

Ep #379: How to Apologize Without Shame, Blame, or Guilt



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Búa Victoria Albina, NP, MPH

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This is *Feminist Wellness*, and I'm your host, Nurse Practitioner, somatics and nervous system nerd, and life coach Béa Victoria Albina. I'll show you how to get unstuck, drop the anxiety, perfectionism, and codependency so you can live from your beautiful heart. Welcome, my love, let's get started.

Hello, hello, my love. I hope this finds you doing so well. So listen, over the next couple of weeks, I am sharing a series called The Work. These are conversations about the subtle emotional patterns that shape the way we relate to ourselves, to other people, and change itself, of course, through the lens of emotional outsourcing.

Here's the thing, a lot of these patterns are so familiar, we don't even realize they're running our lives. That's the sneakiness of our emotional outsourcing habits. So we're starting with mastering the language of apologies. Most of us were taught that apologizing is about like being polite, making nice, taking responsibility. We don't realize that the way we apologize, the language we use, our tone, like everything about how we frame and present an apology, it shapes our relationships with other people and also with ourselves.

So if you've ever found yourself over apologizing, under apologizing or feeling resentment, even when you say sorry, this is usually where things are getting all tangled up. So let's start here.

Okay, so we are talking about apologies because they really matter. I'm here to support you, my darling love, in living an intentional life. One in which you hold the reins and part of living with intention, on purpose, is taking responsibility for yourself. Your thoughts, feelings, actions, results.

When we live with the thought habits of codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing, this fascinating paradox can happen in our minds where we feel so terrible about ourselves. It's really challenging to say, oh, oops, I F-ed up. And it's super challenging because we tend to think so negatively about ourselves and so have that ingrained habit of beating ourselves up

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first before anyone else can, that someone saying we messed up feels like an affirmation of all of our worst stories about ourselves.

It's like it makes real what we most fear. And when these thought habits are our norm, we are understandably very self-protective. And that habit of protecting yourself first, defending yourself first can keep us from apologizing, focused on that defense instead. And can keep us from seeing the harm we've done and the harm done to us, which is another show altogether.

And can keep us feeling attacked when someone else is just saying ouch, you hurted my feelings. In short, these thought habits and linguistic choices can keep us from living with intention and integrity with ourselves. Can keep us from deepening our relationships with others, and can keep us in that protective stance that actually keeps us from truly loving ourselves and others enough to be honest with ourselves and to see the impact of our choices and thus to really see ourselves.

And that's what I want so much for you, my love, to be able to see yourself. Your thoughts, feels, actions, results, because those things literally create your lived experience in this lifetime. And I want yours to be amazing.

So this week, I want to talk to you about some language shifts that make a huge difference in how we think about and do apologies. We'll start with exploring the language around resistance to apologizing, then we'll explore language options for starting an apology, the importance of recognizing the language of intent versus impact, and the reframing of some terms that come up commonly when we think about apologies so that we can find our power and strength.

As we talk about so often here, we know that our thoughts are something that was installed into us like the software on a computer. Installed by our society, our culture, our family of origin. And our thoughts are both

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super-duper powerful, and also something that we can change once we're in touch with them.

Your habitual unconscious thoughts that may be coming up when someone says you did something wrong and I'd like you to apologize may sound like, "I'm not worthy, I always mess up, I'm not important, I'm too much, too emotional, I don't want to offend anyone, I don't want them to think I'm rude. I just want them to like me. I don't want him to think he's right. I don't want him to think I'm wrong."

I was in session with a client recently and I offered her a tool I love to use when conflict arises, which is finding the truth. So your partner says you hurt my feelings with your words, and you've been studying the thought work protocol and so you don't necessarily believe that your words were the cause of the pain, but baby, is that a hill you want to die on?

Is that a loving stance? Also remembering that we do not coach without consent in this family. Your partner says you hurt my feelings with your words, and you get to find the honest truth in that statement, which is that their feelings are hurt. You can see the tenderness in there.

Like you are working every day, as we discuss here together, to find the tenderness within yourself and to honor that. And so my beauty, you can apologize for that. I see you, I hear you that my words hurt your feelings, and I'd like to apologize for that.

