The purpose of this editorial is to say that although apologizing has been around for a very long time, we, as nurses, still struggle with it at times. We can encourage each other to apologize when it is appropriate, as emotional support is very necessary to the process.

Common sense dictates that an apology at the right time for the right reason eases tensions and restores harmony in relationships, whether at home or work. Experience and research validate this obvious point. Although we may find ourselves automatically saying, “I’m sorry” or “Excuse me” many times throughout the day, a complete, heartfelt apology may be more difficult and not as forthcoming.

Researchers and clinicians studying the form of apology indicate that apologies are considered a sign of strength (Barkat, 2002; Steiner, 2000), and they advise us to keep it short, simple, and serious in tone.

HOW TO APOLOGIZE
The steps to take in making a sincere apology include:

- Regret your actions and communicate sincerity about your part in the situation.
- Take responsibility for your actions. (This is a good time to look more deeply into your motivation for your actions and be completely honest with yourself.)
- Indicate your future actions, such as how you will not let the situation happen again, or your inability to keep it from happening again (no one is perfect, nor can one person control everyone and everything).
- Indicate your willingness or current efforts to remedy the situation (e.g., compensation, compensation, compensation...)

Although we may find ourselves automatically saying, “I’m sorry” or “Excuse me” many times throughout the day, a complete, heartfelt apology may be more difficult and not as forthcoming.
making it up to the person or people involved).

**A PERSONAL EXAMPLE**

These steps may seem easier said than done. My favorite example of a person following these principles comes from a work situation I experienced several years ago.

A consultant with whom I was working became extremely frustrated with a situation involving a member of my team. In an effort to vent her frustration, the consultant typed an e-mail indicating her opinion about the team member, using several strong obscenities. She failed to note the reply e-mail address and sent the strongly worded message to the team member. There followed a flurry of telephone calls between the team member and me. The team member thought I had known about the e-mail message from the consultant, but I had not; it had gone to her alone. I agreed with her that the message was unprofessional, but I also reminded her that the e-mail was not meant for her but for me, and that we all need to “blow off steam” and then move on to more productive actions. I assured her of the consultant’s integrity, that she would do the right thing.

There were follow-up telephone calls between the consultant and me, during which she revealed that she was completely demoralized by her mistake. The consultant apologized to the team member by e-mail, and the team member seemed to accept the apology, saying that nothing else needed to be done. However, the consultant surmised that the team member was holding back on true forgiveness.

The consultant decided to visit the team member in person, which meant leaving her home at 4:00 a.m. and driving for 5 hours. In a face-to-face discussion with the team member over lunch, the consultant acknowledged her “stupidity” in sending the e-mail, then gave a detailed account of why the situation was so frustrating. This provided an opportunity for the team member to give a full account of her perception of the situation.

Both individuals gained a great deal of information and understanding as a result of the consultant’s courage in directly addressing the situation. By the consultant’s acting quickly, expressing sincerity by driving a great distance, taking the team member to lunch, and listening to and understanding the team member’s needs, she demonstrated respect and teamwork was restored.

**SUMMARY**

It is hardly possible to go through a day without “stepping on someone’s toes.” By practicing the steps described in this article, you can strengthen your ability to engage in an apology process that is powerful and healing. Being truthful and courageous about your own part of a situation opens the door for others around you to do likewise. People will experience you as a person who has integrity. Receiving an apology from another person allows you to complete the process by forgiving.

**REFERENCES**


Sarah E. Porter, RN, PhD, CS, PMHNP
Visiting Professor
St. Luke’s College of Nursing
Tokyo, Japan

JOURNAL OF PSYCHOSOCIAL NURSING, VOL. 43, NO. 5