

The Amends Process

Amends is a process which moves a relationship toward reconciliation and restoration.

Restoring a relationship requires vulnerability and openness on the part of the one who has committed the offense or harm and also on the part of the one who has been hurt, it is not an easy process for either parties. Therefore, patience, grace and calm listening is required.

If you are initially unable to move through these steps because of emotional distress, escalated intensity or “triggered”, do this at another time when you are ready when things are cool. Do this process at a time when you are collected and ready. Possibly you may need a support person or mediator like a friend, pastor, or therapist to be with you.

This process can often feel kind of clinical or wooden. Do your best to give it some heart and allow some deep feeling into it. Let it be more about the process of reconciliation and openness rather than the content of the words you will say. Be present as you write out the categories of the Amends and listen to whatever arises internally. Let those internal prompts guide you into deeper understanding of the offense and toward a deeper connection with the ones you love.

The Amends process explained here is a four-part conversation that will take time and consideration. Here are the three parts and one optional suggestion that will move you toward restoration of a broken relationship. The first step is to take ownership of the wrong and be responsible for the behavior, you are fully culpable. Secondly, is placing yourself in the other person shoes to gain an empathetic understanding of their experience when you made the mistake. Thirdly, you will intentionally make a plan to reduce or eliminate the behavior. Finally, the optional, but potentially important part of this is working through forgiveness and rebuilding trust. Let’s start with the first step, Ownership.

Ownership, or Here’s what I did wrong.

The initial move toward amends requires you to have full culpability, ownership and responsibility for the action or behavior that is the offense in this situation. Owning it is a significant movement toward taking personal accountability for what you have done or said.

Sometimes the unhealthy actions or behaviors of the other person could have been part of the interaction, however amends requires that you take full responsibility for your actions or words, regardless of the words or actions of the other. You must take full blame and fault for what you have said or done. You must own it without placing any blame on the other.

Accountability is a foundation of trust. If one person has a difficult time holding themselves or being held accountable for their actions, trust will be difficult to build. If holding blame, fault and accountability for your behavior is a difficult thing for you to do, you may need to do some deeper work. But know this, if you are to build trust and reconciliation in your relationships you must take ownership for your poor behaviors.

What you will do is commonly called “confession”. You may think of the confession booth where you would tell a priest your sins or wrongdoings. This is the same thing. You will be confessing what you did wrong. Confession is a pathway toward restoration of relationship. It will take humility. You can do this.

This is very difficult for some people, especially if your family of origin blamed you for things you did not do (scapegoat role) or if they were just judgmental and found fault with everyone else. If this is difficult for you, you must do all you can to become proficient with taking ownership. Talk to someone about how you tend to blame, find fault in others, hold grudges or judge people. These are indicators that ownership will be a tough growth area for you, you must break free from this posture and grow with intention.

Taking ownership may be vulnerable and uncomfortable, but if you want to restore the relationship, allow yourself to grow in this area and embrace the challenge of saying, “I was wrong.” That is how the statement of ownership goes, you will literally say, “I was wrong.” I was wrong when I treated you poorly at the party. I was wrong when I called you that name. I was wrong when I escalated my voice. I was wrong when I sought the attention of my co-worker. I was wrong when I brought up that past wrongdoing, after I said I forgave you for that.

It could be working through a brutal offense, “I was wrong for having the affair. I chose to pursue another person and completely betrayed you, our marriage, our vows and my faith. On many levels, it was wrong.” This would be an offense that would possibly need to have mediation. And there would be an opportunity for questions to be asked and answered about the offense. However, there will need to be a limit to the depth of details that will be processed. General questions are fine. Details, not so much. Get help if you need it.

Do not use the words, “I’m sorry.” “I’m sorry” are just brush-off words designed to get the person to disregard the offense without taking ownership. “I’m sorry” does not move you toward reconciliation, “I was wrong”, does. I would say the three most powerful words in a relationship are not “I love you”, but “I was wrong.” This is where true restoration will have the chance to happen when you own it and speak it. Do not say you were wrong for anything you were not wrong for doing, just to please, manage moods or get through the tension.

Develop your ownership statement of what you did wrong. Write down what you did that was wrong.

I was wrong when I ...

