

Scott: How to Make an Effective Apology. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 292.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Scott: I'm Scott Blair and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show.

Do you know what it takes to make an effective apology? Nobody is perfect. We have all done something that requires a sincere apology towards another person, whether it was borrowing something from a friend without asking, forgetting about plans made with your spouse, or lying to your loved ones, we have all had to take responsibility for our actions and offer an apology to smooth things over.

When it comes to relationships, you have to be able to genuinely be sorry and apologize for things you have done wrong. If you do not, your partner may feel like they don't matter or that you do not care about their feelings. Learning to make an effective apology can save yourself and your partner those negative feelings.

But how do we make an effective apology to our loved ones? Professor of Family Medicine at UNC School of Medicine, as well as Director of Behavioral Medicine in the Department of Family Medicine at Carolina Medical Center, Dr. Matthew Alexander is a psychologist and founder of Alexander Therapy in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Dr. Alexander specializes in clinical, health and family psychology, giving him a strong background in family systems, psychodynamic and interpersonal approaches to mental health. Dr. Alexander primarily treats couples in his private practice and is also available for public presentations on a variety of topics related to relationships.

Welcome to the show, Matthew. I'm so glad that you could join us today.

Matthew: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for having me.

Scott: Tell us a little bit about why making an effective apology is important in our relationships.

Matthew: Well, one word I'd like to emphasize is 'effective' apology, because many times people will apologize in a way that's ineffective. They'll be yelling at a person, saying that they're sorry, and that type of apology doesn't work. The type of apology I'll be talking about today is meant to repair the relationship and is actually a sign that the other person that you've injured, your partner, is important to you. Effective apologies make the relationship whole and allow the couple to move forward without being bogged down in resentment about the offense.

Scott: So it's a not effective to say, "Well, I already said I was sorry and you keep living in the past."

Matthew: I couldn't have said that any better or any worse. That's exactly right. Apologies are a sign of strength, not weakness.

Scott: What problems do you see that couples experience in their relationship when they're unable to make an effective apology?

Matthew: You just put your finger right on it, Scott, because what happens is that people will believe that they've made an apology, and they'll get very frustrated with their partner. What we're talking about is not apologies about the fact that you brought home butter instead of margarine. We're really talking about more deep wounds that need effective apology, and these tend to be wounds that related to attachment issues.

I'll give you one example of a case in which the couple has been married for 20 years and they come in, and the wife says, "When I was pregnant and I brought home the baby, it was a difficult pregnancy. He played golf." And he says, "I've apologized a thousand times for that." What he doesn't understand is that that type of wound, when she was depending on him and he chose to play golf, is what's called an attachment wound. It speaks to the essence of trust and connection, and if he can't hear that and offer an effective apology, she will remember that wound until the day she dies.

Effective apologies allow couples to really leave things in the past and move forward.

Scott: Okay. You said she will remember that until the day that she dies. So left unresolved, what are some of the short-term or long-term negative effects that a lack of a sincere apology or an effective apology could have on a relationship like this?

Matthew: The hurt partner can do a variety of things, because their emotions are put into play and they feel wounded. They might sulk, they might withdraw, they might even become passive-aggressive. If the wounding partner doesn't realize that this is a result of an unresolved issue, attachment injury, then they don't understand what's going on and then they get resentful because their partner is sulking and they can't just get over it. The more resentful they become, the more the other person's sulking.

The couple then gets into a negative downward spiral. In fact, there's a wonderful movie that I recommend to many of the couples that I see with these issues, called "Hope Springs." It's about a couple that has allowed an injury to fester for a long time and it's gotten to the point that they don't sleep in the same bedroom. It's only

with the skill of a very talented therapist that they're able to break through and actually reconnect, because the wound that was never addressed becomes addressed in couples therapy. At that point, they can move forward and reconnect as a couple and have a good relationship.

Scott: I have not seen that film so I'll have to check it out.

Matthew: Definitely.

