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Good morning and happy Sunday. I hope that you're having a lovely weekend. Today by request, I'm going to be exploring effective apologies. How are we framing an apology? What language, what consideration goes into an effective apology? And what even is forgiveness? What does that look like, if forgiveness is even possible?

As always, everything's coming from my own point of view and perspective, there will be things that I miss, and there will be things that maybe are not applicable to your situation. But consider what resonates. And it's fine if some of it doesn't.

I think it's inherent to being in a close relationship with someone, we are going to hurt each other. No matter how hard we might try to be thoughtful and considerate. Yes, that will minimize conflict and pain to the best of our ability. But we are going to do something that steps on the toes of another person. What do we do if we are in a position where we need to atone?

Let's start with the words themselves, right? If I know, I need to say I'm sorry, it's important that I say the words I'm sorry. and that is usually how I lead because when emotions run high, and a lot of times, apology conversations feel very high stakes, we tend to remember how that conversation started. So if nothing else, if things start to get murky, or we get lost in a tangent, and we start to feel like unstructured and kind of lost in what we were originally doing - I do want both of us to remember the premise of this conversation started with an "I'm sorry".

Accompanied with the "I'm sorry" is a clear acknowledgement of what I'm sorry for. In saying the words, I also want to make it clear that I understand what I did. Because if I'm not clear on that, then what's to stop it from happening again? if I'm not clear on where I misstepped, or what I want to work on and avoid doing, then that "I'm sorry" could ring a little hollow. Because if you don't know why you're apologizing, if you're just saying it so I stop crying like, then what's to offer me security that you aren't going to repeat this incident?

I have had to say before, when I thought that a partner was just unreasonable – was like asking for me to text them every day. And I was being a little passive and just not doing it or saying, "Oh, I want to, I want to" and I was trying to avoid conflict. My role in that was, I was not setting a boundary for myself, I was just agreeing to one thing and then subverting it. That was a helpful lesson to me, because I do want to be available. I do want to meet my partner's needs. And if a need is being requested that feels like I can't do that, my apology does still need to happen. Have I agreed to

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that and then I didn't do it? Right, that still requires an apology. And a separate conversation of how that isn't something I can agree to. Maybe an additional apology, that I'm sorry I agreed to it. Right? I'm sorry that, in an effort to avoid discomfort, I didn't push back. Or in a habit of trying to fawn, and just make sure that you're not upset with me anymore. That was a very old response that I have from childhood. And that is very common. So I can also own that. and say, in a separate conversation, I'm sorry for agreeing to something I can't uphold. So the first I'm sorry, was that I broke an agreement. And the second was, I'm sorry that I agreed to something I can't do. We need to acknowledge if there is something that needs to change in order for my broken agreement to not happen again.

I think part of an apology is not just agreeing that we did something wrong. It's also not centering ourselves, right? As a person receiving an apology, I have been with a person who - one partner used to do this all the damn time - whenever they were hurting me and I voiced it as such, they started spiraling about how bad of a person they are, and how bad of a partner they are. And that incentivizes me to, what? take care of them? because I told them that I was feeling hurt? No.

Being ready to give a sincere apology is to continue to center the harmed person in the conversation. And to make it an environment where a harmed person can tell you. and that's easier said than done. but I do try to keep that at the forefront of my mind. And sure, maybe like in a, in a big reactive moment, I might fall into old patterns. But if the majority of the time I'm focused on "okay, but this is about you... I hate that I did that. Oh, no, I did that. Oh, my God, I can't believe I'm... okay, wait, oh, wait, calm down. This is about you."

Remorse and regret fuels our desire to repair, our desire to not do it again, right? we need to feel that pain, and remember what that pain feels like, as part of not repeating this cycle. It's just a matter of not taking it to that person, especially in that moment, our big reaction. We can have a big reaction and process all of our negative self talk or negative spiral elsewhere. it's not saying you're bad if you start to feel like spiraling, but to take that to a support person, or a therapist, to process that away from the person who's asking for repair.

There's also a time and a place to discuss what we were trying to do. Like if I was trying to tell my partner, and be transparent about how my date went. But I wound up being a bit too descriptive, and now they're feeling insecure, or now they're frustrated because it feels like too much information was shared, right? "but I was trying to be transparent like you asked me to be" - that is a tricky position to be in. if we know that we didn't mean to cause harm, and we know that even in fact, we might have been trying to do something good. And get a complete opposite

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reaction. that can be destabilizing. But when a person is expressing harm caused, that doesn't feel like the time or place to focus on intention, yet.

It can be true that what I was trying to do was something completely different. But the reality is, this is what happened. And I need to be clear on how I failed so hard on trying to do the good thing, that I actually caused harm. How did I faceplant so bad? I need to hear, I need to listen, I need to know what pain points, what sensitivities, what would you need me to do differently in the future? to avoid this from repeating. That person can inform me of boundaries and context of what their needs are. I'm basically just listening and validating and creating a space for them to have a reaction.

