



## Six Steps to Creating a Heartfelt Apology

The “Apology” is simply that...an apology. We are not asking for forgiveness at this stage, and in fact we discourage it. Often, the betrayed partner will say the infidel has not apologized as yet for what they have done. So a formal apology is required.

In order to make the next step in healing your relationship, the cheater must apologize to the injured partner. This apology is much more than a simple, “I’m sorry for what I’ve done,” although that sentiment is certainly part of it.

This apology needs to be an unequivocal statement that communicates to the injured partner **a real understanding of the pain the cheater has caused and a legitimate and heartfelt promise never to engage in the same behavior again.**

The apology might also include, as an optional bonus, an explanation of what or how things have changed and are changing in the cheater’s personal world, perceptions, understandings, and experiences that contribute to the cheater’s re-commitment to faithfulness.

In this apology, the cheater should explain that they understand they are solely responsible for the affair, and explain in detail, setting the scene into context, how they have caused their partner pain. They should apologize for the pain they have caused and assure the partner that they intend to do everything in their power, giving details whenever possible, to make this relationship strong and stable again.

Above all, this apology must be genuine. If you try and apologize in order to move the healing process forward more quickly, your partner will sense this and



you will simply do further damage to the relationship. This means that you need to wait to apologize until you really feel the apology in your heart. You will know when it is time.

If you have already apologized for your actions, you need to do it again. And again; and again; until your partner can hear it. Even when you do it “perfectly,” it almost always takes a few repetitions because the injured person wants to hear the authenticity again or wants to make sure of some specific point you might have made earlier. This doesn’t mean you should rain down apologies every time you see them. It means you should take every available opportunity to let your partner know how badly you feel for what you did.

In my experience, the injured person is most likely to hear the apology when the cheater begins by describing the context and process of pain and suffering that the cheater perpetrated against the injured person. We’ll go over this in more detail shortly.

Even if your partner can never completely forgive you for what you did, making a heart-felt apology and asking for forgiveness is an important step in helping both of you accept what you have done and move forward with the relationship. It shows them, in a tangible way, that you are taking responsibility for your actions and that you understand what you have done. We will look at what acceptance means in more detail in Step 6. For now, suffice it to say that it is time you tell your partner how sorry you are for what you’ve done.

To assist you in this process, I developed a 6-step program for generating a meaningful apology. **Remember that this model is built to help you express what you already feel in your heart. It is not meant as a template to help you get away from dealing with the pain you have caused.**

**As an example of how this system works, we will follow the process as Susan and Bilal experienced it.**



## Heartfelt Apology Step 1

The first step in making an apology is for the cheater to understand as fully and completely as possible all the pain they inflicted on their partner. This means coming to terms with the pain they caused them both directly and indirectly, as well as the pain they caused by what they did and the pain they caused by what they failed to do.

One way that the cheater can clarify this is by following the “Living in Another’s Shoes” visualization, applying it to the moment when they first told their partner about the affair. Imagine how your partner must have felt in that moment. It’s time to feel how they felt, see what they saw, hear what they heard, and accept that you caused them this pain.

You won’t be able to make a meaningful and heartfelt apology until you are able to completely understand the pain you caused your partner. This step is going to hurt. You will have to face things that you might have been trying to keep at bay for a long time.

Nonetheless, it is necessary if you really want to heal your relationship.

Let’s listen to how Susan approached Step 1.



*"I had told Bilal I was sorry so many times without really thinking about what I was saying. I told him I was sorry right after I told him about the affair, and I told him I was sorry every time it was even mentioned.*

*"These apologies were meaningless until I was able to truly see the situation from Bilal's perspective. For a long time, I thought I did understand his perspective, but I didn't. I was only thinking about how I would feel if the situation was reversed. It wasn't until I really got inside his eyes that I could see what it must be like for him.*

*"When I did the visualization exercise the first time, I thought about an argument Bilal and I had about my being home late one night. At one point during the argument he said, 'How can I trust what you are telling me after what has happened?' I got really angry at him for that. I thought he was being unfair because I was trying so hard to do everything right.*

*"The visualization allowed me to see that the question wasn't some kind of indirect accusation. He wasn't just trying to hurt me by saying it. He really wondered how he could trust me after what I had done. I would have felt the same way had the tables been turned.*