Disclosure: Often, the accountability/ownership statement is also called a “Disclosure” when an offense has betrayal, deep hurt/pain and crosses significant boundaries, like the offender has affair/s or long-term committed offenses over time. If this is the case this ownership statement must be much more detailed in scope and will also be processed with questions over time. The disclosure must be done to the fullest extent as possible, sharing details by the “installment” method by leaking little bits and pieces over time is agonizing, it must be done all at once as much as possible. Then, with the opportunity for the offended partner to ask questions, as long as that needs to happen. Details must be limited to how often, when, what the offense was, why it happened and the nature of the connection. The details of who/names, where/places (The Marriott) or specifics like having sex doggy-style need to be left out. The offended partner may obsess about these details, but it causes more harm to know the specific details because you’ll never go to a Marriott hotel again. If the need for the full disclosure feels necessary, we can talk about this more in full as a process of healing.

Empathy, or Here's how I think you might be feeling.

The second aspect of amends is a statement of empathy, or what you imagine the other person experienced when you did or said. Empathy is the ability to understand or identify with another person's experience or feelings. You did something, now it is important to gain and understanding of their experience.

What was it like for them when this happened? What did this make them feel?

What words describe the experience, maybe betrayed, unsafe, belittled, or unimportant?

In what ways did it undercut the relationship, trust and security and what was that like?

If you find yourself with difficulty having empathy or imagining what someone else feels or experiences, this is your growth area. Maybe you'll need to talk to someone or read some books. Empathy is a significant part of the reconciliation process. But, even if this is tough, you can do it. Do your best to make this part happen. Just be curious and ask questions.

As you begin to gain empathy, you will be able to complete the following sentences: "I think I have an idea of what you felt when I did that." or "You must have been heartbroken when I did that." "You must feel entirely betrayed." "I can imagine how you have lost all sense of trust with me." "You must feel very vulnerable and exposed right now." "I wonder if you feel insecure and unsafe, maybe even alone and rejected."

To help find the answers to these, ask some clarifying questions to help you understand more, like "What was it like when I talked to you like that?" or "I don't quite know what that was like, could you tell me more about what you experienced?"

Be curious and take time to consider and listen to understand more about what their experience was like as a consequence of the offense, then vulnerably give your best shot with what you see and hear about what they are feeling. Of course, you won't know or feel fully, but this is your open attempt at gaining better understanding about the consequences of your actions. This is guaranteed to be clumsy and awkward, but trust in the process. Do your best and ask for clarification rather than get defensive if things get tense.

So, what would your empathetic statement be?

Response Letter

If the offense was great enough to require a Disclosure, there may need to be a Response Letter. This will be a written document outlining the experience and feelings of the offended, and any observations or other questions that may still be unanswered. This increases understanding and empathy of the depth of pain or trauma with the event. It also helps with clarifying any unanswered questions and loose ends.

Intention, or Here's what I am going to do so this won't happen again.

The intention statement is essentially making a plan to make sure this occurrence is most likely to not happen again or on some occasions, if it is a non-negotiable, so it never happens again, period. The goal here is to do the work needed so that this behavior is no longer part of your life. This is an important thing to provide for your relationship so that trust is built.

Depending on the level of the offense (recovering from an affair will take so much more time and work than a badly timed name-calling event) you will basically engage in a "Project Management" process moving you from point "A" to point "B" like you would with any project at work.

You may create boundaries for yourself, read a book on the subject, pursue therapy or spiritual guidance, or create some clear ground rules for conflict in your relationship. It may look like a 6-month dive into the world of understanding anger, emotions and how the brain works; taking an anger class, reading four books and talking to a therapist about navigating anger in my life. Or maybe trauma, or shame, or how porn is such an important thing to me. Whatever it is, your intent is to do anything it takes to learn, change, and grow in such a way that the likelihood of this happening again is decreased significantly.

This is about change and growth. You'll want to go deep, into the core of the problem. "First Order Change" is just changing your behavior. It's called "White Knuckling" in some circles; Don't drink! Don't Drink! Or Don't look at Porn! Don't look at porn! It works for a bit, but is not sustainable. You are looking for "Second Order Change" which is about deeper issues where you process in your inner world of your identity, your beliefs about yourself, what is driving your desires, what your addictions provide for you or how it is that you ended up like you are. If you want real change, take ownership and make it so.