Meanwhile, this client, let's call her Maggie, said she didn't want to name the truth because she's so resentful of her husband that she, and I do quote, doesn't want to give him an inch. So thought work tells us that what other people think of us is their business. Their thoughts create their feelings, like your thoughts create yours.

In that moment of conflict, when someone is saying you did or said something harmful, you get to decide if you want to be right, if you want to

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keep pushing with that I don't want to give him an inch, he's totally wrong here, like if you want to keep pushing and pushing, or if you want to be happy, peaceful, content within yourself, connected.

A person who is not scared to be wrong, to make a mistake, to fail, understanding as we've talked about so many times here, failure is always a gift. Because it's a growth opportunity. A person who isn't thrown off by simply saying, "Maybe you're right," because you feel so strong in your sense of self that it doesn't matter if you're wrong, if you goofed.

That person is standing in the fullest embodiment of their empowerment. You get to pull back, zoom out, and ask yourself why it matters if your husband thinks you did something wrong and you agree with him, or give him an inch.

Baby, it's like WTF, right? Who cares? Well, sometimes we care because we know how powerful and meaningful words are, and because of the aforementioned codependent, perfectionist, and people-pleasing thought habits in our minds, which leads us to constantly externalize our sense of self, and to avoid blame at all costs because we fear it may melt us into a wee puddle of a human.

And also in those moments, our inner children get activated and they come to attempt to rescue us, defend us, protect us from ever being wrong. So let's look at that. In addition to being super social animals as humans, we are a super communicative species, and words are just one way that we communicate what we're thinking or feeling.

Because those words have power, sometimes saying, "I'm sorry that what I said hurt you," can feel like we're taking the blame when as we've talked about before, we're simply taking responsibility and making space for the truth of someone else's experience. You don't have to be having the same experience to say, human to human, heart to heart, "I see you, I see you're

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hurt, and I honor that that is your experience. I do not need to try to change your experience of the world to attempt to feel safe within myself.”

Meanwhile, defending yourself feels like the smart move. And as a child, it may well have been and may have kept you from hearing and feeling and thinking about how terrible you are, which is devastating to a small and developing human, and can be for a grown one too when you're not practicing living in emotional adulthood, which we talked all about in episode 24.

Being defensive can look like literally denying the other person's feeling or experience, such as, “I didn't say that,” or, “I didn't say it like that.” They can look like storytelling. “It's just that I had a really hard day and the lizard farm flooded and that's why I snapped at you.”

It can look like blame reversal. “Well, I wouldn't have raised my voice at you if you'd just done what you said you'd do.” Or, “Jeez, don't be so sensitive,” which are pretty unkind things to say, and as tactic abusers love to use, it's a form of gaslighting.

And finally, one other tactic is to claim ignorance. “Oh, I didn't realize that was racist or homophobic or sexist or whatever. Dude, my bad, I just had the best intentions here. I'm just learning about this. I'm sorry.” That just doesn't hold water anymore.

There are so many resources out there for folks to educate themselves. You get to do the work, my beauty, to see where you may be perpetuating systems of oppression, which we've talked about here in many an episode.

When we are apologizing, the problem doesn't suddenly disappear, which is likely what your inner child wants. And maybe what happened in your family of origin, if communication skills were lacking there. When we decline to apologize for something that is ours to own, and yes, I'm saying decline, meaning that it's a choice on some level, to decline or to not

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apologize for the hurt another person is sharing that they have experienced, we build conflict and stress, both in the relationship and within ourselves because we are not being radically honest.

And radical honesty is so vital for getting to know yourself and to continue your healing. But when we can find our way to see and hear the other person's truth, their experience of the truth, and to put aside whether we agree with it, whether we're aligned with it, but rather just to say they are hurting, we can open up lines of communication and can come together in the mutual task of strengthening our relationships.

So how do we shift the language we use here when we're in that "I don't want to apologize and you can't make me" mode, when your inner child is stomping her little feet and saying, "You can't tell me I'm wrong and bad." Well, we take a nice deep belly breath, maybe put a little hand on your heart, pressing gently, ground yourself in your body.

And we focus in on the word. Truth. What is true for the person who deserved that apology? And yes, we're tapping into their subjective experience. That is the point. Notice it's not about you right now. If someone else is hurt and you want to show up in your integrity to preserve the relationship, to tidy up your side of the street, you need to make sure your internal verbal landscape matches that.

