



An affirmed self and a better apology: The effect of self-affirmation on transgressors' responses to victims[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Tested whether self-affirmation could promote more effective apologies.
- Affirmed transgressors included more apology elements and fewer defensive strategies.
- Affirmed transgressors were thus more likely to respond in ways that boost forgiveness.
- First empirical research to identify a method for promoting more effective apologies.
- Successful application of self-affirmation theory to interpersonal conflict resolution.

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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive apologies are powerful tools that transgressors can use to promote reconciliation with the people they have hurt. However, because many apology elements require transgressors to admit fault, express shameful emotions and promise change, transgressors often avoid these threatening elements and instead choose to use more perfunctory apologies or even defensive strategies, such as justifications or attempts to blame the person they hurt. In two studies, I aimed to increase apology comprehensiveness and reduce defensiveness using self-affirmation. I predicted that self-affirmation would help transgressors maintain their self-integrity, consequently allowing them to offer more comprehensive apologies and bypass defensive strategies. Participants received a values affirmation, recalled an unresolved conflict, and indicated what they would say to the person they had hurt. As predicted, affirmed participants offered more comprehensive apologies and used fewer defensive strategies than control participants. These studies thus identify a simple method for promoting responses that facilitate conflict resolution and demonstrate the successful application of self-affirmation to the domain of interpersonal conflict.

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Introduction

One of the unfortunate certainties of life is that we sometimes hurt people we care about. Luckily, these conflict events do not have to be detrimental to our relationships. Our relationship partners can forgive us for our harmful actions, and this forgiveness can increase their feelings of closeness (McCullough et al., 1998) and their willingness to cooperate and prioritize the needs of the relationship (Karremans & Van Lange, 2004). Moreover, actively discussing and working to resolve relationship problems are associated with positive feelings between partners, as well as both short- and long-term benefits to the relationship

(Overall, Sibley, & Travaglia, 2010). Thus, when managed well, conflicts can be functional and contribute to positive relationship outcomes (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988).

When managed poorly, however, conflicts can be detrimental to relationship satisfaction, causing lasting resentment and even relationship dissolution (Carrere & Gottman, 1999; Cramer, 2000). These negative effects are not limited to romantic partnerships. Ongoing conflicts can harm other types of relationships (e.g., friendships: Raffaelli, 1997; family: Overall et al., 2010) and have consequences that extend beyond relationship outcomes. For example, unresolved conflict with a colleague in the workplace is associated with reduced organizational commitment, increased intentions to quit, and poor task performance (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Morrison, 2008). The ability to successfully manage and resolve interpersonal conflict thus has diverse implications for the discordant relationship, its individual members, and others in the broader social or work network.

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Comprehensive apologies as tools for conflict resolution

In attempting to manage a conflict, the offending person (transgressor) can perform actions that influence whether the offended person (victim) will respond with forgiveness or continued anger and resentment. Research on conflict management suggests that an apology is one of the most powerful tools transgressors can use to promote reconciliation with the victim (Fehr, Gelfand, & Nag, 2010). Apologies increase victim forgiveness, reduce anger and aggression toward the transgressor, and validate the perceptions of the victim (e.g., Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Eaton, 2006; Exline, DeShea, & Holeman, 2007; McCullough et al., 1998; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989).

But all apologies are not created equal. Past research exploring the effects of apology composition has revealed that comprehensive apologies—those that include more basic elements of an apology—are substantially more effective at increasing victim forgiveness and decreasing blame and anger toward the transgressor (Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Kirchhoff, Wagner, & Strack, 2012; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schumann, 2012). Although the exact number of apology elements varies across frameworks proposed by different researchers, nearly all frameworks include expression of remorse, acceptance of responsibility, and offer of repair as important apology elements (Anderson, Linden, & Habra, 2006; Holmes, 1990; Kirchhoff et al., 2012; Lazare, 2004; Scher & Darley, 1997; Schonbach, 1980; Schmitt, Gollwitzer, Forster, & Montada, 2004; Schumann & Ross, 2010). In addition to these three ‘core’ elements, five other elements have been included in apology frameworks with greater variability: explanation, acknowledgement of harm, admission of wrongdoing, forbearance (a promise to behave better), and request for forgiveness (see Table 1 for a description and example of each element).

Each of these eight elements can be meaningful. For example, an offer of repair can help substantiate the apology (Minow, 2002), an explanation can help clarify the transgressor’s intentions (Lazare, 2004), and an acknowledgement of harm can validate the victim’s suffering (Eaton, 2006). By including more of these elements, transgressors can communicate a genuine attempt to take stock of their offense, repair it, and reconcile their relationship with the victim. Indeed, more comprehensive apologies appear to be more successful at promoting reconciliation (at least in part) because they are judged by victims as being more sincere—a judgment that is often needed for forgiveness to occur (Schumann, 2012; Zechmeister, Garcia, Romero, & Vas, 2004). Transgressors thus optimize their chances of being forgiven by the victim and resolving the conflict by offering more comprehensive, sincere apologies for their offenses.

