

## **Rationale and Therapeutic Apologies**

Shame, blame (self-/other-) and emotional pain in those struggling with mental health issues can make the road to recovery more difficult. Research among persons with mental health issues indicates that many internalize social stigma and experience diminished self-esteem and belief in their abilities. We've encountered numerous scenarios where people in treatment blamed themselves for their symptoms (due to lack of will-power or poor choices), as well as the emotional or financial impact of their treatment on family members. Those who blame themselves for their mental health issues are also less likely to accept help or seek treatment and are more likely to withdraw from treatment or isolate themselves in order to lessen the burden they believe they place on friends and family. Sometimes that self-blame manifested in blaming others.

When faced with your loved one's expression of pain, we invite you to share this burden with your loved one, so long as you can hold in your mind-heart that you did the best you could given the circumstances, and therefore you aren't actually to blame. Doing so provides your loved one with relief from feeling broken and ashamed for what they feel they are "putting your family through" and increases their openness to treatment and healing. A mother who went through this process likened it to "taking the chemotherapy" to free her daughter from the "cancer of her self-blame" that created a shift from placing blame (on anyone) to a sense of togetherness and shared empowerment in the journey towards mental health. In other words, delivering a therapeutic apology does not mean you are to blame or are responsible for the unfolding of the events – it means you are willing to share the burden of the pain of generations past / our cultural conditioning.

What to target? Mental health issues share a common factor that we are specifically targeting with this treatment – that of low skill and confidence in working through emotions/stress/distress. As such, it can be extremely healing for caregivers to deliver a therapeutic apology acknowledging their loved one's challenges in this area. Considering we have all been taught for generations to respond to "negative" emotion/stress/distress with reassurance, problem-solving, minimization and/or distraction (making it nearly impossible to acquire strong emotion processing skills), we have found that anyone in our culture can deliver this type of therapeutic apology with sincerity, and with positive results for all involved.

## Therapeutic Apology - Sample

### Step 1. Identify the injury / event / problematic pattern and its unique impact.

*I want to talk to you how hard it must have been for you that I didn't create an emotion-friendly environment for you at home (and that I didn't teach you the skills you needed to attend to and work through emotions in a good way/with my support). Especially because \_\_\_\_\_ (unique impact – e.g.: you were a kid who felt things deeply).*

\*it is important to resist the temptation to include rationales for what happened

### Step 2. Label and validate the painful emotions associated with the event (*attend to each emotion listed*).

*I can imagine that (when I dismissed your emotions / didn't encourage you to share your emotions) you might have felt scared because it would have felt overwhelming at times or even out of control.*

*I can also imagine that you would have felt sad because you might have longed to be able to share your inner world with me, especially when things were tough so that you could get my comfort and support.*

*I can imagine that you would have felt embarrassed because you might have felt like there was something wrong with you, or that you were too sensitive.*

*I can imagine that you would have felt angry because you deserved to have your feelings validated and to get the support you needed to work them through in a good way.*

*I can also imagine that you might have felt really lonely/overwhelmed having all of these feelings on your own/without my support/without sufficient support.*

### Step 3. Communicate a sincere apology.

*I am so sorry for the pain this has caused you throughout your life.*

### Step 4. State what could have been done instead and what will change. Ensure follow through is possible.

- A. *I should have...* (using prompt of imagined benefit of a crystal ball and all of the financial and social support resources)
- *encouraged you to feel and express all of your feelings, in particular anger*
  - *I should have helped you to see that it's normal and healthy to experience the full range of emotions*
  - *I should have sought out the help I needed to learn how to move through emotions in a good way so that I could support you to develop strong emotion processing skills*
  - *I should have interrupted others who tried to make you feel like there was something wrong with you for feeling the ways you did*
  - *I should have done more to counter cultural messages about emotional expression*
  - ...
- B. *Starting today...*(+ it won't always go perfectly, but I won't stop working on this)

