

## Apologizing for Racial Harm

Begin with this: As a white person, the racial harm you enact is both personal and historical.

- Personal because it is from one person to another
- Historical because the person being harmed has been harmed in this way over and over again – perhaps by you but certainly also by other white people

Yes, you ARE responsible in the circumstance of racial harm for the harm that has been done to a person of color before. Whether done directly by you or by your skinfolk does NOT matter in this instance.

So here are some steps to think of around apologizing for Racial Harm:

### 1. Say you are sorry as soon as possible

If you are under an agreement such as we use in Real Talk, you may find that someone has called you into Mending. Mending is NOT intended to take days or even hours. The intent is FULLY unpack the harm and craft a short statement of apology-- of acknowledging the harm, an expression of regret for the harm, and then MOVE ON TO DO BETTER.

You do NOT need to wait for someone to CALL YOU on racial harm. If you realize it immediately on your own, make an apology as soon as you possibly can.

However, if someone calls you on it and is helping you unpack it, don't circumvent that process by leaping to apology. An apology without fully knowing the harm done can cause more harm

### Don't say "Sorry I offended you"

*"I'm sorry that I offended you, but that wasn't my intent." "Sorry, it was just a joke!"*

Queens College associate professor [David Rivera](#), a co-author of the book, "[Microaggression Theory: Influence and Implications](#)", told Business Insider that he hears too often of these sort of half-apologies.

Apologizing for offending someone is an attempt to validate your own comment by implying that the other person just reacted poorly. "I'm sorry" does not need to be qualified by an excuse or attempt to explain intention.

That said, an apology is always necessary and called-for; making a Person of Color wait days for your apology is NOT acceptable. The waiting centers your needs over theirs and caters to your comfort.

At one time in Real Talk, we even changed our “Mending Room” name to the “Speed Weep” Room, asking that all participating in a Mending do so at a faster pace. It IS possible to be thorough and not go on for hours while a Person of Color is waiting for an apology.

## 2. Begin with the humble personal.

Saying phrases like “I feel like I should apologize” or “I am moved to apologize” are unnecessarily distancing and only protective of your ego. Be direct – “I am sorry” is always preferable to “I should’s” “I’m supposed to”, “I feel moved to” and so on – which can communicate unwillingness to be directly responsible for the harm done

Accept that YOU are the person who has done harm – regardless of what anyone else has done, regardless of how you have been taught, regardless of how society has shaped your response. YOU have done harm to someone. Saying you are sorry for it is an expression of humanity.

Focus on the *impact* of your behavior (focus on the other person’s feelings) rather than your *intent* (ego, sense of inner certainty, image of myself as “good.”)

## 3. Acknowledge the harm done without re-traumatizing

This can be a delicate balance, so having a trusted person to hold you accountable is helpful. No one wants to be gaslighted or have a person who has harmed them dance around and evade what was offensive.

At the same time, the possible of doing further harm is very real. A person of color does NOT need to have racism whitesplained to them – they’ve know it for far longer than you have.

If you are working with a trusted person, unpack ALL the harm in the situation and be willing to hear what you may not have thought of yourself.

In their book, “When Sorry isn’t Enough”, Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas cite a survey of what people preferred most in an apology.

It found that almost four-fifths wanted their would-be penitent to either **express regret** or **accept responsibility**, as opposed to make restitution or seek forgiveness.

Be willing to hear if the Person of Color harmed has feedback to give you, and step back from being defensive about it.

## 4. Take responsibility

Apologizing isn’t about explaining why you said or did what you did – they already know why. Avoid

trying to clarify or justify or explain how you're "not racist" or "not like that." Your behavior and actions communicate who you are to People of Color, not your words. Any explanation or declaration of your "goodness" is an attempt to force People of Color not to feel their justified feelings. You have no right to do this.

Enmity from People of Color for our words and actions may last. You may have permanently injured a relationship or lost a friend. It is uncomfortable and an unhappy thought, but all white people must learn to live with it. We are not entitled to trust or forgiveness, even if WE feel our offense was "slight" or we've been properly repentant.

## **5. Move on, amend your behavior, Keep educating yourself**

There's no need to continue to dwell on the offense, nor should forgiveness for it be assumed. White people aren't entitled to forgiveness for Racial harm, which is ongoing and active all around People of Color all the time.

Therefore, phrases such as "I hope you can forgive me" or "Can we move forward together?" or "I would like to seek reconciliation with you." place an unnecessary burden on People of Color. True forgiveness and reconciliation are a process that takes time – it may or may not be possible to approach that with the Person of Color harmed and must be at THEIR instigation if and only if they are so inclined.

Continuing to refer back or dwell on the incident also places an unnecessary burden – People of Color are not responsible for soothing you or comforting you.

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Of course there is more to say about apologizing for racial harm – this is a process of learning that will continue for all of us white people. For now, focus on learning in this space.

Your Mentors are all experienced in Mending – ask questions!

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"I am responsible for the house I did not build,  
but in which I live."

*Dorothy Soelle*

"I am responsible for the house I did not build,  
but in which I live."  
For every brick I dislodge and for every brick I lay.  
For every path I sweep and every weed in the garden.  
I build; I destroy

Where rot takes hold, I must dismantle  
Where shelter is strong, I must support  
I do not shoulder the burden alone  
I know my sisters will help me

*Arrelby "Stories of the Women in the Village."*

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