Tab 1

# Week

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# Day

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# Day Title

Listening with Presence

# Lesson Name

Communication as a Bridge

# Meme

(insert meme image)

# Summary

Listening with presence combines deep attention, active engagement, and emotional attunement. It moves beyond hearing words to understanding the feelings and needs beneath them. By practicing presence, reflection, and empathy, we create spaces of safety and connection. The absence of presence erodes trust, while true listening strengthens intimacy and resilience in relationships.

# Daily Passage

Listening is one of the most powerful gifts we can offer in relationships, yet it is often the most overlooked. True listening goes beyond waiting for our turn to speak. It requires us to bring presence, openness, and curiosity into the moment. When we listen deeply, we communicate: “You matter. I want to understand you.” This form of listening fosters safety, trust, and connection in ways that words alone cannot.

Deep listening begins with presence. Presence means putting aside distractions and giving our full attention to the person in front of us. In our fast-paced lives, we are often half-listening; scrolling our phones, planning what to say next, or drifting into our own thoughts. Presence calls us back. It invites us to quiet the inner chatter, notice the other’s tone and body language, and attune to what is being expressed beyond the words. This kind of attention allows us to hear not only what is said but also what is felt.

Active listening adds a layer of responsiveness. It is not passive absorption but engaged participation. We show we are listening by nodding, maintaining eye contact, offering small verbal cues, or paraphrasing what we have heard. For example, saying, “So what I hear is that you felt left out when I didn’t include you,” reflects understanding and invites correction if needed. Active listening is a dance of presence and reflection. It reassures the speaker that their words are landing and matter.

Attunement takes listening even deeper. Attunement is the ability to sense the emotional undercurrents of a conversation. It is noticing the pause before someone answers, the shift in their posture, or the subtle change in their voice. Attunement requires empathy, which is the willingness to step into another’s experience and feel with them. When we are attuned, we can say, “I notice this is hard to talk about—do you want to pause?” This kind of responsiveness communicates deep care and strengthens the bond.

Listening with presence also requires us to hold space without rushing to fix or defend. Many of us listen in order to respond rather than to understand. We may jump in with solutions, counterpoints, or reassurance, but often what the other person needs most is simply to be heard. Holding space means resisting the urge to take over or redirect. It means trusting that listening itself is healing.

The absence of presence in listening is felt immediately. When we sense that someone is distracted or disinterested, we often withdraw. Over time, a pattern of poor listening erodes trust. We may stop sharing altogether, leading to disconnection and loneliness even in close relationships. By contrast, even brief moments of true presence can nourish connection. A single instance of being deeply heard can stay with us for years.

It is also important to recognize that listening with presence depends on capacity. Sometimes we simply do not have the attention, energy, or emotional space to be fully present, and it is healthier to acknowledge that openly rather than pretend. Saying, “I want to give you my full attention, but I cannot right now. Can we revisit this later?” preserves trust. The speaker also holds responsibility in this exchange. Before sharing emotional content, complaints, or heavy material, it is respectful to ask, “Do you have space to hear something I am struggling with?” This mutual care ensures that both people feel considered and creates more intentional communication.

Listening with presence is a skill we can cultivate. Practices like mindfulness strengthen our capacity to stay present. Reflective exercises help us notice when we are rehearsing responses rather than tuning in. In daily life, we can begin with small shifts: putting down the phone during conversations, paraphrasing what we hear, or asking open-ended questions like, “Can you tell me more about that?” Over time, these habits build the muscle of deep listening.

# Alternative View

While deep listening is powerful, it requires energy and capacity. We cannot always be fully present, and expecting constant attunement can create pressure. Sometimes the most authentic act is to acknowledge our limits: “I want to listen to you, but I don’t have the space right now. Can we return to this later?” Respectful honesty preserves trust while honoring our humanity.

# Activity

Think about a time you felt truly heard. What made that experience powerful?

Where do you notice your attention drifting, or find yourself planning your next response instead of fully listening?

What practices could help you be more present in your daily conversations?

How does attunement—listening beyond the explicit words—change the depth and quality of your connections?

