

# The Art of Apology: Respect Means Having to Say You're Sorry

By Jennifer Neal

February 2, 2018



**T**here are certain behavioral inequities so deeply imbedded in the obstacle course of gender that they have become, quite simply, part of the landscape in which we operate. As a woman, I would describe them as being constantly interrupted at work, compressing my physical self to accommodate men on the train who hold very high opinions of the size and oxygen-needs of their genitalia, and wading through an endless sea of dick picks which, to many men, seems like an appropriate response to the question “Not much, what about you?”

These are everyday examples of the dichotomy between how men naturally get to demand what women are naturally expected to relinquish. But since the beginning of the #MeToo movement, it’s become clear that this is a dynamic that also applies to the most basic tool of verbal communication—the apology. While women constantly struggle to keep from apologizing too much, disgraced male celebrities all seem to lack the skills, and more notably the empathy, required to apologize at all.

In fact, the only thing achieved with any efficacy from the 50 and

counting high-profile public apologies from male celebrities is a display of entitlement that justifies not only a range of sexual misconduct, but also finds issuing disingenuous half-hearted apologies as an acceptable response. And this actually does a lot more to compound the effects of sexual harassment and assault than to heal them.

“A failed apology may be insincere, blame-reversing, or a quick way out of a difficult conversation,” says Dr. Harriet Lerner, psychologist and author of the book *Why Won’t You Apologize?*

Healing Big Betrayals and Everyday Hurts "Often we offer a failed apology by using vague, obfuscating language that obscures what we are actually sorry for."

---

## **While women constantly struggle to keep from apologizing too much, disgraced male celebrities all seem to lack the skills, and more notably the empathy, required to apologize at all.**

---

According to a 2011 paper called *Apologies of the Rich and Famous: Cultural, Cognitive, and Social Explanations of Why We Care and Why We Forgive* by Karen A. Cerulo and Janet M. Ruane, these kinds of public apologies are broken down based on how the various people involved in the offensive act are centered in the apology. Comedian Louis CK's apology, for example, uses the offender-driven sequence, what Cerulo and Ruane describe as an apology that "elaborates the offenders' characteristics, feelings, or intentions" but doesn't necessarily acknowledge the victim's. In his apology, CK mentions himself 35 times, four of which focused on how 'admired' he was, and once implying a level of consent from his victims that seeks to invalidate their reactions to his behavior.

The result is a 500-word self-aggrandizing statement that admits to what he's done (but puts himself on a pedestal), that acknowledges the pain he caused (but never actually expresses remorse). It's a confusing way to issue an apology, especially because he never actually says the words "I'm sorry."

Disgraced CBS news anchor Charlie Rose, on the other hand, did the opposite. He apologized, but never actually admitted to wrongdoing. Instead, his statement begins by talking about how he has been a champion for women, despite the fact that he wouldn't be apologizing for sexual harassment claims from eight of them, if that were indeed true.

Cerulo and Ruane call this a double-sequence apology. The words 'I apologize' rest comfortably between a reminder that he's a good guy and a response to the 'interpretation' of his actions, rather than the actions alone. This kind of public apology "paints the [offender] as both victim and sinner" and "brings ambiguity to the interpretation of the wrongdoing,"

making the audience question the authenticity of the statement altogether. He concludes by claiming that he is just now "developing a profound respect for women," something that contradicts the opening sentence of his statement, where he claims to have been our "greatest advocate" for 45 years.

While these examples are pretty horrible, they're far from the worst pop culture has to offer. Mario Batali used his apology as an opportunity to promote a recipe for pizza dough cinnamon rolls. Hollywood director James Toback called all three hundred of his accusers "lying cocksucker[s] or cunt[s] or both."

Any man who finds himself sleeping on the couch for forgetting an anniversary or flirting with a co-worker would need to make a concerted effort to do worse. Yet, somewhere, some man is about to take on that challenge right now, because his defensive instinct is more finely tuned than his level of empathy.

"For a serious harm, the good apology requires us to put aside our defensiveness and listen with an open heart to what the hurt party needs us to know," says Lerner. She emphasizes that one's ability to issue a heartfelt apology is linked directly with the strength of their self-image—something that tends to be quite fragile for people in the public spotlight.

"The non-apologizer walks on a tightrope of defensiveness above a huge canyon of low self-esteem... People who have a solid sense of self-worth do not find apologizing to be something that 'stings.'"

For celebrities, self-image, reputation and public image compound upon one another to make accepting responsibility for an offense all the more precarious (or even litigious) and bad apologies all the more cringe-worthy.

---

## **"All the 'sorries' are sounding the same. We're all on crisis and apology overload, so nothing resonates right now."**

---

"After a horrific crime has been committed, the apology is the end of the story. In an offense, the apology is often the beginning of healing," says Marian Salzman, CEO of Havas Public Relations in New York City. Salzman has dedicated her career to helping clients through troubled times by ensuring that their "reputations are intact or salvageable."

She senses growing public disenchantment in regards to the series of apologies that have followed the sexual harassment scandals, which, at this point in the coverage, are blending in with one another.

“All the ‘sorries’ are sounding the same. We’re all on crisis and apology overload, so nothing resonates right now.” She agrees with Lerner in the sense that an apology must be, above all things, sincere. “The apology has to have an authenticity to it... public apologies have to be much more genuine.”

Salzman asserts that one of the biggest reasons as to why none of these apologies are being accepted as sincere is because the timing is all wrong, a common mistake made in the natural life cycle of committing grave offenses. When one apology is issued right after another, it limits the audience’s ability to really process what’s being said, and raises the public’s expectation of what constitutes a suitable apology—making forgiveness more and more unattainable.

“I think people forget the value of time for healing...The pressure of getting the timing right is really quite important. You can’t let things go on too long, but nor can you apologize right into the frenzied moment.”

You don’t have to be a celebrity to understand the cause and effect relationship here. An apology made in the face of someone red, furious and emotionally overwhelmed, is an apology that won’t be heard. Accepting responsibility for the consequences of one’s actions also means letting the pain that resulted from those actions play itself out. Unlike a public apology, a private apology doesn’t follow a formulaic sequence.

It won’t be ripped to shreds by think pieces around the world. It is, above all other things, an opportunity to demonstrate genuine remorse and compassion for another human being, which is why—when done well—often brings the offender and the offended closer together.

But it would be a mistake to apologize with that in mind. “The good apology does not ask the hurt party to do anything, not even to forgive,” says Lerner.

But this is something that women have known for a long time. In fact, just as Charlie Rose is now developing his profound respect for the opposite sex, women are just now allowing themselves to hope that men might possibly, maybe, be ready to discuss the multitude of ways in which women make themselves small to accommodate men. But how do we discuss sexual violence, without first discussing the pain it causes? How do we discuss that pain, without first having it acknowledged? And how can men acknowledge that pain without accepting responsibility for having caused it?

As Salzman says, “Love might mean never having to say you’re sorry, but respect means saying sorry and meaning it.”

Respect also means not walking around naked in front of women at the office, not masturbating in front of anyone powerless to say ‘no,’ not putting hands on anyone who doesn’t consent to it, and not interpreting professional courtesy as an invitation to send unsolicited dick pics.

In other words, respect means being a much better man than those other guys. Sorry, not sorry.