How to apologize for sexual harassment

Apologies can actually help survivors. But only if they’re done right.

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"There are no words to express my sorrow and regret for the pain I have caused others by words and actions," former Today anchor Matt Lauer wrote on Thursday. “To the people I have hurt, I am truly sorry.”

Lauer was fired from NBC after a woman accused him of sexual misconduct. After his firing, at least two more women made reports to the network, including one who said that in 2001 he asked her to come to his office, locked the door using a button under his desk, and sexually assaulted her, causing her to pass out.
Lauer’s apology is deeply unsatisfying, as Vox’s Constance Grady points out. And Lauer is just one of the many men to deliver an unhelpful, half-hearted, or downright offensive apology in recent weeks, as women come forward with accounts of sexual harassment, assault, and abuse.

As Americans consider how to repair the damage done by powerful men to the lives and careers of those they have victimized, apologies are a good place to look. The right kind can help survivors and potentially make it easier for others to come forward in the future. The wrong kind of apology, however, risks reinforcing the stereotypes that make it so hard for survivors to speak up in the first place. Perpetrators can help survivors and society heal from harassment and assault, but only if they’re willing to own up to what they’ve done clearly and specifically, without making demands in return.

**Why apologies matter**

For some survivors of harassment and assault, a perpetrator admitting fault can make a big difference in healing. One woman who was raped on her college campus told NPR earlier this year that what she wanted was for her rapist “to step up to the plate and take responsibility, and to be active in teaching others about this experience.” He apologized, and the two ended up making a video about the assault that they showed to student groups. She described the process as “really therapeutic.”
Not every survivor will want to participate in such a process, nor will every perpetrator be willing. But the desire for an apology or admission is common. Lisa Bloom, an attorney who has represented many women who have reported harassment by powerful men, including Donald Trump and Rep. John Conyers, told Vox in October, “All my clients say the same thing: ‘Why don’t these guys just admit it and apologize? That would make a big difference in my life.’” She said that her previous clients’ desire for an apology influenced her decision to represent Harvey Weinstein, whom she hoped would offer one.

But not every apology is helpful. David Karp, a sociology professor at Skidmore College and the co-founder of Campus PRISM (Promoting Restorative Initiatives for Sexual Misconduct), told Vox he evaluates celebrity apologies based on how well they fulfill the following five criteria:

- An apology should include an explanation of the harm done to the person or people receiving the apology.
- It should include an admission of the perpetrator’s role in causing that harm, an “acknowledgment of personal responsibility and avoidance of denials or minimizing.”
- Perpetrators should express remorse.
- They should explain which behaviors they are committed to stopping now that they understand the harm they’ve caused.
- Finally, they should explain what they will do to make amends.

A good apology must be specific, and many powerful men’s apologies fail this test

Many of the apologies offered by powerful men in recent weeks have failed on Karp’s first two counts. Lauer, for instance, said, “Some of what is being said about me is untrue or mischaracterized, but there is enough truth in these stories to make me feel embarrassed and ashamed.”

It wasn’t clear from his statement exactly what conduct he was apologizing for, and what he was denying. Several other apologies by powerful men have followed a similar pattern. In a statement to the New York Times issued as women began to accuse him publicly of harassment, assault, and intimidation, Harvey Weinstein said, “I appreciate the way I’ve behaved with colleagues in the past has caused a lot of pain, and I sincerely apologize for it.” But he didn’t specify what behavior he was talking about. And soon after the statement was released, Weinstein’s lawyer threatened to sue the Times, arguing that its story on women’s reports of Weinstein’s behavior was “saturated with false and defamatory statements.”
Charlie Rose issued a similarly vague statement after multiple women reported unwanted advances by him. “I have behaved insensitively at times,” he told the Washington Post, “and I accept responsibility for that, though I do not believe that all of these allegations are accurate.”

Mark Halperin was somewhat more specific in his apology after women accused him of harassing them while at ABC News. “In recent days I have closely read the accounts of women with whom I worked,” he wrote on Twitter. “In almost every case, I have recognized conduct for which I feel profound guilt and responsibility, some involving junior ABC News personnel and women just starting out in the news business.” But, he added, “some of the allegations that have been made against me are not true.”

By apologizing for just some of the behavior they’ve been accused of — without specifying what they actually did and did not do — perpetrators invite the public to speculate about which allegations are false. They may believe they are doing accusers a favor by not singling them out directly, or they may simply be following the advice of lawyers, but effectively, they are casting doubt on all those who have come forward to speak about their behavior. A vague apology coupled with a vague denial has the effect of casting all accusers as potential liars.

This is one thing Louis C.K.’s apology — widely and rightly criticized for its odd focus on women’s “admiration” of C.K. — actually got right. C.K. was clear: “I want to address the stories told to The New York Times by five women named Abby, Rebecca, Dana, Julia who felt able to name themselves and one who did not,” he wrote. “These stories are true.”

By naming specific reports and affirming that they were accurate, C.K. helped ensure that the women who had the courage to come forward about his behavior would be believed. News stories will no longer need to qualify their accounts with the word “alleged.” In a time when survivors are still too often blamed and smeared, these women will stand as a high-profile example of survivors whose reports have been confirmed. And the confirmation of their reports will help others who come forward about sexual harassment and assault in the future.
Of course, C.K. could have done the women he harmed this service long ago, before they faced career repercussions for talking about what he did to them. Karp called C.K.’s statement “one of the more compelling” recent celebrity apologies, but said he had yet to see a powerful man apologizing for sexual harassment or assault actually fulfill all five of his criteria.

**The right apology can be the beginning — not the end — of healing**

Even a perfect apology is not an end, but a beginning. If Lauer, for instance, had enumerated all his misdeeds clearly, that wouldn’t necessarily make it just — or safe — to put him back in the anchor’s chair. One of the most repellant aspects of Harvey Weinstein’s response to the reports against him was his request for a “second chance” mere days after women came forward to accuse him of harassment and assault. Anyone who expects that an apology will lead to immediate forgiveness and a return to business as usual is offering that apology in bad faith.

Rather, we should think of apologies as a necessary step along the way to making amends. At PRISM, Karp works on campus misconduct policies and practices based on restorative justice, which he calls “an approach that emphasizes understanding and addressing the harm that’s caused by misconduct or crime.” The goal is to repair, as much as possible, the damage caused by the misdeed both to the victim and to the surrounding community.

As the revelations about harassment and abuse by powerful men continue, some people have begun to ask whether, and how, these men can atone for what they’ve done. It’s a valid question to ask not just for the sake of perpetrators, but for the sake of survivors: What would help redress the wrongs they’ve experienced?

A specific, no-strings-attached apology can be part of that process. But a half-apology that exposes survivors to more criticism and disbelief may do more harm than good.

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