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“Making peace, one person at a time”

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To Err is Human; to Forgive, Complicated

By John Bertschler, PhD

In our practice, we often see relationships that have been damaged because of injury done by one party to the other. It may be a personal relationship (a couple or immediate family) or one involving friends or coworkers.

Whatever has happened, feelings of pain and betrayal are difficult to endure and difficult for friends and supporters to witness.

People long to know how to forgive, how to seek forgiveness, whether to forgive, and how to get past the offense to a restored relationship. The path to forgiveness and reconciliation may be rocky and uncertain, many times best helped by a trusted third party such as a therapist, mediator or spiritual advisor.

We often find that the essential first step is that the offending party must in some sense really *get it*—truly understand that she/he has in some way injured the other. This often requires an understanding beyond the surface act itself, an understanding of the deeper meaning of the act to the offended party.

This first step is often difficult because most of us minimize damage we have done (“It wasn’t that big of a deal!”) to protect our own egos, and because we have a hard time understanding what things mean to another from his/her own perspective.

And it may be difficult for the offended party to explain things clearly while still emotionally upset. This is where neutral third parties can be most helpful in clarifying language and ensuring understanding.

If you really get it that you have done damage, it is essential to apologize and seek forgiveness if true reconciliation is to take place. “I know I hurt you” is pretty useless unless it is followed by “...and I’m really sorry that I did it.” This is also complicated by our desire to protect our own integrity. We sometimes say “**I’m sorry, but...**” and what follows is usually our effort to justify our action. (“I’m sorry I said those things, but I was so mad.”)

Such *but statements*, by suggesting mitigating circumstances, really have the effect of wiping out the apology. They come out as “I did it, and I’m sorry, but I had a good reason.” Most of us can imagine how lame such an apology feels.

In contrast, we find a sincere apology to be among the most powerful of events between people. It is a way of saying to the other person, “This relationship and your feelings are important enough to me to stop defending myself, and be humble before you.” Many offended parties, in both our counseling and mediation work, want nothing more than this, a reality that keeps many cases from going to court.

Finally, any real apology must include a sincere expression of intention not to repeat the offense. If “sorry, but...” felt lame, what is far worse is trying to forgive or seeking to be forgiven when the offender acknowledges the damage but repeats it anyway.

If we make a good faith apology, based in understanding of damage done and the desire not to do further damage, forgiveness is possible.

*** This is Part I of an article published in *The Cleveland Women’s Journal*, West Edition, Feb-Mar, 2009 and reprinted with permission. Part II will be included in our next newsletter.

2009 CALENDAR

- Mar. 12-13 and June 25-26** **Basic Mediation Training.** \$250. John Bertschler, PhD and Mark Newton, J.D. 8:30 – 4:30.
- Mar. 19 and April 14** **“Without Becoming Enemies”** for divorcing couples who want to learn about mediation. No charge. 7:30 – 8:30 PM at our office
- Mar. 23** **OCAPS Conference,** Columbus. John B. to speak on Elder Mediation.
- April 3** **MANO Annual Conference** 8:30 AM – 4:30 PM. Held at Corporate College, Warrensville Hts. www.manomediate.org to register.
- April 8** **Free depression/ stress screening** At Brecksville Dept. of Human Services. ½ hour session. Call Barb Nyegran to register at (440) 526-2499. Adults 55+
- Apr. 21** **“Spirituality and Aging.”** John B. to speak at Brecksville DHS. Free. 12:30 – 1:30 PM.
- Apr. 28** **“Have the Audacity to be a Leader”** 2 CEUs. Pleasant Lake Villa, Parma OH, Free. Includes supper. Register At (440) 887-4202 Mary Hopkins.
- July 9, 10, 15, 16, 17** **Divorce and Family Mediation Training.** \$725. John Bertschler and Mark Newton, JD. 8:00 – 5 PM daily.



Build a Business Marketing Tip...

Create a **Media Kit** and keep handy to give to reporters should they call for an interview. The more you include in the Media Kit (kept in 2-pocket folder), the less the reporter needs to look up and the more time he/she can devote to your interview. Include: professional photo, resume, practice brochures, mission statement, background sheet about your practice/ organization, testimonials, any published articles, business card.