

Sorry

The faux-pology hashtag of our times may not be all that ironic: We don't say it when we mean it, and when we mean it, we flub it. Let's reclaim the mea culpa.

By Michelle Ruiz

Our heartfelt regrets to the apology, that cornerstone of common decency. You had quite a run as two words that couldn't be minced. Now you send nothing but mixed messages. You can be cryptic (see: Katy Perry tweeting that she *might* collaborate with Taylor Swift "if she says she's sorry" ...for something). You're defiantly sarcastic (in her hit single "Sorry," Beyoncé spends three minutes and 52 seconds saying anything *but* that). You've made history, for all the wrong reasons (Hillary Clinton was the first presidential candidate ever chronicled to say the words *I'm sorry* in a concession speech). You hijack conversations so often that some companies have created "Sorry" jars, with female employees contributing

a \$1 bill for every gratuitous apology that slips out. Still, that scarlet S has lost its emotional currency. It's come to mean nothing, when it should mean everything.

"It's not hard to apologize," says Cynthia Frantz, Ph.D., a social psychologist and professor at Oberlin College who has studied the science of the S-word. "But it's hard to apologize and mean it." Our resistance to acknowledging we messed up runs deep. "Saying 'sorry' means we have to be vulnerable and admit we're flawed," says Marjorie Ingall, cofounder of SorryWatch, the apology analysis website. But done right, the word is mental dynamite, knocking down walls and saving relationships from the verge of ruin. Intrigued? Read on.

Not Sorry

Anatomy of an Apology

Spilled cabernet on your sister's white couch? "Accidentally" hooked up with your BFF's ex? The most effective apologies have six key elements, says a new study from Ohio State University. For a shining example, see the public mea culpa that actress Selma Blair published on VanityFair.com last summer after an incoherent outburst on a plane (she hit an admirable four of the six).

1. *The number one, most clutch part of a bona fide, big-girl apology? Acknowledging you—and you alone—messed up. "A true apology is a simple, direct statement of responsibility," says psychologist Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., author of Why Won't You Apologize? Healing Big Betrayals and Everyday Hurts.*

2. *Explain what you did wrong. Cringe through it if you must, but spelling out your mistake makes it clear that you're owning it.*

3. *Express regret. You can't time-travel and erase your misdeed, but you can still wish it never happened.*

4. *Show you're repenting. Instead of spitting out a quick "sorry" and moving on, you're taking the incident to heart and promising there won't be a repeat performance.*

5. *Researchers also found that offering to fix the screw-up—like a guest paying to dry-clean that red-wine stain or a politician offering his resignation—is key. "That puts some skin in the game," says Edwin Battistella, Ph.D., a professor of linguistics at Southern Oregon University and author of Sorry About That: The Language of Public Apology. (Selma missed this one, but it would have been hard to accomplish, short of treating the passengers to flight vouchers.)*

6. *The last step in the ideal "I'm sorry": asking for forgiveness, though subjects in OSU's study found this was least important to a solid apology and can be skipped. Lerner agrees: "An authentic apology is not something that we give to get something back, like to lower our guilt quotient or to get forgiveness." Ultimately, apologies are about the other person's feelings, not yours.*

"I made a big mistake yesterday. After a lovely trip with my son and his dad, I mixed alcohol with medication, and that caused me to black out and led me to say and do things that I deeply regret. My son was with his dad asleep with his headphones on, so there is that saving grace. I take this very seriously, and I apologize to all of the passengers and crew that I disturbed and am thankful to all of the people who helped me in the aftermath. I am a flawed human being who makes mistakes and am filled with shame over this incident. I am truly very sorry."

JUST SAY NO TO...

FAUX-POLOGIZING

Adding *if* or *but* after *sorry* is cheating: The first puts the mistake on the other person ("Maybe I did something wrong... or maybe you're just a delicate flower") and the second offers excuses. Even if what you say after *but* is true, notes Lerner, "it makes your apology false."

PRE-APOLOGIZING

As in, "I'm sorry, where's the restroom?" Say what you actually mean: "excuse me," not "sorry."

OVER-APOLOGIZING

Dramatic apologies for little offenses "interrupt the flow of conversation and make the other person feel they have to reassure you," says Lerner.

Love Means Having to Say You're Sorry

Making amends with the person you love and adore and see naked on the regular—what could possibly be hard about that? According to psychotherapist LouAnn Smith, L.C.S.W., apologies are extra tricky in romantic relationships, where emotions run hot and you have a history.

Smith's golden rule for being truly contrite: "You can only apologize for one thing at a time for it to really stick." When you're saying sorry for your specific screwup, don't let it become a doorway to other issues in the relationship. That's where those annoying "buts" come in ("but you always...").

If you're due an apology, realize that

men are typically raised to avoid sharing vulnerability, says Lerner. "Many men say they're worried that admitting they're sorry will unleash endless anger and criticism." So listen with an open mind, don't interrupt, and avoid shaming him further—you want this to be such a painless episode that he's willing to experience it again...and again. ■

"I'm Sorry" "I'm Sorry"

HIS & HERS

You're not imagining it. Women apologize more often than men, says research published in *Psychological Science*. But it's complicated: The study found that women and men actually apologize at the same rate, about 80 percent of the time, when they believe they're in the wrong. The key difference is that women think more behaviors deserve an apology.

"Women are raised to feel guilty for using up the valuable oxygen in the room," says Lerner. "Mom guilt" is a thing, after all; ever heard of "dad guilt"? Most guys feel no such thing and, in fact, have told Lerner that apologizing feels "like putting their head on the chopping block and giving the other person the competitive edge"—whether that person is a colleague or a lover.

"I think it's very telling that the default recently is 'Women apologize too much,' rather than, 'Gee, men don't apologize enough,'" Ingall points out. Yes, it would be great to hear more honest, open apologies from men. But while you're waiting for them to evolve, start moving the needle by not atoning for anything that's not your fault. (The Wi-Fi is spotty during a work presentation? You're not sorry; you're annoyed and you want it fixed.) "Engaging in this little politeness game is actually undermining our power," says Frantz. And if a guy would never do that, why should we?