*"Seeing this allowed me to start seeing other things from Bilal's perspective. I realized that all the times I said, 'I'm sorry,' must have sounded so hollow. Saying that was too little too late.*

*"Over time I tried to understand more and more how Bilal felt using the visualization exercise. This process was anything but easy. When the visualizations were really successful it was like I could actually feel his pain. But I also had to deal with the fact that it was me that caused him this pain. At times that was almost too much to bear.*

*"But the reward in this was that it allowed me to understand what a real apology to Bilal would look like. I could finally get away from my vacuous apologies and tell him something that was really meaningful."*

*– Susan Miller*



## Heartfelt Apology Step 2

Once the cheater has a complete understanding of all the pain they have caused the injured person, they need to express that understanding fully and completely to their partner in a way that shows that they accept full responsibility for having caused so much pain.

This expression should be made without giving any reasons or justifications for the behavior. This means no excuses, no defensive statements, and taking the full “hit” for causing the pain you are describing.

What you say exactly will depend on your particular situation. Each relationship is different, and there will be different things to apologize for contingent on what has gone on in the course of your relationship. In addition, people simply express things differently.

Whatever you decide to say, it is important that you completely open yourself up to the feelings that you now know your partner has experienced and take full responsibility for your actions. At this stage in the game, there is no holding back. It’s time to put your heart on the line and let your partner know that you are sorry if you want to repair what is broken in your relationship.

Compare these two examples of the cheater expressing an understanding of the injured person’s pain and suffering:

**Example one:** “I understand that you were hurting a lot – you were hurt and angry that I had the affair.”

**Example two:** (setting the context) “You said you felt we had been distant for some time. You were willing to endure the distance between us because you



knew that we had an enduring love and commitment to each other. It was your faith in my commitment that gave you the strength to take on more responsibility when I was working the long hours.” (setting the betrayal into the context) “Then, you found out that some of my long hours were spent with someone else while you were home taking on the additional responsibilities to help me be there with that someone else. On top of that, you found out that your motivating force for continuing our already strained relationship, my commitment to you, was a sham. This made you feel doubly betrayed, as if your guts had been torn out.”

(Note that the final description of the feeling included a good guess by the cheater that the partner felt “doubly betrayed” and a description of “guts having been torn out.” This is due to the fact that the whole conversation is not included here.

The injured person in this example had already described the pain to the cheater using that term.

You don’t even have to ask which of these is more compassionate and understanding of the experience the injured person went through. Adding the context and putting the pain into the context makes a world of difference in helping the injured person know and feel that the cheater really understands what they went through.

**Here’s how Step 2 worked for Susan.**



*“Once I felt like I had a fairly complete understanding of how Bilal must have been feeling, I decided it was time I tell him how sorry I was for all the pain I caused him.*

*“One evening when we were sitting around in the living room, I asked him if I might have a few words about our relationship. He knew that meant that I wanted to discuss the affair and what was going on with us at this point. He agreed, and I started my apology.*

*“‘Bilal, I have spent a fair amount of time trying to understand how you might feel about what I did. I know that I can never completely understand it, but I have been trying hard to imagine where you are coming from so that I can properly apologize to you. We have known each other for a lifetime. We have been through some difficult times, and though it hasn't always been easy, you always stuck by me. You put your heart into this relationship, and I took advantage of the fact that you trusted me completely. It is clear to me that when I cheated on you, I must have not only broken your heart, but fundamentally changed your perception of me, our relationship, and our whole history together. I am so sorry that I caused you all this pain and anguish; I take full responsibility for my actions. It was my fault, and I have no excuses.’”*

*–Susan Miller*



## Heartfelt Apology Step 3

You will know it is time to move on to Step 3 when the injured partner agrees that the cheater understands or, at least, can express some understanding of what the injured partner went through and continues to go through in terms of the pain and suffering they are experiencing.

A repetition of an earlier caution: The cheater often wants to move quickly to the third step because they don't want to hear or acknowledge the extent of the pain and suffering they have caused. In this case, the cheater might try to pressure the injured partner to accept their understanding without further detail or explanation.

If you try and rush the injured partner in this way, you are undermining this entire process. At this point, you need to let your partner take as much time as they need to accept that you truly understand what you did. This might mean that you, the cheater, need to offer additional explanation to assure them that you are clear on what you have done.

A word to the injured person who is reading this: you should willingly help your partner understand the hurt you have been through and continue to experience. You don't have to force it on them, but if they are struggling with understanding you, or they don't understand the full impact, assist them in a helpful and cooperative way.