# Sources

Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, 1961  
 Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, 2003  
 Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Communicating*, 2013

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# Day Title

Assertive, Aggressive, and Passive-Aggressive Communication

# Lesson Name

Communication as a Bridge

# Meme

(insert meme image)

# Summary

Assertive communication balances honesty with respect, allowing us to express ourselves clearly while honoring the other. Aggressive communication dominates and harms trust, while passive-aggressive communication hides truth in indirect ways that create confusion. By cultivating assertiveness, we create relationships rooted in authenticity, safety, and respect.

# Daily Passage

The way we communicate shapes the health of our relationships. Every word, tone, and gesture carries meaning. While there are many communication styles, three common ones stand out: assertive, aggressive, and passive-aggressive. Each has a distinct impact on connection. By understanding these styles, we can recognize our patterns, notice how they affect others, and choose ways of relating that foster honesty and respect.

Assertive communication is the healthiest and most effective style. It balances honesty with care, allowing us to express our feelings, needs, and boundaries clearly while respecting the dignity of others. An assertive communicator might say, “I feel overwhelmed when I handle all the chores. I need more support. Would you be willing to share them with me?” Assertiveness is direct without being harsh. It reflects self-respect and respect for the other. This style builds trust because it communicates authenticity, clarity, and accountability.

Aggressive communication, by contrast, prioritizes one person’s needs at the expense of the other’s. It often shows up as dominating, blaming, or attacking. An aggressive communicator might say, “You never do anything around here. You’re useless.” While aggression may achieve compliance in the short term, it damages trust and creates resentment. Aggressive communication shuts down dialogue because it triggers defensiveness or fear. Over time, it erodes intimacy and leaves relationships feeling unsafe.

Passive-aggressive communication is more indirect. It arises when people avoid expressing their true feelings or needs openly but instead communicate them through sarcasm, silence, or subtle sabotage. For example, a passive-aggressive response to frustration about chores might be saying, “Sure, I’ll do it, as always,” with resentment in the tone. This style often develops from fear of direct conflict, but it creates confusion and mistrust. The unspoken frustration seeps into the relationship, leaving the other person uncertain about what is really happening.

Many of us move between these styles depending on context. At work, we may be assertive, while in family relationships, we may slip into passive-aggression. Stress, cultural background, and past experiences all influence our default tendencies. The goal is not perfection but awareness. By noticing our patterns, we can shift toward assertive communication more consistently.

Assertiveness does not mean getting our way all the time. It means expressing ourselves honestly while remaining open to the other’s perspective. It involves both speaking and listening. Assertive communicators are willing to say no with kindness, to set boundaries without hostility, and to share feelings without blame. For example: “I cannot attend the gathering tonight, but I hope you enjoy yourself. Let’s connect another time.” This type of communication respects both the self and the relationship.

Practicing assertive communication requires courage. For those of us who fear rejection, speaking up may feel risky. For those accustomed to aggression, softening our tone may feel like weakness. Yet over time, assertiveness strengthens connection because it creates clarity. Others know where we stand, and they learn that they can trust our words.

Developing assertiveness also means noticing when we slip into aggression or passive-aggression. When we catch ourselves using sharp words, sarcasm, or silence, we can pause and ask: What am I truly feeling? What need is not being met? How can I express this more clearly and respectfully? This self-awareness allows us to choose a healthier path in the moment.

Assertive communication is not about being perfect, but about practicing alignment. It calls us to honor our feelings and needs while caring about how our words land with others. Over time, this practice builds relationships grounded in respect, honesty, and mutual understanding.

# Alternative View

There are moments when assertiveness may not feel safe or possible—such as when power dynamics are unequal or when aggression is met with hostility. In these situations, protecting ourselves may take priority. Assertiveness is an ideal to practice, but it must be balanced with discernment about context and safety.

# Activity

Which of these three communication styles do you use most often, and in what situations?

How does your communication style impact the trust and safety in your relationships?

When have you experienced assertive communication from someone else, and how did it affect you?

What is one small step you can take to practice greater assertiveness this week?

What is your primary communication style, and in which situations do you tend to use it?

# Sources

Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, 2003

Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Connection*, 2001

Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 1989

Susan Forward, *Emotional Blackmail*, 1997

# Domain

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Tab 3

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# Day Title

The Four Horsemen of Communication and Their Antidotes

# Lesson Name

Communication as a Bridge

# Meme

(insert meme image)

# Summary

The Four Horsemen—criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling—are destructive communication patterns that erode trust and intimacy. Their antidotes—gentle startup, taking responsibility, building appreciation, and self-soothing with reengagement—strengthen relationships and create healthier ways of navigating conflict. By practicing awareness and applying these antidotes, we turn moments of tension into opportunities for growth and closeness.

