

How To Apologize

- 1) **Acknowledge what you did.** Describe it factually without getting into why you did it. Offering any reasons for the mistake, including mental illness, may come across as defensive as you start the conversation. You may want to talk about those towards the end, after the person appreciates the genuineness of your apology.
- 2) **Acknowledge the effect it had on them.** If you're not sure say "I imagine " instead of "I know" about how it affected them – the prevents the risk that they get angry because you presume to know them when you're wrong. It's very important, though, to understand how it affected them. For example, if you step on someone's toes and say "I'm sorry I hurt your toes" that might not help things if their toes feel fine but what really happened was you ruined a \$500 pair of shoes. If you're unsure of how it affected them, try asking them how it affected them – best to do this in person during the apology.
- 3) **Acknowledge what you did was wrong.** You may not want to do this in all circumstances. For example you may be in a situation where the other person could use that against you, or you may deeply feel that you weren't wrong and don't want to misrepresent that. However, it's at least best not to defend your actions or even explain why you did that. You could say you are sorry and had no intention to hurt them, but that clearly you mis-stepped in that because it did hurt them.
- 4) **Offer something to repair the relationship.** You don't always have to give something to make up for it, but could if you want to or say "If there's anything I can do to make up for this let me know." Instead of offering a thing, you could simply offer up your hope in the relationship. For example you could say "I really value your friendship and hope we can continue and rebuild that." You can express that they'll forgive you, but try not to make that a pressured thing so that they can do that when they are ready to.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 1/2015