Barriers to offering comprehensive apologies

If comprehensive apologies are so effective at promoting reconciliation with the victim, why don’t transgressors use them in every conflict situation? I propose that transgressors may avoid offering comprehensive apologies because it can be threatening to do so. People are highly motivated to maintain their sense of self-worth and integrity (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), but the act of harming another person can threaten one’s identity as a good and appropriate person (Aronson, 1999; Goffman, 1971; Schlenker & Darby, 1981). Because of this threat, transgressors are likely motivated to avoid associating themselves with wrongful actions. Apology elements require transgressors to admit fault, recognize the harmful nature of their actions, promise change, convey emotions like shame or regret, and even offer a plea for forgiveness—all expressions that might diminish transgressors’ sense of power and further threaten their self-integrity (Okimoto, Wenzel, & Hedrick, 2013; Tannen, 1999, April/May). Transgressors may therefore choose to avoid using these potentially threatening elements, and instead offer more perfunctory apologies or even refuse to apologize altogether. Indeed, Okimoto et al. (2013) found that refusing to apologize boosts transgressors’ feelings of power, integrity, and state self-esteem.

Transgressors may also try to protect themselves from the negative consequences of committing an offense by responding with defensive strategies. These strategies include justifications (attempts to defend one’s behavior), victim blaming (attempts to place some or all of the responsibility for the offense on the victim), excuses (attempts to mitigate responsibility for the offense), minimizations (attempts to downplay the consequences of one’s actions), and denials (attempts to deny one’s involvement in or the presence of an offense; Itoi, Obuchi, & Fukuno, 1996; Schonbach, 1980; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Transgressors might use these defensive strategies on their own or might include them in a response that also includes apology elements (e.g., “I’m sorry [remorse] for being mean [responsibility] mom. It’s just been a long day [excuse] and you made me drive all the way from San Jose to Concord just to sleep here for a couple hours and wake up at 5 in the morning [victim blame]”). These defensive strategies can be temporarily beneficial to the transgressor by helping restore his or her self-worth, but may do so at the cost of aggravating the victim and hindering reconciliation (McLaughlin, Cody, & O’Hair, 1983; Mead, 2008). Indeed, defensiveness—refusing to take responsibility for one’s actions and instead pointing the finger of blame outward—is considered one of the most destructive behavior patterns in relationships (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Gottman & Silver, 1999).

Although defensive strategies may provide transgressors with short-term relief from self-integrity threat, comprehensive apologies yield

Table 1
Description of apology elements and defensive strategies.

| Element | Description | Example |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| <i>Apology elements</i> | | |
| Remorse | Expressing a statement of apology Expressing regret or sadness about one’s actions | “I’m sorry”; “I apologize” “I feel terrible”; “I regret it” |
| Acceptance of responsibility | Stating that one accepts responsibility for offense Stating the offense using responsibility-accepting language | “I take full responsibility for my words” “I’m truly sorry for <i>breaking my promise</i> ” |
| Repair | Offering to compensate for or fix the problem caused by one’s actions Attempting to repair the damage by making the victim feel better/loved | “I will make sure that I remember to call this week” “I love you and I am eternally grateful for all you’ve done” |
| Explanation | Trying to explain one’s actions without applying an external attribution | “I was afraid of commitment” |
| Forbearance | Promising to behave better in the future | “I’m taking steps to make sure it never happens again” |
| Acknowledgement of harm | Stating how the victim has suffered or been inconvenienced by one’s actions | “I know it upset you and hurt your feelings” |
| Admission of wrongdoing | Stating that one’s actions were wrong or unfair Stating that one should not have acted in the way that one did | “It was wrong for me to say the things I said” “I <i>shouldn’t</i> have spoken poorly of you” |
| Request for forgiveness | Asking the victim for forgiveness | “Please forgive me” |
| <i>Defensive strategies</i> | | |
| Justification | Attempting to defend one’s behavior | “I’m sorry that I kicked you out, <i>but I did it for the right reasons</i> ” |
| Victim blaming | Attempting to place some or all of the responsibility for the offense on the victim | “If you gave me more freedom, I wouldn’t feel the need to be dishonest” |
| Excuse | Attempting to mitigate responsibility for the offense | “I was very busy and in a hurry” |
| Minimization | Attempting to downplay the consequences of one’s actions | “I’m sorry if I upset you”; “it’s in the <i>past</i> ”; “it was <i>just a joke</i> ” |

Note. Italicized words indicate the location of the element in the example.

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