# Daily Passage

When conflict arises in relationships, it is often not the disagreement itself that creates lasting damage but how we communicate about it. Psychologist John Gottman identified four patterns of communication that are so destructive that he called them the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” These patterns include criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling and they predict relational breakdown when left unchecked. By learning to recognize these patterns and practicing their antidotes, we can transform conflict into opportunities for deeper connection rather than disconnection.

The first horseman is criticism. Criticism attacks the person rather than addressing the behavior. It often begins with phrases like, “You always” or “You never.” For example, saying, “You never listen to me, you are so selfish” targets character rather than the specific issue. Over time, criticism erodes trust and makes the other person feel attacked. The antidote is a gentle startup, focusing on specific behaviors and feelings rather than character. Instead of blaming, we can say, “I felt hurt when I was interrupted, and I would like to finish sharing my thought.” This shifts the focus from judgment to honest expression of need.

The second horseman is defensiveness. Defensiveness arises when we respond to feedback with excuses, denial, or counterattacks. For instance, when told, “You forgot to call me back,” a defensive reply might be, “Well, you forget things too.” While defensiveness may feel like self-protection, it prevents accountability and escalates conflict. The antidote is taking responsibility, even for a small part of the issue. A healthier response might be, “You are right, I did forget to call. I know that was frustrating, and I will do better next time.” Responsibility de-escalates tension and opens the door to repair.

The third horseman is contempt. Contempt is the most damaging pattern, as it conveys superiority and disrespect. Sarcasm, mockery, eye-rolling, and hostile humor all signal contempt. For example, saying, “Oh, of course you messed this up again, I am not surprised,” places the other beneath us. Contempt is corrosive because it communicates not just frustration with behavior but disdain for the person. The antidote is building a culture of appreciation. By regularly expressing gratitude and respect, we buffer against contempt. Even in conflict, we can affirm the other’s worth: “I know you were trying to help, and I appreciate that, but I felt hurt by the outcome.”

The fourth horseman is stonewalling. Stonewalling happens when one person withdraws from interaction, shutting down emotionally or physically. Silence, avoidance, or leaving the room without explanation can all signal stonewalling. While withdrawal may feel like a way to avoid escalation, it often leaves the other person feeling abandoned and unheard. The antidote is self-soothing and reengagement. It is okay to take a break when overwhelmed, but it is important to communicate this clearly: “I am feeling flooded and need a short break. I will come back in 20 minutes so we can continue.” This signals care and intention to reconnect rather than permanent withdrawal.

The Four Horsemen are common in all kinds of relationships, from romantic partnerships to friendships, family bonds, and even work dynamics. Their presence does not mean a relationship is doomed, but ignoring them can create patterns that are difficult to repair. Recognizing them early allows us to shift toward healthier ways of relating.

The antidotes require humility and practice. They invite us to slow down, notice our patterns, and make conscious choices. Choosing a gentle startup instead of criticism, responsibility instead of defensiveness, appreciation instead of contempt, and clear communication instead of stonewalling transforms the emotional climate of a relationship. These shifts are not about perfection but about creating resilience. When we practice antidotes consistently, we create safety and trust even in the midst of conflict.

# Alternative View

While the Four Horsemen highlight damaging patterns, it is important not to label every moment of frustration or withdrawal as destructive. Everyone occasionally slips into these behaviors under stress. What matters most is the overall pattern. Occasional criticism or defensiveness does not define a relationship. What sustains connection is the willingness to notice these moments and practice repair.

# Activity

Which of the Four Horsemen do you notice most often in your own communication?

How do you feel when you experience these behaviors from others?

What antidote can you practice more intentionally in your closest relationships?

What role does appreciation play in buffering against contempt in your connections?

# Sources

John Gottman, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, 1999  
 Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 2012  
 Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Anger*, 1985

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# Day Title

Speaking Truth with Care

# Lesson Name

Communication as a Bridge

# Meme

(insert meme image)

# Summary

Speaking truth with care means balancing honesty with compassion. It involves naming our feelings and needs clearly, choosing respectful language, and practicing discernment in timing and tone. It also requires openness to listening after we share. This practice fosters trust and intimacy by creating a space where honesty and respect coexist.