At some point, when things feel calm and when an apology feels like it's already been delivered, we've processed it together. And I've completely centered them the whole time. If it feels like the move to mention, "I really was trying to do something good, I really don't want to hurt you". I do think that matters. Malicious causing of harm, purposeful causing of harm, carries a weight to it and is a reveal of character. That is different, in my opinion, than ignorance. Yes, it still caused harm. And also, if it's an ignorant harm, but with an eagerness to not cause harm, that person is teachable.

As well, what plan of action? What we do next, and moving forward in the future, that matters. That's arguably bigger of a deal than saying the words, or when or how, or if we're believed. What we do moving forward can be an apology in action. And sometimes I'll repeat that phrase of like, "I'm only accepting apologies in the form of changed behavior". I like that phrase. I think that is succinctly emphasizing the import of behaving differently as the ultimate signifier, of if an apology is sincere.

I had a partner who cheated on me a few times and was really good at verbal apologies. was really persuasive and charismatic and empathetic. absolutely made me believe that he was very pained that he caused pain to me, and he let me vent and let me cry and he held me. all of that led me to believe that he took it seriously enough to change behavior moving forward. But then he did it again. And then he did it again. I gave this person so many opportunities to behave differently and so many benefits of the doubt. Because there's a degree of pain in internalizing that this person won't or can't treat me with respect. this person won't or can't honor my agreements, my pain that he very obviously witnessed. that he acknowledged and validated. It was not a factor in his future actions. He did it again. So words? I am done with words, don't say anything, I'm refusing your real-time apology, you can fuck off. I became very done.

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And then he was confused like, "oh, I need to apologize with actions" because we talked about that. He confused that with a big, grand romantic gesture. And, I may have shared this story before recently, but he arranged with my father to meet me at the airport with balloons and chocolates and stuff. in front of my family, so I can't really get into the whole conflict about cheating. it was very strategically done, whether he was conscious of it or not, to silence me. and to feign changed behavior. because "well I said the words and here look, I'm apologizing with gifts, and I went out of my way, I canceled my plans, I came out to the airport to greet you." it was a long distance relationship at the time.

But that's not an apology, that's not a fucking apology. An apology is - you stopped doing it. an apology is - you not only stopped doing it, you actively worked to rebuild trust. I'll get into that in a minute. But I encourage anyone who might be vulnerable to either receiving big grand gestures, or have the impulse to do them. While it's not bad to show care in this way or receive care through gifts or things like that. While it's not bad, it's not always relevant. An apology in actions is - how do I make it right? Not how do I sell flagellate, or how do I inconvenience myself or give you things. that is not the same as acknowledging "I broke a thing. How am I going to help repair that thing?" Those are different.

I have very strong feelings about that. It was just like a couple of years, of me needing to, I guess learn that lesson over and over. until I was finally willing to go through the grief process of letting that person go, and blocking that person. So, that's part of it. When we receive apologies, often it's from a person that we want to believe. And if that's the case, let's definitely still stay tuned to their patterns of behavior following the words. and I think even different behavior can be maintained for like, a few weeks or a few months even. But if they are actually internalizing that they need to be different, that will be a long term maintenance. they won't just perform different behavior, until it seems like you trust them again, and then go back into doing whatever they want. You know what I mean?

So how does repair happen in action? This is a question that I get a lot. And it's something that I even contemplate with my own partners, when we accidentally hurt each other. Pinpointing the nature of the harm caused is so important. And hopefully, in the verbal apology process, we've already identified what caused the harm. But it's not just "these specific sequences of actions." what's the theme? If the theme was that I didn't consider you? If the theme was, I demonstrated the ability to lie to you? what is the essence of the rupture?

What do we do, how do we demonstrate that we're doing something different? especially if it's a kind of situation that won't be repeated anytime soon. I don't want

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to wait around, if I'm in either position of apologizing or being apologized to. I don't want to just brace myself and wait around for the highest stakes reiteration of that broken trust to reoccur. I don't want to say "well, the only way that I will trust you again, is if this happened again, and you said no or you did it differently". Yes, that is the biggest way that I would expect to be apologized to, is for it not to play out in the exact same way. And, it can feel powerless to have the ability to trust again, or be trusted, contingent on factors outside of our control. For that reason, what I usually do is - after I've pinpointed the main theme of what the rupture was, then what are some lower stakes ways that I can daily or weekly demonstrate the opposite behavior?

I won't go into descriptors. But I did have a partner that somewhat recently set off some sexual trauma, during sex for me. And again, I knew that wasn't the intention. And it still happened. So that needed to be clarified. I went through the wave of having my reaction, and I needed to pull away and be distant for a bit. my mind knows, "you don't want to hurt me." But now my body has experienced being hurt being triggered in that way. And so it'll take me a bit to totally relax again.

