

COUNSELOR'S CORNER

by Scott Browning, Ph.D.

SCRIPTS TO GET BY ON: WHEN YOU HURT (OR GET HURT BY) SOMEONE YOU LOVE

By Patricia L. Papernow, Ed.D.

Wouldn't life be wonderful if we could live up close to other human beings without ever hurting or disappointing each other? Often in family living, however, we hurt and disappoint each other. Many hurts in a new stepfamily are simply accidents. What is a crime in one part of the family (leaving wet towels on the floor, eating sugar cereal, failing to say hello upon entering the house), may be an ordinary event in the other.

Some hurts result from "bad behavior." "Bad" behavior includes (but is not limited to) dealing with difficult situations by calling names ("You're stupid."), being sarcastic or critical, withdrawing or attacking. It is worth noting that using "good behavior" i.e., your best interpersonal skills, when you are upset with someone you love creates much less hurt and leaves less mess. "I" statements are easier to respond to undefensively than "you" statements: "I'm feeling really sad that our theater plans were changed by your son's soccer championship," works better than, "You insensitive clod, you never put me first!" Giving "data" (what a Martian anthropologist would see or hear if she were watching and taking notes), works better than labeling or blaming: "When your daughter comes into the room, she doesn't say hello and that's painful for me," is easier to hear than, "Your daughter is an uncivil brat." Requests evoke less defensiveness than accusations. ("Would you be willing to ask your daughter to say hello to me when she comes in the door?" rather than "You obviously raised her terribly.") And, always, compassion helps: "I know your daughter isn't used to this, but it would help me a lot."

But even using our best interpersonal behavior does not change the fact that sometimes remarried family life involves pulls and obligations that require doing things that hurt or disappoint people about whom we care deeply. (A son's championship soccer game intrudes on a theater date with your new partner. Or special long held plans with a new partner require missing a child's special event.) Sometimes there is no way around the fact that what we have to say is painful to hear. ("I'm having trouble with your child." "I'm so sorry. I need to break our date because my child has an event I cannot miss.") Whether the hurt in family is the result of an "accident", due to "bad" behavior by one or both of you, or simply the painful result of remarried family realities, this column describes four steps you can take to heal the hurt.

If you hurt someone you care about, and the hurt doesn't seem to heal, check to see if you have missed one of the following four steps, or if you did one halfheartedly. Check with yourself, and then check with the person

you hurt. Likewise, if you got hurt and it still won't go away, use these steps to see what you could ask for that might help put your hurt to rest.

Step One. Apologize. Say, "I'm sorry."

A simple "I'm so sorry" can go a very long way to healing someone in pain. If you are the person who created the hurt, this step requires finding in yourself the part of you that is genuinely sorry that you hurt someone you love. If you find it hard to apologize, work on separating your *intention* (what you meant to do) from your *effect* (what happened to the other person). You may not have known your new partner hates finding large forks in the small fork bin. You may have been so hurt yourself that you lashed out. Or you may have been kind and gracious, but what you had to say was, nonetheless, hard to hear. In all of these cases, your intention may have been fine, but your effect was still hurtful. *Arguing that you didn't mean it will not fix your partner's hurt.* Likewise, trying to figure out who was right and who was wrong will only prolong the agony for both of you.

This is equally important if you are *asking* for an apology. Remember that most hurts are unintentional accidents. Try taking four deep breaths (count: one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi). "I know that you love me and that you never mean to hurt me. But when you cancel our plans, it's really painful," is much more likely to get the apology you are needing than, "What is wrong with you anyway."

When both people feel wronged, remember that it is in *your* best interest to have the hurt resolved. That may help you make the first move. Example:

Mary and John have just begun living together in what was originally John's family's house. Mary, in her eagerness to make Sally, who is away at college, feel welcome, says to Sally, "I hope you'll come *visit* soon!" Sally is outraged. "How could she tell me to visit my own house. Obviously Mary feels it's her house and not mine." John agrees with Sally: "How could you use the word "visit" with my daughter!" Mary is aghast. She meant to be welcoming but had the opposite effect. John wants Mary to say she was "wrong". Mary says, "But I didn't do anything wrong! All I did was use the word 'visit'! I was trying to be welcoming. Why don't you understand?" John feels very hurt that Mary won't "apologize." To John, apologize means, "Say you were wrong." Mary feels very hurt because she feels she did nothing "wrong".

