

I'm Not Sorry

I made a vow this month. I'm trying to avoid saying a phrase I repeat far too often: I'm sorry.

With this goal, I have a head start. I'm good about matching my words to actions. If I say I'll do something I'll usually do it, unless there's a compelling reason not to. I don't make plans or offer help unless I mean it.

But like many people, and women in particular, I say, "I'm sorry" a lot. My friends notice it. My spiritual teachers notice it. I notice it, especially at work. I apologize for things that are not my fault. I apologize for things that are clearly someone else's fault.

Saying sorry when I'm actually not is a subtle but unacceptable break of my [vow not to lie](#). And so I need to get better about saying I'm sorry less, or perhaps not at all.

My friend Patrick is brilliant at this. He almost never says he's sorry. Like me, he seeks to match right words with right actions. Unlike me, he doesn't apologize when something goes wrong that's out of his control or the result of simple human error. We've traveled around the world together, and one day, as we sped from our hotel in Bhutan to the airport, hoping to make a flight to Myanmar we were already running late for, I learned an important lesson.

"Stop!" he said to the driver, powerfully and without hesitation, "We need to turn around. I left both our passports and tickets in the lockbox at the hotel."

I looked at him expectantly.

He was quiet.

The driver pulled off the highway and circled back. We raced to the hotel.

There was a strong chance we would miss our flight.

And so I waited, expectantly, for what I was sure he'd say next.

But he never said it. Not in the car, not when we hurtled towards check-in, or anytime that day.

We made the flight, and the next afternoon, while we ogled the spectacular Golden Pagoda in Yangon Myanmar, I couldn't hold it in any longer. Relaxed in one of the most spiritual places I had ever been, I finally trusted myself not to ask the question aggressively. "Hey yesterday, when you realized you had left our tickets at the hotel, why did you not say, 'I'm sorry?'"

He smiled, with no apology in his eyes.

"Because I didn't do anything wrong," he said calmly. "It was an honest mistake that anyone could have made. I didn't do anything hurtful or with bad intentions." He explained he would only say he was sorry if he acted in a way that didn't match his values.

At first, I steamed. If it had been my mistake, I would have apologized fifty times. But the next day I realized—this is a better way to live.

If you speak the truth, and act in accordance to your words and values, you shouldn't ever need to apologize.

And if you live this way, apologies start sounding weak and inauthentic.

Last summer I had brunch with a young filmmaker in London. He was a relative of a friend, and this was our first meeting. As we finished eating, I looked at the time and realized I only had ten minutes to get from Electric House in Notting Hill to Shoreditch House for my next meeting. I Google Mapped the distance in horror. It was at least a half hour drive, and probably more. I grimaced at the cost of a taxi and wondered if I could even hail one amidst a street fair that had shut down every road in the neighborhood.

Sensing my distress, my new friend jumped up to offer a ride. The trip would take him an hour out of his way. I was humbled by his generosity. I was panicked about making the appointment. I said yes.

The drive was brutal. Streets were blocked in all directions, traffic was L.A.-awful, and it was soon clear I wouldn't be twenty minutes late but at least an hour. I relaxed into reality. It was outside our control. But my friend would not stop apologizing.

"I'm so sorry about this traffic!" he would say. "I feel terribly I can't get you there sooner," and "I'm so sorry you'll be so late. I just feel awfully about this."

His actions were the epitome of kindness. But his words didn't ring true. Why was he apologizing for something that wasn't his fault, when he had done nothing wrong and had actually been incredibly thoughtful?

I questioned him about the apologies, and he said his girlfriend asked him all the time not to apologize for things that weren't his fault. It bothered me. It bothered her.

Why?

A false apology feels inauthentic.

Social psychologist [Heidi Grant Halvorson](#) calls it a "superfluous apology." It may be something we think we *should* say, but it's the opposite of speaking the truth. My co-founder Charlie Knoles, an excellent meditation teacher, says people crave authenticity. I find spending time with people who speak the truth is almost always more relaxing, and rewarding, than being with people who aren't saying what they really think.

If you've upset someone, "I'm sorry" is too easy. What's hard, but authentic, is to stand in truth and say, "I didn't mean for my words to affect you in this way" or "My intentions were pure when I said..."

When you've acted badly it feels more authentic to address it. Let's say you're late several nights in a row for a family dinner. You may benefit from thinking about why. And then speaking honestly, whether you've chosen to prioritize work this week or to spend time with friends before heading home. If you can offer your spouse a head's up about this decision earlier in the day or week, even better.

How do you begin raising the bar on "sorry?" First, notice when you say it.

If you made a simple human error, try treating yourself with compassion and forgiving yourself. The energy of forgiveness is far more attractive than someone consistently beating themselves up with words.

Then, be honest with yourself. What promises are you making that you don't keep? What expectations are you setting that you can't fulfill? Can you reset them and get into a pattern of meeting, and even exceeding, expectations?

Third, if you're apologizing for things that aren't your fault, practice suppressing the instinct to say, "I'm sorry." It's hard. It means getting into why someone misinterpreted you or acted badly. But it's a valuable step towards honest communication and freedom from trying to be pleasing to the people around you.

I struggle with this.

Each day I count my sorrys.

And hope they're fewer than the day before.

I aspire to have the confidence to stand behind my words and actions.

To forgive myself with ease. To hold other people accountable as I hold myself.

And for that, I'm not sorry.

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