It is better to go through this too many times than not enough. You need to help the injured person feel that their pain is understood and validated.

Once the injured is able to accept the idea that the cheater has a legitimate understanding of what they have done, the third step is for the cheater to make a separate statement of accepting responsibility for having committed these wrong actions and inactions. At this point, they need to specify exactly what it was they



did (or did not do) that was so wrong.

A reminder here from Step 2: when you are accepting responsibility for your bad behavior, this should be done without giving any reasons or justifications for the behavior.

That means no excuses, no defensive statements, and taking the full “hit” for the behaviors leading to and starting the affair. After all, you always had a choice at each step along the way.

**Again, let’s look at Susan’s experience with this step.**



*“Even after I told Bilal that I understood his pain and was ready to accept responsibility for the fact that I had caused him this pain, he wasn't completely convinced.*

*“He actually asked me a number of questions about what I meant when I was trying to apologize to him. He asked me what I had been doing to try and understand his pain, why I was doing it, and what I meant when I suggested his perception of our relationship must be fundamentally altered.*

*“I wanted so badly for him to accept that I understood what he was going through, but I knew that might take some time. I also knew he deserved an explanation to the questions he asked. I realized that the best course of action was simply to answer his questions as honestly as I could.*

*“I told him that I had been doing visualization exercises to try and get in touch with what he was feeling. I told him that I was doing this in order to make a meaningful apology to him – one that he might be able to accept someday.*

*“I explained that in the course of my visualizations I imagined that when I told him I had an affair it must have made him not only completely lose all faith in me, but perhaps even in himself or the world at large. I knew that if I trusted someone completely and they betrayed me, I would feel like I might be cursed or losing my mind or something. I imagined he might be feeling this way too.*

*“It took him a little while and a few more conversations to come to a point where he was ready to accept the idea that I had some understanding of what he might be going through. When this did happen, I knew it was time for me to take the next step in the apology process.*

*“I told him that I took full responsibility for having the affair, for trampling on his feeling of security and trust in me, and for not communicating my needs to him in a meaningful way so that we might have worked on our relationship.*

*“I accepted responsibility for and apologized for all the lies, all the deceit, and all the indiscretions. I also said that I knew there were other things for which he deserved an apology.”*

*– Susan Miller*



## Heartfelt Apology Step 4

When the injured partner is able to accept that the cheater has an understanding of the pain they have caused, and the cheater tells the injured partner that they accept responsibility for everything they did that led to the affair, it is time to move on to Step 4.

At this point, it is time for the cheater to realize that they don't want to be the kind of person who would lie, cheat, or have an affair. They have to find that part of themselves that doesn't want to be the kind of person who could or would inflict such pain on another human being, especially their partner.

Again, you cannot rush this part of the process. Do not simply decide one day that you have made this change. You need to really search inside yourself and prove to yourself that you have made a substantial and significant character change.

Look at it this way. Imagine a good friend came to you and told you they had an affair. At what point would you know that they had made sufficient internal changes to truly feel sorry for what they did and want to change so that they never made the same mistake again. How would you judge their sincerity?

Now apply that information to your own situation. Are you truly able to look inside yourself and see that you are a changed person and that you don't want to be the kind of person you once were?

When that realization comes, you must describe the changes you have experienced to your partner. You should try and make them understand that you have undergone a fundamental shift in character and that you never want to be the kind of person that would cause them pain again.



*"When I first told Bilal about the affair, I immediately felt sorry for what I had done. There was no question about that. The pain on his face, my own negative emotions, and the tension in our relationship was so great that I just wanted to keep saying, "I'm sorry," until he could hear it.*

*"But that was different than the apology I was trying to make when I used the structured apology Dr. Ellis gave me. In a lot of ways, my first attempts at apologizing were really about my own need to escape from pain. I thought that if Bilal would just accept my apology I would be off the hook.*

*"But this was about something else entirely. This was about checking in with myself and making fundamental changes about the way that I think, feel, and behave in order to make sure that I would never hurt Bilal that way again. This was a much deeper, more intense process.*

*"So I searched inside myself. I tried to find that part of me that didn't want to be the type of person who would lie to and cheat on my partner.*

