of character to own your actions and the consequences of them, both for others and yourself.

HOW NOT TO REPAIR

Don't defend or minimize what you did.
Don't debate who hurt whom first or worst.
Don't insist that you didn't do anything wrong or that you didn't mean to do it.
Don't apologize to silence your partner or as a way to quickly end conflict.
Don't explain why you did what you did.
It's not about alleviating your feelings of guilt.

No "if's" or "but's."

I'm sorry if I offended you. (I'm sorry that I offended you)
I'm sorry you feel that way. (I'm sorry I made you feel that way)
I'm sorry, but you provoked me.
I'm sorry, but you're way too sensitive.
I'm sorry, but you also did the same thing.
I'm sorry for how I talked to you, but what I said is still true.
I'm sorry, but it wasn't that big of a deal.
I said I'm sorry 10 times so why are you still bringing this up?