Have you ever noticed how often, and in how many different ways, people say they’re sorry? Lately I’ve seen “sorry” issues popping up everywhere in my work and personal life.

- When my colleague fails to meet a self-imposed deadline for sending me a document to review, he says, “I’m so sorry I dropped the ball.”
- Then, when I send the document back, I say I’m sorry for making so many edits.
- Whenever my twin 4-year-olds are tired and cranky, they do a wide variety of “sorry”-worthy things to each other (biting, hair pulling, pinching, full-body tackling, etc.)
- On those particularly intense days, my husband comes home, takes one look at my face, and says “Sorry, honey.”
- As he then looks around at the state of the house, I say “Sorry, it’s a disaster in here. (Again.)”

Sometimes the outcome of the “sorry” is positive and constructive, but many times it’s really not.

As we think about the impact of saying we’re sorry, it can be helpful to distinguish between (at least) six different types of sorry:

1. “I Suck” Sorry
   - Typical voice tone: self-denigrating or depressed
   - “Sorry, I know, I screwed up again.
   - “Sorry, this is all my fault. I should have known better.”

Do you ever find yourself making comments like this? I certainly do. Notice that when we say these things, the focus is all on us and how bad we are, rather than on whatever difficulty was created for the person being apologized to. In fact, the other person often ends up reassuring us (“Don't worry about it; I know you’ve had a hard day”) or even saying they’re sorry (“Sorry life is so crazy for you; of course I understand”).

So there’s a payoff for us here. We get to feel we’ve done the right thing by apologizing, without having to give much thought to anybody but ourselves. And on top of that the other person may actually step in to take care of us!

I’m embarrassed to admit how easily I slip into the “I Suck” Sorry—”Sorry the house is such a mess.” “Sorry it’s taken so long for me to get back to you.” “Sorry to be so negative.” And for me at least, reassurance from others doesn’t balance out the negative impact of feeling bad about myself. To counteract this habitual tendency, I’ve started making a concerted effort to convert “I Suck” Sorries into:
Reality checks—testing whether I’m just imagining the other person’s negative feelings (“Does the mess in the living room bother you, or not?” “Was the comment I made upsetting to you?”), and/or

Appreciation—using the opportunity to generate positive feelings instead (“Thank you for your patience.” “I really appreciate your understanding.”). (For an awesome cartoon on this topic, see “If you want to say Thank you, Stop saying sorry.”)

That shift is still a work in progress for me, but I’m highly motivated to avoid passing this type of communication on to my kids. The other day I heard one of my little girls say, “It’s all my fault—I ruined it” with an “I suck” tone of voice. I’d love to never hear that from her again.

2. “You Suck” Sorry
Typical voice tone: edgy, condescending, or detached

“Well. I’m sorry you feel that way!”

A very different way of communicating is the “You Suck” Sorry, essentially a #sorrynotsorry. It’s an apology in the same way that “Nice move, moron” is a compliment and “What are you, stupid?” is a sincere inquiry. Depending on the phrasing and voice tone, “You suck” sorries can range from relatively subtle (“I’m sorry you’re upset, but…”) to blatantly insulting (“Sorry you can’t take a joke”). At the subler end of the spectrum, the speaker may genuinely feel as though what they’ve said counts as saying they’re sorry. But virtually nobody on the receiving end would agree.

I think I do a good job of avoiding the “You Suck” Sorry with almost everyone—except my husband. (Sorry, honey. Or, rather: Thank you so much for being patient with me.) I know I’m not alone in this. For many of us, our closest relationships are the ones where we’re most vulnerable to taking things personally and getting defensive—a reaction that’s at the root of almost all “You Suck” Sorries. We hear a criticism (“You’re always late!”) or perceived criticism (“The kids were hungry so we ate without you”) and launch a counterattack (“Well, sorry. I’m sure if it was you out working, you’d magically beat the traffic and be home at 5pm every day”).

So how do we shift from a “You Suck” Sorry to more constructive communication? When emotions run strong, this shift can be extremely difficult. Even when we change the words we say, our voice tone and body language tend to betray our true feelings. Therefore, to talk less defensively, we need to actually feel less defensive—which means taking things a little less personally. Strategies for taking things less personally are too numerous to do justice to in this article. (For one method, see my earlier blog on separating intent from impact.) Almost all of us could benefit from using one or more of these. But for now, I’d like to recommend an all-purpose backup strategy: stall.

When you feel defensive and can’t snap out of it right away, often the best thing you can do is buy yourself time. Recognize that you’re feeling reactive and try sticking to whatever you can manage to say in a neutral tone of voice. Below are a few examples. I can personally attest that at least some of the time, these can effectively buy time in a conversation without making the situation worse.