Ask yourself, what have they told me? What is true for them? Remember, seek to understand and then to be understood. You may need to do some deep breathing and get out your pen and your paper, write down CTFAR, circumstance, thought, feeling, action, result. Do that mental work to stay focused on the truth of the person who has experienced hurt as they experience it.

That's the central tenant here. And yeah, you absolutely get to attend to your inner children as their most loving parent because it's likely they will

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not like this. Not one bit. Like we've talked about before, it's not your job to apologize for things that you literally had nothing to do with.

If someone's saying you hurt them when you called them a nasty name and you just literally didn't do that, you don't need to apologize for that. But when you're a part of the problem, whether you meant to or not, you get to keep your mental language focused on uncovering the truth of the person you love so you can find the words you need to make a sincere and hopefully effective apology.

And that brings us to the difference between intent and impact. It's so common to attempt to deflect, often unconsciously for sure, from having done something harmful by talking about our intention, not the impact of what we did, said, or didn't do or say that we promised to do.

And listen, I did this one for years. I spoke to my intention because my inner children would get all worked up when I was told I had done something wrong, and they were like, screaming inside me to defend and protect us, that it was super dangerous to be told I had messed up because then it was like, one more strike against me ever liking myself, ever believing that I was anything other than a total mess-up of a human.

And I still have that sensation within me now for sure. It's there. I'm just able to pause, to breathe, to give my inner children gentle love and care, and to remind them that we are awesome and human, and humans mess up because we are human. And that doesn't mean that I have to be mean to me.

And now, stepping ever more into my emotional adulthood, I can then use my prefrontal cortex to respond in a different way on purpose, while my inner children and my lizard brain say, "But, but, I didn't mean to do that bad thing, I mean, I didn't..." they have a lot of words.

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So let's look at this and my nerds, let's use the definition from Johns Hopkins University because that feels both fancy and nerdy. And we are both fancy and nerdy. So intent versus impact. The mechanism of creating an offense, and then absolving yourself of responsibility for its impact is pervasive in our language.

Most of the time, people use this kind of mechanism not only to preempt accusations, but to subconsciously avoid the cognitive dissonance of saying something hurtful to others and taking ownership of what they are saying. Wow, and that summed it up so gorgeously, and I think what's really powerful here is to recognize that it's pervasive. It's a society, cultural level thing. You were taught to do this, which means you can unteach it.

I guess unlearn it would be better English. You can unlearn it. And the word subconsciously really hit me there. So again, this is another thought habit that is underneath the surface, and so you get to choose to do the work, to bring it into the light.

So let's look at some examples to make this feel more real. So let's say you're on a crowded train and you accidentally smack someone in the head. An action I've been on both sides of about one thousand million times. So it wasn't your intention to hit that other human in the noggin, but you sure did it, so you apologize.

"Oh man, I'm so sorry I hit you in the head, I apologize for that." So that's apologizing for your impact. I hit you. Ouch, I'm sorry. I apologize. Making it about intention sounds like, "I didn't mean to hit you in the face. This train is just packed and why was your face there anyway?"

See how that's not an apology? And it doesn't matter if you meant to or not. Their face still hurts. So too when we say words that hurt or take any action that hurts someone else. We apologize for the impact. This is particularly true when we're talking about instances of oppressive or prejudiced language.

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It is not loving or kind to rest on your intention, such as, “I hear you that what I said was offensive to you, but I have the best of intentions here.” Baby, it’s not okay, particularly when you say something misogynist, homophobic, racist, ableist, et cetera. And doing so not only amplifies the pain of the person you’re effectively telling to get over it. It also keeps you from growing because you’re not being honest with yourself or that other human.

And at the same time, my darling, of course intent matters, and you get to get real with yourself about whether your intention in the moment of apologizing or being asked to do so is to actually own your oops, or to defend yourself. Now, that’s an intention that really matters.

Furthermore, you could have said or done something with an open heart, with what feels like love for you in your body, based on your history and experience, but that doesn’t mean that it necessarily or objectively would feel that way to another person. And the restorative value of explaining your intention is not yours to decide in a given situation as the person who caused the harm.

