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A Cure for I'm Sorry Syndrome

Did you ever notice that some people seem to be in a perpetual state of apology?

"I'm sorry I didn't show up on time."

"I'm sorry I didn't call."

"I'm sorry I didn't get that done."

This type of communication typically comes from individuals who are in the habit of making excuses for their actions. They know that they have a commitment they haven't met, and, instead of facing the music, they choose to say "I'm sorry" to skirt the issue.

Think about how you feel when you hear this merry-go-round of excuses. During this ride, on the way up there is a feeling that the person has noticed their poor behavior and will make changes; the way down, however, quickly follows -- when you realize no change is coming. This is a ride that no one wants to buy a ticket to get on!

Where does this behavior, come from? A look at our childhood offers us clues. As children we are taught to say "I'm sorry" whenever we have failed to meet the expectations of others.

"I'm sorry I didn't clean my room."

"I'm sorry I didn't do my homework."

"I'm sorry I wasn't home on time."

We are indoctrinated as children to pacify adults with apologies to get them off our backs. We quickly learn that "I'm sorry" ends the uncomfortable situation, making us free to move on to other things.

Because this behavior works, we carry it into adulthood. We then easily offer up an "I'm sorry" in any situation where the expectations of us are greater than our performance. We learn that by saying "I'm sorry" we can smooth out, or pacify, potential rough spots.

What is lacking when an "I'm sorry" is offered? The commitment to make a positive change. A better alternative to constantly saying "I'm sorry" is to replace those excuses with behaviors that will create positive outcomes:

Excuse Offered Alternative Behavior

"I'm sorry I didn't show up on time." Choose to be punctual.

"I'm sorry I didn't call." Make the phone call.

"I'm sorry I didn't get that done." Choose to do it.

Remember, the quality of our life is in direct proportion to the choices that we make and how we act on them. Part of building healthy self-esteem is to make promises that you will keep. When you over-promise and under-deliver, you are negatively affected: you suffer a feeling of low self-confidence and lack of control. Furthermore, the person on the receiving end of your excuse is left doubting your word and loses confidence in your ability to perform.

So when is it appropriate to say "I'm sorry?" For example, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. Next time I, I'll think about what I, m going to say before I say it." Although you have used the magic words "I'm sorry" you have acknowledged the negative affect your behavior has had on the other person. You've also indicated to that person your commitment to improve your behavior in the future.

Just think about what it would mean if everyone would live their life so they wouldn't have to say "I'm sorry." When we heard a promise, we could expect it to be delivered. And when we offered others our word, they could expect the same promise to be fulfilled.

Today, make a commitment to examine how and why you use "I'm sorry." By doing so you will make the first step toward self-diagnosing and curing "I'm Sorry Syndrome."

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.