In this example, despite Mary's good intentions, her effect was painful. John and Sally need to get interested

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CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS FOR SPRING 1999

By: Gloria Clark, B.A., Chapter Development Chair

This should be a good time for chapters. The movie "Stepmom" came out on Christmas Day, "Woman's Day Magazine" has an article on stepfamilies, and there have been many interviews in newspapers around the country on step-family issues.

It has been a good time for our chapter here in Pittsburgh. We have received many calls from people who have seen the movie or read the articles and feel a surge of hope about their own stepfamilies. These articles make good handouts and points for discussion at meetings.

This time of year also brings us a time to review our financial record for the past year and to report this to SAA to fulfill our responsibility to them to maintain our chapter status. Its is vital for SAA to have this information and also the name, address and phone number of the leaders so that referrals can be made when people contact SAA. Many of you have already completed your forms and

have sent them in; if you haven't, I urge you to do so—it is vital information.

At the bottom of the financial report there is a request that you report chapter activities on the back of the form. To make this easy to do I keep a log of each monthly meeting and list the number of people attending, the speaker or main topic of discussion and what handouts we used. I find that being able to review that information helps me to plan the monthly meetings and facilitates the annual report.

I would once again like to remind you that as chapter development chair I am available for chapter leaders who are just getting started or chapter leaders who are asking themselves "why am I doing this" or anyone needing to talk about their chapters. It has been helpful for me to be able to chat with other leaders to keep my enthusiasm alive and share ideas about meetings. I can be reached through SAA at 1-800-735-0329.

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in Mary's *intention*. Mary needs to be interested in her *effect*. Someone has to make the first move.

Mary, with some help from good friends, is able to see that she hurt Sally, even though she didn't mean to. Mary feels terrible about hurting Sally, and this realization enables her to write to Sally and genuinely apologize for hurting her. "I am so sorry I hurt you so badly. It was absolutely not my intention, but I can see I really hurt you." This eased things slightly between Mary and Sally, which comforted John and enabled him to back off.

Mary was able to offer Sally a wholehearted apology because for Mary, "I'm sorry," stopped meaning, "I'm a bad person," or even, "I was wrong." It began to mean, "I can see that I hurt you, and I am so sorry for hurting you."

Note that an apology can be "poorly landed" or "well landed." Giving an apology is like feeding your partner (or your child or your stepchild) a piece of fruit. If you are shy, or feeling defensive, it is easy to end up tossing the fruit halfheartedly towards the other person's left knee and then looking quickly away. Looking straight at the person you are apologizing to will greatly increase your effect. Work on tenderly placing that chunk of cantaloupe right into his or her mouth.

Step Two. Listen.

Letting a person *tell you how you have hurt them* can often go a surprisingly long way toward healing a hurt.

Listen with as much compassion and caring as you can muster. Hold on to the conviction that you can be a perfectly nice, well meaning person and still *accidentally* hurt someone you care about. *Save your explanation* of your reasons, your thinking, etc., until they are completely finished talking and they feel heard and responded to. When you feel defensive (and you will), breathe (four Mississippi will probably do the trick) and let it go by.

This step always sounds great but is hard in the doing. It requires taking your urge to defend yourself and putting it aside to just listen. It may help to remember that it is in *your* best interests that your partner feel better. Defending yourself won't make them feel better. Example:

Jerry, a patient of mine, and his teen-aged daughter, Sarah, have been living with Leah, Jerry's second wife, for two years. On a "Dad and Daughter Day Out", Sarah had confided to Jerry that she feels that Jerry always takes Leah's side, and that Jerry cares more about Leah than he does about his daughter. Jerry reports to me that he had been appalled and even hurt because he tries so hard to please both his wife and his daughter. "I can't believe you feel that way," was all he could stutter out. Sarah had withdrawn sullenly and the Dad and Daughter Day Out had become strained and awkward.

After talking it over with me, Jerry was able to go back to Sarah with a wholehearted apology and some genuine curiosity about what in the world happened. "I've been thinking about what you said yesterday. I am so sorry you

have felt that I have taken Leah's side. I never ever intended to make you feel that way, but if what I have been doing has been making you feel like I don't care about you, I am so sorry. That must feel awful. Can you tell me what it is that I do that makes you feel that way?"