And it’s certainly not your place to announce your intention or attempt to use it as a shield to make yourself blameless. My favorite example of this is a conflict I had last year with one of my BFFs, Aisha. She called and said, “Vic, I didn’t like how you did that thing you did.” And I apologized for the impact because I’ve been practicing. I used the language we’re talking about here and left it at that.

Then she asked what my intentions were because we love and trust each other. And she wanted to know because it matters to her. So I told her. And she got it. My intention and my impact both mattered to her, so it mattered in the conversation.

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And we left that conversation with a deeper understanding, more trust, even more love. Again, it's not yours to foist the story of your intention on someone. And if they want to know, they can ask.

And this one was really challenging for me. In a loving relationship, good intention is likely assumed. And you can work to know and believe that, and can use that thought to replace the worry in your mind that codependency embedded there, that you're always wrong and bad and a mess up of a lousy human and everyone knows and believes it.

A friend said this to me some years ago, that I didn't have to prove my loving, kind intentions because they just assumed that I'm always coming from that place. It's baked into our relationship. And that was kind of a mind-blowing moment because my inner children didn't believe that.

They assumed I constantly had to be proving that I'm a good person, that I'm kind, that I'm loving. They assumed everyone thought we were always wrong, always bad, always the cause of grief because that's what I heard and internalized growing up. And a huge part of learning to own your life and your thoughts and your actions is to get right with that.

You are amazing. You get to believe it. You have good intentions and a loving heart. You get to believe it. And if you look at yourself honestly and you recognize my intentions were actually not good there, you get to own that while believing in the truth of your inherent goodness.

And once you make these shifts and truly learn to embody all of this, apologizing for impact isn't that scary. It's aligned with your integrity and the world and you no longer need to defend yourself so darn hard. So you're in a situation, someone said you hurt me, and you're ready to apologize.

I want to revisit the language shift away from, "I'm sorry for," or, and please don't do this one, "I'm sorry but," that we discussed way back in the second apologizing episode, to offer up a different opening. Like we've talked about

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when we're in a position to apologize for something, we are vulnerable, which is totally okay. Scary, like, let's be real. Scary, challenging, but at its core, totally okay.

So someone else has told us that what we said or did hurt them. And we get to look carefully at our words and actions, think about their repercussions, possibly reestablish boundaries or rules of engagement with the other person, and ultimately, fortify our connection. What an amazing opportunity?

With this in mind, I would encourage you to consider starting your next apology with, "Thank you." It's quite a shift from what we were taught as kids or see modeled for us as adults. Maybe we say thank you for being honest, or thank you for sharing with me, or thanks for taking the time to tell me, or thank you for pointing out my misstep.

Why start with a thank you? Well of course, science. Nerd alert, my love. When someone is hurt, they will typically shift into their sympathetic nervous system. Their fight or flight. Their blood pressure may be up, their heart beating fast, their veins full of hormones.

Or they may move into the parasympathetic dorsal ventral state of freeze, immobilization, feeling dejected, unloved, and hurt. And if you're listening to all this and you're like, what are these words, after this episode, go back and listen to episode 61 all about polyvagal theory.

So recognizing that the person you're talking to may not be in a nervous system state where they can hear you well, you get to be conscious of that and loving of that. And when we say thank you, with a smile, with an energy of openness and a desire to connect, those two words can shift our listener towards receptiveness, into the parasympathetic nervous system's ventral vagal state where they will feel more safe, social, ready to connect.

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Their body will sense less danger and more safety. They may notably exhale, their shoulders may relax, their face may open. Those are all signs that they are shifting out of fight, flight, or freeze, and are so much more likely to hear whatever you need to share.

Also note, you may try all of these techniques with that open heart, and it may not work. The other person may still be in their anger, in their sorrow, whatever they may be. And you get to hold space with love for them to have their lived experience in their own time.

So after you have thanked the other person, either for their willingness to share or whatever else they've brought you as discussed previously, I would invite you to use the phrase, "I'd like to apologize," or, "I want to apologize." Rather than the oft used and worn out, "I'm sorry."

So wait, what's the difference? Well, if you know kids and have heard them say, "I'm sorry I took your Nintendo, I'm sorry I hit you with the Legos," it's like, oh wow kid, not super inspiring. I'm not particularly moved by your use of I'm sorry.