• Minimalist

“The kids were hungry so we ate without you.”
Response: “Okay.”

Sometimes the other person isn’t expecting a response, and if you say a simple “Okay” or “Mm hmm,” they won’t push you.

• Simple Agreement

“You’re late.”
Response: “Yes, I am.”

If you can simply agree with what the person says without an edge in your voice, go for it.

• Cards on the Table

“You’re late again! You’re always late!”

A very different way of communicating is the “You Suck” Sorry, essentially a #sorrynotsorry. It’s an apology in the same way that “Nice move, moron” is a compliment and “What are you, stupid?”
“Hearing you say that, I feel very defensive. I want to wait to have this conversation until I’m in a better frame of mind.”

Clearly stating your emotional state—“I’m feeling defensive” or “I’m in a negative state of mind”—is much less likely to escalate the situation than venting negative emotions through your words or voice tone.

Skillful stalling can give you time to calm yourself down and plan out a better alternative to a “You Suck” Sorry. It may help to ask yourself, “Which part of what they were saying is true?” “How might I feel in their shoes?” “What really matters here?” Or “What might I say if I weren’t taking this personally?” At that point, if it’s appropriate to offer an Empathy Sorry or Ownership Sorry (see below), you’re more likely to be able to do it.

I had a chance to practice this recently, when a business owner scolded me for sitting and reading with my kids on the sidewalk outside her storefront. Not surprisingly, my attempt at explaining myself (“My daughter just had a tantrum and this was the only way she’d calm down”) just made things worse. The best I could manage after that was “Uh huh” and “Okay.” During our long walk home—in between a couple of other meltdowns (this was a spectacularly rough day)—I was able to put myself in this woman’s shoes and summon up some genuine empathy. I sent my Empathy Sorry in an email and received a gracious response.

“A genuine, heartfelt Empathy or Ownership Sorry is impossible to force.”

In situations where there’s a chance the other person wasn’t actually being critical, a stall may help give you the presence of mind to try a reality check. When you ask without defensiveness, “Did it bother you that I didn’t make it home for dinner?” you may be pleasantly surprised to hear the honest answer is no. (That’s often the case for me in these types of conversations. Have I mentioned my husband is very patient?)

3. Polite Sorry
Typical voice tone: neutral or friendly

“Oops, sorry. I forgot.”

This is the simplest and most straightforward of the sorries. You bump into someone and say, “Sorry, I didn’t see you there.” Or you offer a brief “Sorry I’m late” when you miss the first two minutes of an informal meeting. Like “Excuse me,” this is part of basic social etiquette. So long as you don’t slip into an “I suck” voice tone, this kind of reflexive communication can work just fine. However, if you’d like to start saying sorry a little less often, you might want to try sticking to “Excuse me” or just “Oops” when that’s all you really mean. And of course, the Polite Sorry would be inappropriate for something major—“Oops, sorry I lied to you for 20 years” isn’t going to cut it.

4. Grudging Sorry
Typical voice tone: whining or resentful

[“Tell your sister you’re sorry.”] (mumble) “Sorry.” [“Louder!”] “SOOOORRY!!”

A genuine, heartfelt sorry (like the Empathy or Ownership Sorry, below) is impossible to force. Numerous parenting experts advise against requiring a child to apologize, because it typically results in an unsatisfying-for-everyone Grudging Sorry, or sometimes an “I Suck” or “You Suck” Sorry. (See here for a nice article on the topic. I do my best to follow this advice in my own parenting.) A forced sorry is particularly problematic if you demand it with anger and irritation in your voice. This reinforces the message that saying sorry is about how bad or wrong the child has been, rather than on how the other person is feeling. In response, the child can either agree they’re bad and feel guilty (“I suck”) or disagree and feel resentful (“You suck” or grudging apology).
So what’s the alternative? How do we sincerely say we’re sorry and help our kids learn to do the same? A good starting place is what we’ll turn to next: empathy.

5. Empathy Sorry
Typical voice tone: empathetic, with authentic feeling

“I’m so sorry for everything you’ve been going through this year.”

“I’m deeply sorry for what has happened to your family.”

The Empathy Sorry is the least self-focused variety. Instead of venting our own guilt (“I suck”) or irritation (“You suck”), it expresses empathetic concern for what the other person has experienced. Because empathy is not an apology, it can be helpful whether or not we’ve done something wrong.