Sarah proceeded to give Jerry examples of times when Sarah was upset about Leah and Jerry explained Leah to his daughter. Jerry had been instructed to concentrate on listening, not explaining, and to find something he did understand in each thing his daughter said. "Oh," said Jerry, taking a deep breath. "I never thought about it that way. So when I explain Leah to you, that makes you feel like I care about her but not you. I never thought about it that way, but I can see how that makes you feel like I only care about her." Now Sarah softened some. Jerry was able to give her even more room to talk: "Is there more you want to tell me?" Sarah talked about how hard all of the changes in her life had been. Jerry and Sarah felt closer than they had in a long time.

Now Sarah was available to hear Jerry say, "You interested in what I'm thinking when I'm explaining Leah to you?" He could tell Sarah about how often he feels stuck in the middle between his wife and his daughter, and that because Sarah and Leah don't really talk to each other, Jerry tries to help by explaining them to each other.

If you hurt someone you care about, and you find your (wholehearted) apology is not quite doing the trick for you, try Step Two. If, in reverse, your partner has hurt you, and his or her apology doesn't do the trick, try asking for Step Two (or Step Three below). Hint: It is important when asking for something more, *to acknowledge first what has already been given*. Otherwise the other person starts to imagine that you are a bottomless, thankless pit, when in fact, a couple more moves by your partner might enable you to let the whole thing go.

It might go something like, "Thanks so much for the apology. That really makes a difference. But I think I'm still stuck. I think I know what might finish this off for me. You willing to give it a try?" If the person says yes: "This may sound odd. But what would make a difference is if you would just let me tell you what happened to me when you... It might be hard for you to listen to. I just need you to understand, I don't even need to say who was wrong or right. Would you give it a try?"

Step Three. Tell the person you hurt what you do understand about how you hurt them.

Tell them what you do understand about what it must be like for them, why it would be so painful, how what you did must feel.

This may seem for some like beating a dead horse. But in fact it's a kind of CPR. When we are hurt we often feel invisible. Part of healing when we have been hurt is believing, in our bones, that we are visible, that our pain matters to the people we love. This is why, if you have hurt someone, explaining "Why I did it" rarely helps in

the first round. Explaining helps the *explainer* feel more visible and less misunderstood. It does not heal the person the explainer has hurt.

Step Four. Plan for the next time. Figure out what to do differently so it doesn't happen again.

Not all hurts require figuring out what to do differently next time. Sometimes a wholehearted apology is enough (Step One). Sometimes giving the person you hurt an opportunity to *really* tell you what happened to them — or, in reverse, being able to say how you got hurt and feel listened to—is enough (Step Two). Sometimes saying what you do understand (or, in reversed positions, hearing how you are understood) is enough (Step Three). And sometimes the thing needs fixing so it doesn't happen again (Step Four). Especially in a stepfamily, this may be a process requiring multiple conversations, not an event.

Sometimes there is no action that can "fix" things right away. Nonetheless, actively healing hurts each time they happen can pave the way for new step relationships to form. In the first example, Mary, the new stepmother, understood that her partner's daughter, Sally, was in a very rough period of adjusting to her parents' divorce. With the help of her friends (several of whom lived in stepfamilies), Mary was able to keep her expectations realistic. Sally's feelings would not be fixed in one go-round, no matter how compassionate Mary was. However, in response to Mary's heartfelt apology, Sally was able to tell Mary that she (Sally) felt rushed into her father's new situation. With this information, Mary wrote to Sally at school to reassure her that they would take it very, very slowly.

In fact there were several more incidents in which Mary made "mistakes" that hurt Sally very badly. Each time Mary (with the support of good friends) tried to genuinely respond to Sally in much the same way. "I am so sorry that I hurt you. I really didn't know that would have hurt you. I'm learning you. Just like you need time, I need time to get to know you." Over time, Sally's discomfort subsided and she and Mary made some peace. Had Mary lashed out at Sally, Sally's eventual adjustment to her parents' divorce would have found Mary and Sally with much scar tissue between them and a much more challenging path to building a viable step relationship.

These steps provide "scripts to get by on" for healing hurts. Sometimes it takes only one of these four steps to heal a hurt. Sometimes it takes all four, repeated several times. The larger the hurt, the larger your effort on any or all of these will have to be. The bad news is that hurts are inevitable. The good news is that hurts can be healed, and that the process of healing a hurt can actually be incredibly strengthening to your relationships with the people you love. The words in the "scripts to get by on" are obviously mine. Feel free to borrow them if they work. If they don't fit, find language that does the job for you.