This Is How to Apologize for Sexual Misconduct

If you realized you’ve crossed the line and hurt someone in the process, here’s what you need to do next.

BY ASHLEY FETTERS   MAR 19, 2018

In high school, I was friends with a guy we’ll call Pete. Pete was my sidekick, my dude, the buddy I’d goof off in class with, occasionally engaging in the kind of harmless light vandalism that’s eternally popular among high school kids.
One summer night, while we were both home from college, I went to Pete's after dinner to catch up over a beer. It was getting late, and I said I needed to get going. Pete seemed offended.

"Come on," he said. I laughed and reached for the doorknob. He blocked the door, pulled me in, and caught me by the waist. "Come on," he repeated. I squirmed. He squeezed harder. I pushed him away, and he mashed his face into mine.

"I actually do have to go," I said in the breeziest tone I could muster. Then I hurried out into the street.

What happened with Pete didn’t ruin my life, and it undoubtedly could have been worse. But I’d be lying if I said it didn’t have a lasting impact on me: every once in a while when I’m alone with a man, I think about being at Pete’s house, and his sweaty, unwelcome hands on me.

Sometimes, though, I wonder what would’ve happened if he’d apologized. Maybe, maybe, if he’d acknowledged what he’d done, or if he’d asked if I wanted to talk about it, I wouldn’t have lost my friend.

Maybe it’s you. Maybe you’ve been the Pete in this story, or the Aziz in the Aziz Ansari story, or the James Franco in the James Franco story, or the guy in any of the news stories who didn’t think he was causing any harm to the women around him, and suddenly thought, "Oh."

Maybe you’ve looked around the post-#MeToo landscape with new eyes and realized you’ve made some questionable moves — or worse — in the past. Maybe you cornered someone a little too aggressively at a holiday party, or made a sleazy comment to a coworker, or you had sex with someone who wasn’t necessarily saying no, but seemed far less enthusiastic than you were. Maybe you were the bad guy, and you feel awful about it. Where do you go from there? What should you do next?
In some (but by no means all) cases, the answer is simple: apologize. When Men's Health spoke with women who had been victims of sexual misconduct, ranging from harassment to violations of consent, many said that they did want to hear from past transgressors, even if they didn’t necessarily want to directly speak with them about it.

Apologizing for something as complicated and harmful as a violation of sexual consent is often easier said than done. When done wrong, it can actually make things worse. But when done right, it can lead to healing, even if it doesn’t necessarily lead to absolution. Here’s what you need to know to do it right, in a way that doesn’t cause more damage.

"This isn’t about your feelings. It’s about hers."

KNOW THAT SOMETIMES, AN APOLOGY JUST WON’T CUT IT.

First, if you have been accused of something terrible — or even criminal — then a simple apology isn't appropriate.

Even if you don’t believe that you fall in this category, “just because you apologize, you won’t necessarily be forgiven,” says Dr. Shawn Burn, a psychology professor who does social justice-oriented research at Cal Poly. “Sometimes we’ve done damage to the relationship and others’ perceptions of us that aren’t easily undone," she says. That’s OK. This isn’t about your feelings; it’s about hers.

GET IN TOUCH IN WRITING.

This is a serious conversation, and if you have it in real time, “people don’t have time to gather their thoughts,” says Dr. David Karp, a Skidmore College sociology professor and the director of the Project on Restorative Justice. Texts or calls can also seem superficial.
That’s why Karp recommends sending an email or a letter. If you apologize via email or a letter, it doesn’t force the receiver to respond immediately — or at all, if that's what they'd prefer.

“If the person forgives you, that’s grace on their part. And they don’t owe it to you.”

YOU NEED TO MAKE IT CLEAR THAT YOU TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS.

No apology should ever start with the words “I’m sorry if.” ”If” makes the apology feel conditional, like you’re only sorry if you did indeed hurt someone’s feelings, not because you’ve come to terms with harm you’ve caused. “That’s like saying, ‘It's your problem, not mine,’” Karp says.

Steph*, 28, was the victim of non-consensual sex with an ex-boyfriend. If she heard from him now, she would want him to take full ownership of his actions. “When men say sorry, it shouldn't be shrouded in, ‘I was young and stupid and drunk’ or ‘I had no idea’ or ‘I misread the signals.’ It should be a full admission that they behaved in a way that they see now was hurtful and/or damaging,” she says.

RESIST THE URGE TO MAKE A BIG SPEECH.

A good apology is about making the receiving party feel cared for. It’s not about showing off how well you can empathize. “I wouldn’t want a man’s apology to be some kind of extended soapbox thing that takes up all the air in the room,” Steph says. “The apology isn’t about him coming across as some noble feminist hero.” Keep it limited to a few short, clear paragraphs.
You should be conscious of the language you use, but not to the extent that you sound like a robot. “Be a human about it,” says Charlotte. “Don’t slip into legal-brief jargon. That makes it sound like you’re trying to not get fired.”

DON’T MAKE HER COMFORT YOU.

Marian*, 29, once slept with a man who spread cruel rumors about her after their encounter. Though he eventually apologized for it, she said it was ultimately unsatisfactory. “I don't want you to grovel,” says Marian. “I don't want to have to perform the emotional labor of comforting you.”

Saying you’re sorry over and over again, or saying how you feel so awful you can’t even sleep at night, can pull the focus from where it needs to be, which is on the other person's well-being.

TELL HER HOW YOU’RE TRYING TO CHANGE.

Molly*, 27, was sexually assaulted when she was in college. If her assailant reached out to her now, she’d want him to tell her exactly what he’d learned since then. “Not only would it say to me that he realized what had happened with me was bad, but it also would show me that he’s not going to do that to anyone else. That’s more important than him apologizing to me,” she says.

“Say, ‘I can’t undo what I did, but I hope it helps you to know that I won’t do that again.'”

Make it clear that you have taken the necessary steps to remedy your behavior, whether that’s seeking counseling, being more attentive to women’s verbal and nonverbal cues, or simply recognizing the emotional harm that comes from sexual harassment and sexual assault.

“Say, ‘I can’t undo what I did, but I hope it helps you to know that I won’t do that again, to you or anyone else,’” Burn suggests. “I also plan to do my part to change male culture by calling out men who sexually harass.”
Hayley*, 27, told *Men’s Health* she had one sexual partner who *removed* a condom *during sex without asking*. While she’d probably never want to hear from him again, if he did reach out, she’d at least want him to invite her to talk about it.

Karp recommends including a clause at the end of your letter or email that goes something like this: “If you want to talk this through, I’d really welcome that chance — for my own sense of well-being, as well as to create an opportunity for me to be helpful to you.”

**DON’T EXPECT EVERYTHING TO BE OK.**

Some women won’t want to revisit a night that was particularly unpleasant or uncomfortable for them at best, and traumatizing at worst. Be prepared for that response.

If the woman on the receiving end of your apology declines to talk, declines to respond, or declines to pick up wherever you left off in your relationship, that’s her right.

“If the person you’re apologizing to forgives you, that’s grace,” Charlotte adds. “That’s grace on their part, and they don’t owe it to you.”

*Last names have been withheld to allow subjects to speak freely on private matters.*