If you are the offended one, it is essential that learn to set boundaries and say "No!". A boundary is a line in the sand dividing healthy behavior from unhealthy behavior. It is saying, "I will not subject myself to this again." and creating a boundary communicating what is right or wrong to you and what you want in the relationship. These boundaries will help to develop the plan to make sure things are clearly communicated what is good or bad with behaviors.

What plan would you make to make sure that you will not do this behavior? Point A to Point B?

What is your Intention statement? Here's what I am going to do so this doesn't happen again.

Forgiveness (The optional, but potentially very important, part of this Process)

Forgiveness is optional because it is each individual's choice and responsibility to provide forgiveness or not. Also, this could be something that has to do with your faith. You may feel the need for this or not. Do this part of the process, if you don't have a problem with this.

Forgiveness is not forgetting; it is releasing the penalty for the offense. If you forgive the person, you will no longer hold the penalty over their head or hold resentment in your heart. You will remember because whatever happened is now part of your story, forgetting is not part forgiveness, regardless of what you've been told. Forgiving is a commitment to release the penalty of the offense, to let it go. Often, the process of forgiving takes time to process, sometimes quite a bit of time and effort.

The legal system uses forgiveness at times. A judge has the power to give the full penalty of the law and sentence a person to extreme punishment or to show mercy and forgive, releasing the person of that punishment. Mercy is a release of the punishment, not getting what you do deserve. If you have ever experienced this, you know what it feels like. It feels good and often unexpected to receive mercy.

Debt is also a significant aspect of forgiveness and helps us understand how forgiveness works. When someone owes you something, that is debt, there is a repayment to be made to settle the tab before the debt is released. The settlement finds balance and releases the debt or penalty.

Forgiveness is the offended party releasing the debt before the debt is paid. Any offense places a person in "debt", they now owe the offended party a penalty or repayment. Forgiveness changes that process, bypassing the need to settle a debt or repay a penalty. Forgiveness is a completely different way to approach relationship offenses. The letter of the law would require that the debt be paid in full before there is any settlement or relationship. Forgiveness bypasses the law and creates a new path toward relationship reconciliation.

I'll use a parable Jesus tells in the Bible to explain this further. Jesus tells a parable in Matthew 18:21-35, "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ***ten thousand talents*** was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, **canceled the debt** and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him ***a hundred denarii***. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I **canceled all that debt** of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had **mercy** on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you **unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.**"

Jesus, being the master storyteller here, gives us a huge illustration of forgiveness and debt. We wouldn't see it unless someone told us, but one talent is 20 years of labor and one denarius is on day of labor. So, 100 denarii, what the fellow servant owed, is roughly \$80 per day x 100 = \$8,000. 10,000 talents however, what the wicked servant of the story owed, was 1 year of labor approximately 30K per year, so, 20 years of labor 30K x 20yrs. = 600K for each talent. 600K x 10,000 = 6 billion dollars. The wicked servant owed 6 billion dollars! The fellow servant owed only 8 thousand dollars. Quite a difference. As Jesus told this his audience would have been shocked by the obvious exaggeration.

This is the same for us, we have been forgiven much, therefore the obvious turn would be to forgive much. If we hold bitterness and resentment in our hearts, the other person will not feel the pain much, except for the distance or tension in the relationship. But we will experience the negativity and grind of what bitterness does to your soul.

Remember the saying that "resentment is like drinking poison hoping the other person will die." You are the one who experiences the negativity. In this, the idea of forgiveness gives us a brilliant path toward freedom and relationship reconciliation. Forgiveness is good for the soul, it releases so much negativity.

Don't forgive prematurely, before you have really released it. If you still hold it and really have not let it go, it will come up again, like bringing up the past in an argument. Forgive, but give it the time you need before you say, "I forgive you." As the offending one, ask, "Will you forgive me?" Then give the offended one the time need to do so.

If you have done the first three steps outlined in this process, you will be more prepared for the process of forgiveness with the offended party. Just remember it is a process, so give it time.

What do I feel about forgiveness in this situation?

What resentments am I holding on to? Who do I need to forgive?

What would it look like to ask for forgiveness? Am I ready?

Other Important Questions;

Do I need outside help like a therapist or spiritual guide?

Do we need to do the Full Disclosure process?

Are there legal ramifications, and if so, should I consult an attorney?

What will this mean for the future of my relationship?