*I will check in with you more often to see how you are feeling and I will work towards welcoming all of your feelings, including sadness, anger, shame, fear, even hopelessness. I will use the skills I learned to offer validation and support so that we are in it together. I will work towards dealing with my own emotions in a*

*better way. I know for sure it won't always go perfectly, but I won't stop working on creating space between us / in our family so that we can have healthier relationships with our inner worlds.*

**Step 5. Respond with validation to their reaction - whether anger, denial, reassurance or pain.**

If anger or silence: e.g. *"I can understand why you would be angry. It probably feels like too little too late..."*

If reassurance: e.g. *"I can understand why you would want to reassure me. You've seen me hurting in the past and that's been really hard..."*

If denial: e.g. *"I can understand why you wouldn't remember this / would want to deny this, it's a hard truth in our family..."*

If pain or grief: e.g. *"I can understand why you'd feel pain. It's an old wound that hasn't received the attention it deserves..."*

**Step 6. Then, repeat steps 3 and 4.**

And I want you to know that I am so sorry. I should have (repeat content from Step 4A). Starting today I will (repeat content from Step 4B).

Once the therapeutic apology communicated (including Steps 5 + 6), most often, your loved one will respond with surprise and relief. Should your loved one maintain a stance of anger/denial/reassurance following the validation of their reaction and the reassertion of the apology, you may consider a second attempt at a later time. Either way, you can rest assured that although you didn't observe a shift in your loved one, the therapeutic apology is still very likely to have had a positive impact in some way. In fact, deep emotion processing can occur even when there are no apparent verbal or non-verbal signals. That being said, it is still recommended that caregivers explore whether they experienced difficulty with adhering to the steps as scripted. Whether or not the resistance to the apology was related to a technical issue, a genuine attempt to "try again" can be incredibly healing for your loved one. Your persistence and commitment to the process communicates that you are determined to attend to these old family/cultural wounds and that your loved one's well-being is incredibly important to you.

## Therapeutic Apology - Worksheet

### Step 1. Identify the injury / event / problematic pattern and its unique impact.

*I want to talk to you about \_\_\_\_\_ and how hard that must have been for you. Especially because \_\_\_\_\_ (unique impact). \*it is important to resist the temptation to include rationales for the unfolding of events*

### Step 2. Label and validate the painful emotions associated with the event (*attend to each emotion listed*).

*I can imagine that (when I \_\_\_\_\_) you might have felt scared because... and because... (relating to feeling out of control or overwhelmed)*

*I can also imagine that you would have felt sad because... and because... (relating to longing, missing, loving)*

*I can imagine that you would have felt ashamed because... and because... (relating to feeling defective; too much, etc)*

*I can imagine that you would have felt angry because... and because... (you deserved something more / different)*

*I can also imagine that you might have felt really lonely/overwhelmed going through all of this on your own/without my support.*

### Step 3. Communicate a sincere apology.

*I am so sorry (for the pain this caused you).*

### Step 4. State what could have been done instead and what will change. Ensure follow through is possible.

*I should have...(given the benefit of a crystal ball and all of the financial and social support resources)*

*Starting today...( + it won't always go perfectly, but I won't stop working on this)*

### Step 5. Respond with validation to their reaction - whether anger, denial, reassurance or pain.

If anger or silence: e.g. *"I can understand why you would be angry. It probably feels like too little too late..."*

If reassurance: e.g. *"I can understand why you would want to reassure me. You've seen me hurting in the past and that's been really hard..."*

If denial: e.g. *"I can understand why you wouldn't remember this / would want to deny this, it's a hard truth in our family..."*

If pain or grief: e.g. *"I can understand why you'd feel pain. It's an old wound that hasn't received the attention it deserves..."*

### Step 6. Then, repeat steps 3 and 4.

And I want you to know that I am so sorry. I should have (repeat content from Step 4A). Starting today I will (repeat content from Step 4B).