Scott: At what point in time do you see that couples are becoming aware that not being mindful of each other is actually hurting the relationship?

Matthew: That's such a great question because so many couples are very busy with the challenges of life; parenting, making a living, that they lose mindfulness until one person becomes so unhappy that they say, "We need to talk. We need to see a couples therapist, or else we need to divorce."

Another thing that unfortunately, if it gets to this point, when a person has an affair, which is another attachment wound, that brings both people into the office so quickly that it's not funny. So people who have delayed therapy for a long time, once there's an affair will come in right away. At that point, they pay a lot of attention to each other and they're very mindful because they're terrified of losing the relationship. Unfortunately, my job is to make sure that couples who come in my office don't have to get to that point.

Scott: Do you see any patterns or trends among the couples that are coming into your office that need to learn how to make an effective apology?

Matthew: There are several trends. One is that people that grew up in families where they have very blaming parents often have a particularly hard time apologizing because they see it as a sign of weakness. Those people tend to be defensive, and defensiveness is a real barrier to communication.

I would say that if these wounds are left untended then couples drift apart sexually. They may develop fights about parenting, fights about money, but the real fight is hidden. The real fight is about, "I wasn't important enough for you to be there when I needed you, when I was pregnant, when I brought the child home, and you've never apologized. So I will not trust you to take care of me again. I will withdraw and I'll fight with you about sex, I'll fight with you about parenting, I'll fight with you about money, because I don't trust you to take care of me."

Scott: Interesting. You've come up with a way to make an effective apology, so tell us what elements are needed in order to do this.

Matthew: That's very good. That's a very good question. I'd like to say, before I answer that, to give another analogy if I could, my office looks out - I'm looking at it right now

– it looks out onto a dentist's office. When somebody goes to the dentist with an infected tooth, the dentist doesn't say, "We don't have to worry about the infection. We'll just put a crown on the tooth. It'll look great." He or she usually says, "We're going to have to root out the infection. It might hurt, but once it's clear of infection, then we can put a crown on and then your tooth will heal."

It's the same thing with wounds like this. It's like an infection, and you don't just want to put a crown on it and pretend it's not there. You address it, and you address it in part by making this effective apology.

So what is the effective apology? First of all, it doesn't work in the heat of the moment. You've got to be calm. You have to really be reflective because perhaps the most important part of this apology is your tone. The tone has to be apologetic and not angry.

Then, we move on from there to something that we all teach our kids, which is when you apologize, what are you apologizing for? The wounding partner must name the offense and the emotions triggered by their action. For example, "I know I embarrassed you in front of your family. I know that my talking about our sex life was a real violation of your trust. It must have felt demeaning and undercutting. "

That person is saying, "I know I did you wrong because I embarrassed you," he's naming the emotions that he created in her, and he's naming specifically the offense. "I embarrassed you in front of your family by talking about our sex life." Then, the individual must take on the shame of that, something like, "I really acted like a jerk."

Then maybe take it one step further and help the wounded partner understand what was going on. "Maybe because of this behavior I drank too much and I was unable to control myself. I've probably been building up resentment about the changes in our sexual relationship after Johnny was born." So you don't blame the person, but you explain what was going on with you.

Then you have to ask for forgiveness. "I hope that you can forgive me for what I did," and it's only going to be effective if you commit to doing everything you can to make sure it doesn't happen again. The person might say, "I will be extra careful in the future to make sure this doesn't happen again, starting with my not drinking when we're with your family."

Scott: I'm glad you added in that last point about making sure the violation doesn't reoccur. I was thinking about that and some of the earlier points, how that would take away the effectiveness if somebody apologized but then continued to repeat the pattern.

Matthew: Exactly, and I've seen people do that. After awhile the apology means nothing because what good is an apology if you keep doing the same thing? It shows you're not really learning from it.

Scott: Absolutely. What can couples do to grasp these concepts a little better to offer a more effective and sincere apology?