*"The truth is that I had known Bilal so long that I somehow stopped taking the fidelity component of our relationship all that seriously. It was as though it never occurred to me that this wonderful thing we had together could ever go away. I had known Bilal all my life. How could that ever change?*

*"Of course, that meant I had started taking him for granted, and that is never a good thing to do in a relationship.*

*"The truth was that I cared deeply for Bilal and I didn't want to hurt him. But there was more to it than that. In my heart, I just didn't want to be the type of person who would hurt someone the way I hurt Bilal. I didn't want to be a liar. I didn't want to be disloyal.*

*"This struck home for me one day at work. A colleague of mine came into my office and told me that she had been applying for a position with a competing company. She was pretty sure she was going to get it. In the meantime, she had just accepted a major promotion at the company we worked for. She dedicated herself to managing one of our marketing teams, while she was looking for a job somewhere else.*

*"I thought she was so disloyal. I was disgusted. Then I compared her situation to my own. I had, after all, been purporting that I was a loyal partner to Bilal, but I had an affair. What was the difference?*

*"It was at that point that I realized I really didn't want to be that kind of person, and I told Bilal about this experience.*

*"I think it affected him somewhat. Although, I'm not sure that he completely appreciated the analogy. Nonetheless, he was receptive. He had known me for a long time, and I think he knew I was telling the truth this time."*

*– Susan Miller*



## Heartfelt Apology Step 5

If the cheater is able to successfully negotiate the earlier steps of this apology, it is time for them to make an unequivocal statement about their commitment to the relationship and to their partner.

It is important that the injured person hear this information. If they do not, they might never completely trust that the cheater really desires a deep, long-lasting commitment.

Again, there are as many forms this statement can take as there are people on earth.

To help you along, you're going to read Susan's story below, and I'd like to give you the following tips that you might consider when making this kind of statement:

- Consider wedding vows as an example of what you might say in this circumstance. If you're married, it might be meaningful to reiterate some of what you already said in your original vows. If you aren't married, wedding vows might be a good resource of possible ways to make a clear statement about your commitment.
- Think about a couple you admire, and consider what they might say to one another in this context.
- Imagine your best friend was about to marry someone they had loved for a long time. Imagine what they might say in this situation.
- Think about what your partner would most like to hear from you regarding your commitment to your relationship.
- Imagine what you might like to hear from your partner. Use this as a model for what you could say to them.

**Now for Susan's statement of commitment.**



*"Once I realized that I didn't want to be the kind of woman that would cheat on her partner and I told Bilal this, I realized it was time for me to tell him that I was completely committed to our relationship.*

*"We sat down together one evening, and I told him that I wanted to be with him forever if he would have me, that I was completely committed to him and to our relationship, and that I would do whatever was necessary to heal the pain I caused.*

*"He was still a little doubtful; after all, I had lied to him not that long ago.*

*"Nevertheless, it was a powerful moment for us. Up until that point, I'm not sure he was willing to accept the idea that I truly wanted to be with him and that I really was sorry for the tragic mistake I made. It made me feel good to let him know how I really felt about him and our relationship."*

*–Susan Miller*



## Heartfelt Apology Step 6

In this step, the cheater needs to make a statement that they will never violate the promise for fidelity that they made in the previous step.

Essentially, this step is a finalization and culmination of the other steps in this process.

You must tell your partner that you won't ever get involved in a situation that could lead even to the earliest stages of an affair. You have to commit to sticking with this promise. This shouldn't be too difficult if you have been able to make the character changes described earlier in the process.

It is important that you make this final statement in order to confirm for your partner and for yourself that everything you have been saying up to this point is true and heartfelt.

Here is how my client Susan made her promise to stick by what she said.



*"I didn't want Bilal to have any illusion that I wasn't serious about what I had been saying over the course of this apology. I was completely serious, and I wanted to make sure he knew it.*

*"So I told Bilal that I was completely committed to sticking to the promise of fidelity I made. I told him that I would never cheat on him again and that I meant everything I had been saying up to this point.*

*"I also assured him that in order to achieve this I would change any behaviors that I might be engaging in that could lead to even very early stages of an affair. I wanted him to be assured that I wouldn't do anything that would further endanger our relationship.*

*"It wasn't as though Bilal suddenly forgave me and scooped me up in his arms. It doesn't happen that way. But I could feel his heart soften a little, and I knew that he accepted what I told him. He believed me as much as he could for now, and that was all I needed."*

*– Susan Miller*