So what to do? when partners that care about each other, both people understand both sides of it, both people want to repair and everybody has good intent. Okay, what do we do? What happened reminded me of a time that I didn't feel like I had agency over my body, that I didn't feel like I had the ability to consent. or that consent was not respected. If that was the main theme of the accident, Okay, so we're not going to jump right back into the highest stakes version of how I can demonstrate that to be different, right? I don't know that I could relax enough to risk that, which is fair. And it's also fair for my partner to want the opportunity to show that it was an anomaly and not a pattern. or not a reveal of character. that it was an accident, which I do believe. And so it's true that there can be even tension about the desire to demonstrate change, or demonstrate repair. There can be tension about what that even looks like, because the person who caused harm might be eager to revisit that situation again, to prove that they're different. And the person who's been harmed might say, I need a minute, I'm not ready to revisit that.

What are some lower stakes ways to demonstrate that my consent matters? and that what happens to my body, I get the say in that. And long story short, we went through a few weeks of every physical touch - a hug, pat on the arm - a request for consent. Is it cool if I do this? And I would actually try to consider. I would pause kind of each time "do I want that?" I don't want to just go through the motions of, "okay, you're doing the thing. So therefore, I need to forgive you. I need to say yes, or I need to demonstrate trust in order to rebuild trust." It's like, No, I don't want to hug right now.

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Even if it feels like there's still a lack of repairing happening, the nature of the action taken, the proactivity over and over each day, helped. Little by little, and with some weeks of that being consistently a priority, and consistently happening. Relaxation naturally started to settle back in because my body was experiencing being safe. My body was experiencing that moment of "do I get to say, or is this just going to happen?" And each time it is reinforced, that nothing has to happen to me that I am not explicitly consenting to.

So, it's a very personal example. And I'm not saying that this is how it should play out for everybody. I think who it is, matters. The nature of the relationship, the track record up until that point, the fact that for years that had never happened, mattered. The fact it was weird that it happened, that it was a surprise, mattered. That all played into whether or not I was gonna try to repair this. If there had been a number of instances that implied my consent wasn't so much of a priority all the time, then maybe I reconsider if I even want to do that work of trying to rebuild trust. Context is very important. Who it is, and how sincere they are, or are they just performing goodness, and then slipping back into old patterns? All of that matters.

I'm really grateful for the partners that I do keep in my life long term. That when we accidentally cause a rupture, we are still teammates, even if there's distance, even if there's hesitation, even if there's still hurt feelings. We're still collaborating on what might make the hurt person feel cared for, or that history won't repeat itself. And the person who did the hurting, deals with any negative self talk elsewhere. I'm really grateful for the ability to remain teammates, in those instances, and can say that's how I've successfully repaired trust in high stakes situations with people I care about.

So with forgiveness, what does that word mean? If I say I forgive you, does that mean you're off the hook? Does that mean I can never again remember this time and be upset about it? Does that mean if I am reminded of this and feel grumpy about it again, at some point years down the road, Does that mean now you will be angry at me because I already forgave you? Feelings are messier than that. Conflict and relationships are messier than that. We can trust again, and still have a wound there. A scar there. That if this were to ever be repeated, it will reopen that wound. And absolutely, it would raise the volume on my reaction to that, because this will always have happened. And it will always have hurt.

So no, we don't want to weaponize the past, we don't want to ignore changed behavior. We don't want to invalidate that the person who apologized actually has done a lot of work. And maybe, depending on how long it's been, maybe even is a different person. We do want to factor that in. But it can feel hard to do if we're

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zapped back to that moment, and it feels fresh, and it feels new again. So what is forgiving, if that remains a possibility?

I see forgiveness as a willingness to trust again, a willingness to even be vulnerable to a similar situation. that I view you as ultimately capable of being trustworthy. I view you as someone I can be safe with. And even though it hurts, I'm willing to take a leap of faith that it won't hurt again. I carry with it an expectation that I'm allowed to still be hurt about that, I'm allowed to have that be a sore spot. I'm allowed to not really want to talk about it. or if another person is involved, I'm allowed to still have sore feelings about that person. Whatever is true, is true. If they are genuinely demonstrating work in the opposite direction, we want to acknowledge that too.

So forgiveness being a willingness to try again, and ultimately forgiveness being acceptance. I see it that way as well. Of, "I accept that you are a fallible person who caused harm. I accept that you are a three dimensional person capable of change and capable or not causing future harm." So yes, this might always be a point of contention for the next 30 years, right? It's not that forgiveness erases or hits reset. But I'm willing to accept that you can be a trustworthy person capable of hurting me sometimes. That is a risk I'm willing to take. And I'm not going to characterize you as "all harm." And I'm also not going to expect from you "no harm ever again." it's just important that this lesson is learned, that this lesson is taken seriously. That there is an active, eager and consistent action to prove that this matters to the person who caused harm, you know what I mean?

So, anyway, maybe that will be helpful. I welcome your input if there's an angle to this that I missed. And I hope that you have a lovely week, and I'll see you soon. Bye bye.