Matthew: I'll tell you one thing that I do with couples. I just assigned this this morning to a couple around this issue. Many years ago I was channel surfing through TV and I came across a scene in a very famous movie called "Pretty Woman." In the scene, the character played by Richard Gere, whose name is Edward, has told a friend that Vivian, played by Julia Roberts, is a hooker. That was a violation of trust. The friend then propositioned her and she was furious.

They go back to the hotel where they're staying and they're yelling at each other and it's escalating, and he says, in fact, "I'm sorry. I'll say it a thousand times. I'm sorry," which is not an apology. And then she says, "Well, I'm sorry I ever met you." So she's escalating it. And then she says, "Just pay me." So he whips out a thousand dollars, throws it down on the desk, and she doesn't take it.

She walks out and she's waiting for the elevator, and he walks out of the door to meet her, and within about two minutes he gives the most effective apology. He does all the things that I recommend. He says, "I'm sorry." His tone is conciliatory. He says, "I know I acted like a jerk. I know I betrayed your trust." And she says, "Well, why did it happen?" He says, "Well, I guess I was just jealous. I didn't like the way that you were looking at him." And she says, "Well, make sure it never happens again," and he says it won't.

And then, because it's Hollywood, they go back in and the next thing you know it's morning and they're waking up in bed together with big smiles on their faces. In those two minutes, he effectively does all the things that I suggest. He says it won't happen again, he explains why, his tone is apologetic, and he names the offense and the feelings that it caused in her.

Scott: That movie I have seen.

Matthew: A lot of people have, but they may not remember that scene.

Scott: I didn't remember it that way. Now you've made me want to re-watch it so I can study the effective apology.

Matthew: Good. And the other movie is "Hope Springs" which I mentioned already, in which the character played by Tommy Lee Jones is very angry at his wife because she rejected his sexual advances many years ago, and he's held onto it. It's only by the force of this therapist who forces him to talk about that, they are able to repair

that wound. So that's another motion picture that I would highly recommend people see.

Scott: With couples apologizing in a more effective way, they come into your office and you give them these techniques, what are some of the changes that you're seeing in the quality and the interactions of the relationship?

Matthew: Everything has a potential to change. All of a sudden there's trust, there's greater connection, and there's greater happiness and joy in their relationship because these old wounds are no longer dragging them down. There's a renewed sense of, "We're in this together, we're a team, and you've let me know that I'm important to you so I'm going to let you know that you're important to me."

I often tell couples that when they come to see me they're in a downward spiral, a negative feedback loop, and my goal is to get them into a positive, upward spiral. One very effective way to do that is to learn how to make apology. I don't know whether it's harder for women or for a man to do this. I know a lot of husbands complain about their wife never apologizing, but probably there are an equal number of wives who would complain about their husband never apologizing. So it's probably not a gender issue.

Scott: Matthew, when it comes to making an effective apology, do you think there is anything else that our listeners should know?

Matthew: I think that this is fixable. It's one of these fixable behavior patterns. I would start now, and I would encourage people to remember that apologizing is a sign of courage and not weakness. You can even apologize if it wasn't your fault, because that's also a sign that you care about the person. If I am in a room and somebody spills coffee on themselves and I say, "God, I'm sorry," that doesn't mean I caused it. I'm just sorry to see you suffer. I think that meaning of the phrase 'I'm sorry' is also useful.

In any event, use it often but mean it, or else it won't mean anything and it can't repair. It does require some growth and humility, but it's worth it.

Scott: Matthew, thank you so much for talking with us and being on the show today.

Matthew: My pleasure, Scott. Thank you for having me.

Scott: To find out more about Dr. Matthew Alexander and his practice, Alexander Therapy, you can visit their website at [www.AlexanderTherapy.com](http://www.AlexanderTherapy.com), or call 704-371-3070 for an appointment.

Thank you so much for joining us today and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and previous episodes, visit us at [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com).

I'm Scott Blair. Until next time, Stay Happily Married.

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