And for me, I want to apologize just sits so differently. When we say we want to apologize, we are making a commitment and we're taking action. It signals to your listener that we're willing to do something about the harm caused by our words or actions.

So now instead of, "I'm sorry if you're hurt by what I said about your partner being dumb, I didn't mean it, it's just sometimes I make a joke and they don't get it, sorry," we can try, "Thank you for letting me know my words were hurtful. I'd like to apologize for what I said. That wasn't kind."

Let's go back to the beginning of this episode. I mentioned that when we shift the language that we use for apologies, we are also shifting the verbal landscape of our own minds, and wow, that's so powerful. When we say I

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am sorry, we are making it about us and how we feel in that moment. And also, making ourselves small.

We are sorry, we feel sorrow. And while sure, that may be true and please attend to yourself around that, what messages are we sending to ourselves when we say this? That we are small and sorry and should feel bad about what we did, but in a I'm a bad person way? Goodness knows that humans socialized as women in this country don't need to be feeling any pushed to feel smaller, am I right?

By contrast, when we say that we want to apologize, we highlight for ourselves our courage and power and that we're owning it. And as you practice this, as you look at your own habits around apologizing, also about asking for an apology, which we'll be talking about soon enough, I want you to be conscious of blame, shame, and guilt.

So blame is about pointing fingers and sometimes it's about scapegoating. When we blame ourselves or others, again, emotional adulthood and emotional childhood, which we talked about in detail way back in episodes 24 and 25, so when we're in that state of blaming ourselves or others, we don't have anywhere to go from there, other than to shrink and to find the nearest rock to crawl under.

When we think instead about responsibility, we are highlighting our ability to respond. Our willing to take ownership for our words and actions, and to consider changing up how we do things if we find ourselves hurting the people around us whose relationships bring us joy and that help us grow.

A big issue in the lives of those of us working to shift out of codependency, perfectionism, and people pleasing is shame. When we experience shame, it's about saying that you are wrong and bad. I am wrong for doing that thing, which keeps you spinning and focused on you beating yourself up, protecting yourself, defending yourself, instead of come and correct the situation and owning your actions in this world.

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Remember that shame plus fear equals perfectionism. And you can start to intervene on your own behalf by starting to drop the shame. So you did something that hurt someone. Perhaps you had the best of intentions. You still get to own your behavior and you also get to not make it about you as a person.

And you definitely get to practice not beating yourself up because that serves exactly no one, my darling, and will actually keep you from making the changes you want to make in your life. Lastly, guilt, and we'll do a whole episode about guilt and there are from the psychological literature, there's some aspects of guilt that can be supportive and can lead us to make change, but I don't think that's what's going on for most of us.

Often, when we let that fear of F-ing up and doing it wrong, our fear of feeling guilt overcome us, it can cause terror within us and we become paralyzed. So take a look at shame, blame, and guilt in your life and do the thought work protocol on them.

Write out the circumstance in which you're feeling those sensations and take a good look at what you are habitually thinking about yourself, the world, other people, your past, your present, your future that's leading you to feel one of those emotions, and to then work out what the action you take is when you're flooded in your body with shame, blame, or guilt, and the result you are creating for yourself.

Please take a moment, do that work, my beauty. It's so important.

My darling, thank you for listening in. Once you start to see how you're showing up in your relationships, the next question becomes, are you actually available for change? Do you have the skills, the tools, the mindset? Are you ready? Are you ready to make lasting, sustainable change in your life or not quite, which like, whatever, no shame if not quite, but it's really important to distinguish because wanting something to be different and being ready for it are not the same thing.

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I know in my life, I wanted all these huge changes in how I communicate, how I relate to others, how I was in a romantic relationship, and I kept pushing up against it until finally something shifted and I was ready to step into the life I have now, which is pretty frigging rad. And so that's where we're headed next week. Make sure that you are following the show or subscribe to the show so you don't miss a thing in this series. It's really going to build on each other quite beautifully if I do say so, so make sure that you're following.

All right, my love, let's do what we do. Gentle hand on your heart should you feel so moved. And remember, you are safe. You are held, you are loved. And when one of us heals, we help heal the world. Be well, my beauty. I'll talk to you soon. Ciao ciao.