For example, imagine that one of your friends was expecting you to pick them up outside on a cold day, and you never did. You might say:

“I’m sorry you were stuck waiting out there in the cold. That must have been awful!”

Here it doesn’t matter whether you forgot to pick up your friend, got in an accident so were unable to pick them up, or never said anything at all about picking them up (maybe they just imagined it or misheard). You can still empathize with the difficulty and suffering they went through.

In any Empathy Sorry, voice tone is crucial. No matter what words you say, an “I suck” or “You suck” tone of voice will send an “I suck” or “You suck” message. The best way to strike a genuine empathetic voice tone is to have genuine empathetic concern—to really notice and care about how the other person feels, without taking it personally.

We focus a lot of empathy in our house—both in talking directly to our twins (“I hear how frustrated you are,” “You’re really mad because I didn’t do what you wanted!”) and in talking to them about each other (“How do you think she felt when you said that?” “It looks like she’s a little hurt/sad/lonely…”). The girls occasionally come out with sweet, heartfelt Empathy Sorries (“Sorry you were disappointed,” “Sorry that didn’t work out”). More often, they stick with the just-as-effective nonverbal equivalent: a big silent hug.

6. Ownership Sorry
Typical voice tone: empathetic, with authentic feeling

“I’m really sorry for the way I lashed out. I was way out of line.”

“I’m sorry I failed to acknowledge the important contribution you made.”

As helpful as it is to empathize, there are times when we need to go one step further and take responsibility for our mistakes.

Again, voice tone is key. An over-the-top agonized, depressed, or self-denigrating tone distracts from the essential message of sincere, straightforward regret. It’s hard for someone to take in the words “I’m sorry” when your voice tone says, “I’m such a loser!”

A heartfelt Ownership Sorry can make a big difference in a professional or personal relationship. Demonstrating integrity by owning up to errors can help bring peace to the person apologizing. And for the person on the receiving end, an Ownership Sorry can be both validating and reassuring. It validates any negative feelings they might have had by confirming that they had reason to be upset. If this is an ongoing relationship, it also provides some reassurance that similar mistakes in the future will at least be acknowledged. Even better is following an Ownership Sorry with an offer to make amends (“Let me make this right”), a pledge to behave differently in the future (“I promise that in the future I will check with you before making commitments on your behalf”), and/or a request for mutual accountability (“If you ever see me do that again, please call me on it right away”).

In a parenting or professional leadership situation, Ownership Sorries provide excellent role-modeling. Recently when I talked to Sammy about biting Abby, she changed the subject to what I had done: “You yelled at me.” And it’s true. I did. I had
pulled her away from her sister yelling, “Sammy, STOP IT! Stop hurting her!” So I told Sammy I was sorry. And that was true too. I don’t feel good about yelling, and if it makes things worse, I want to stop. We ended that conversation agreeing that she would work on not biting and I would work on not yelling.

We can directly invite an Ownership Sorry, although as I mentioned earlier, it can’t be forced. When one of my girls hurts the other, I often ask (neutrally), “Is there anything you want to say to your sister?” Sometimes it’s a real “I’m sorry, Sammy” or “I’m sorry, Abby.” But typically the answer is no. Even I’m not always able to muster these apologies right away (thus the need for the stalling strategies above!), so I don’t expect my 4-year-olds to have that capacity.

The sweetest, most genuine little Ownership Sorries are the purely spontaneous ones. Maybe Sammy hits Abby in the middle of the day and isn’t ready then to apologize. I give Abby a hug, help her calm down, and talk about how she’s hurt, and then Sammy gives her a little hug too. Then later at dinner Sammy’s finally ready to say, “Abby, I’m sorry I hit you.” And she really means it—there’s a little tear in her eye. These sorries aren’t yet frequent or consistent, but in the mind of this mom, they’re well worth waiting for.

Footnote for those of you who’ve studied SAVI® (the System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction)
I imagine the following breakdown of behaviors:
• “I Suck” Sorry—Self-attack
• “You Suck” Sorry—Attack/Blame
• Polite Sorry—Ritual and/or Personal information
• Grudging Sorry—Complaint or Attack/Blame
• Empathy Sorry & Ownership Sorry—Inner feeling

Questions to Consider
Do these six categories resonate with you? Are there additional categories you’d add to the list?

How do you tend to say you’re sorry in your work and personal life, and what kinds of reactions do you get? How do you react when others say they’re sorry in each of these ways?

Another important question has to do with the role of the listener. When we’re on the receiving end of a “sorry” that doesn’t feel right to us, how can we take the initiative to turn the conversation around? (This could be a whole other article. If you’re interested, let us know!)