



Thursday, November 16, 2017

The promise and importance of apology: The need for apologies to be heard and not dismissed.

Alissa Ackerman, PhD, David Prescott, LICSW, & Kieran
McCartan, PhD

Will an authentic apology ever be enough? This is a question we asked ourselves this week in the wake of Louis C.K.'s apology to the women he masturbated in front of. Last Friday, the comedian responded to a report in the New York Times where five women told their stories about his behavior with a written apology which can be [read in full here](#).

In his statement, he acknowledged that what he did was wrong. More importantly, he explained that he justified his behavior because he did not fully understand that his behavior was a real predicament for these five women. He did not fully recognize the power differential he maintained. With this statement he is accepting responsibility for his actions.

Several outlets have published pieces chastising the apology. One in particular that has made rounds on social media [can be read here](#). The piece admonishes Louis C.K. by rewriting the apology to make it, as they say, a real apology. It is true that he does not actually use the words "I am sorry", but we argue that his admission and acknowledgement is a step toward healing, reconciliation, and transformation. Indeed, people who have experienced sexual abuse are frequently highly sensitive to the language of apologies and can spot insincerity quickly. While the critiques of C.K.'s apology raise important points (and the apology doubtless went through several rounds of editing), apology is still an interpersonal process that cannot be meaningfully dictated by outsiders.

Most individuals who experience sexual victimization and/or harassment agree that an apology – an acknowledgement that what happened to them was wrong - is an important step in the healing process. These individuals rarely receive an apology.



Kieran McCartan, PhD
Chief Blogger



**David Prescott,
LICSW**
Associate Blogger



**Alissa Ackerman,
PhD**
Co-Blogger

SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are at risk to abuse.

The views expressed on this blog are of the bloggers and are not necessarily those of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment, or Sage Journals.

Perhaps one reason that apologies are hard to come by is that when they are given they are perceived as inauthentic or not good enough. At the same time, sensitivity is required; an apology should never be written in a way that compels the person harmed to accept it or forgive before they are ready.

The Louis C.K. apology offers a teachable moment for anyone who has ever committed a harmful sexual act. It shows that it can be done and it can be powerful. It takes courage to own up to harmful behavior, but doing so offers a space for authentic connection. It is unfortunate that what appears to be a meaningful apology is met with judgement and admonishment – the very things that lead to disconnection. Professionals working with people who have abused often observe that these individuals often have intense trouble expressing their thoughts as eloquently as they and others would like. Sometimes this is due to intellectual and other learning disabilities. At other times it can be due to shame and self-hatred as a result of their actions. In the end, it is the dialog that is the most important.

In previous posts ([link them here](#)) we have written about restorative justice and how it might be beneficial in cases involving sexual harm. Restorative justice (RJ) is a framework that focuses on repairing the harm that was caused. The most typical RJ practice, victim-offender mediation, puts the person who caused harm and the person who was harmed in the same room. This can be daunting for survivors of sexual violence, which has made RJ inaccessible in most cases of sexual harm.

Professionals have not made their minds up as to whether RJ is useful in cases of sexual violence, as many believe it can cause secondary trauma for the survivor or allows the individual who offended to relive and “enjoy” the abusive incident(s). Acknowledging that, it is important to remember that in most cases both the individual who caused harm and the one who was harmed will come into contact with each other at some point in the future, as over 80% of sexual abuse cases involve people known to one another. When RJ is used in cases of sexual violence, (i.e. in CoSAs) an apology – usually written and passed via a third party – can be seen as lacking legitimacy. We end up with a challenging paradox of wanting heartfelt and freely given apologies, but do not fully engage in processes that enable this to happen.

If done correctly, one positive outcome of RJ type sessions is the insight gained by the individual who causes harm. RJ can help people understand the impacts of their actions and their offending behavior. It can also help survivors gain an understanding of why they were victimized. For RJ to begin to be effective, the individual who caused harm must admit to their offense(s) and must offer an apology.

It is easy to point fingers at celebrities about which we know little. It is easy to unleash our collective rage at these public figures. However, this outrage does not and will not end sexual violence because most people who act in sexually inappropriate ways do not fully understand that their behavior is harmful.

Louis C.K. is a prime example of this. He justified his behavior and believed that it was acceptable because he asked the women before he masturbated in front of him. He did not understand the impact of his behavior until much later. This in no way excuses his actions, but it provides a framework for understanding the mindsets of many people who act in sexually inappropriate ways.

Each of us has been affected by sexual abuse in one way or another. One of the authors, Alissa, is a survivor of sexual violence and participates in restorative justice type sessions with men in

community based treatment for sex crimes. To date she has shared her story with close to 200 men, answering their questions about the impacts of sexual victimization and asking them questions about their offenses. She writes: "What I have learned in this work is that approaching individuals with authentic curiosity and non-judgement allows for connection and understanding that would not occur if I showed up with anger... I've learned that many of these men have very little understanding of how their actions have impacted the lives of the individuals they've harmed. The behavior itself and the harm it causes becomes abstract until a survivor is sitting in front of them outlining in detail how sexual trauma has changed her life. Then they get it."

Perhaps one way for powerful people to better understand the impacts of the harm they cause when they engage in sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape is for them to stop talking and start listening. Louis C.K. ends his statement by saying, "I will now step back and take a long time to listen."

If he, and others in shoes like his, are willing to listen, maybe it is time for us to speak in open, honest, authentic conversations. Instead of pointing fingers, reacting in anger, judging with disgust, we should embrace dialogue and honor that just because someone should have known that their behavior was wrong and harmful, doesn't mean they actually knew it. Perhaps that starts with an apology and the willingness to listen.