# Daily Passage

Honest communication is at the heart of authentic relationships. When we speak our truth with clarity, we allow others to know us more fully, and we invite them into genuine connection. Yet honesty alone is not enough. If truth is delivered harshly, without care for its impact, it can create distance rather than closeness. Speaking truth with care means balancing honesty with compassion. It is not about hiding or sugarcoating, but about expressing ourselves in ways that respect both our needs and the dignity of the other.

One of the foundations of speaking truth with care is self-awareness. Before we communicate, it helps to pause and ask: What am I truly feeling? What need is underneath this feeling? For example, instead of saying, “You never spend time with me,” which may sound accusatory, we might say, “I feel lonely when we do not have time together, and I would love to plan something soon.” This shift from blame to vulnerability communicates the same truth, but in a way that invites connection rather than defensiveness.

Language plays an important role in how our truth is received. “I” statements keep the focus on our own experience rather than placing blame. Phrases such as “I feel,” “I need,” or “I would like” create openness, while “You always” or “You never” tend to provoke defensiveness. Speaking truth with care requires both courage and gentleness. It means naming what matters without attacking the person we love.

Timing also matters. There are moments when honesty can land as an invitation and moments when it may land as an attack. For example, bringing up a sensitive topic in the middle of an argument may escalate tension, while choosing a calmer moment creates space for true dialogue. Speaking truth with care includes discernment and recognizing when both people have the capacity to engage fully.

Respectful honesty also involves tone and body language. The same words can carry very different meanings depending on how they are delivered. A soft tone and open posture communicate care, while sarcasm or eye-rolling undercut even well-chosen words. Speaking truth with care requires congruence; our tone, body, and words all aligned with respect.

Another element of speaking truth with care is the willingness to listen after we speak. Communication is not one-way. When we share our truth, we must also create space for the other to respond with theirs. This means staying open even when the response is difficult to hear. True dialogue is not about winning or proving a point but about mutual understanding.

Speaking truth with care does not mean avoiding hard truths. In fact, some of the most loving moments in relationships come when we are willing to share something that may be uncomfortable. For example, saying, “I feel concerned about how much we are drinking together,” or, “I need more space for myself right now,” may create tension in the short term, but over time, these conversations deepen trust because they reflect honesty and respect.

It is also important to distinguish truth from impulse. Not every thought or reaction needs to be voiced. Authenticity is not about unfiltered expression, but about discernment. Speaking truth with care means asking: Will sharing this support connection? Is this truth mine to share right now, or does it need more reflection first? This balance ensures that honesty builds bridges rather than walls.

Cultural and personal backgrounds shape how we approach truth-telling. In some families, directness is valued, while in others, harmony is prioritized. Learning to balance these influences helps us communicate in ways that honor both our authenticity and the relational context. Respecting differences in style allows us to adapt without abandoning our truth.

At its core, speaking truth with care is about choosing connection over performance, and compassion over harshness. It asks us to stand in our integrity while also considering the heart of the other. When practiced consistently, it creates a foundation of trust and openness where both people can grow together.

# Alternative View

Sometimes speaking truth with care is not possible in the moment. Strong emotions, stress, or lack of capacity may make respectful honesty difficult. In these times, it can be wiser to pause, regulate, and return to the conversation later. Care also does not mean avoiding truths that may upset the other. Love sometimes requires difficult honesty, even when it risks conflict.

# Activity

Which of the Four Horsemen do you notice most often in your own communication?

How do you feel when you experience these behaviors from others?

What antidote can you practice more intentionally in your closest relationships?

What role does appreciation play in buffering against contempt in your connections?

# Sources

Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*, 2003  
 Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Connection*, 2001  
 Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 2012

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# Day Title

Conflict Resolution and Repairing After Rupture

# Lesson Name

Communication as a Bridge

# Meme

(insert meme image)

# Summary

Conflict resolution and repair transform disagreement from a source of division into a pathway to deeper connection. Resolution begins with regulation and clarity, and repair involves acknowledgment, mutual responsibility, perspective-taking, and practices that restore trust. Conflict is inevitable, but when we approach it with skill, it strengthens rather than weakens relationships.

# Daily Passage

Conflict is a natural part of every relationship. When two people bring their unique needs, histories, and perspectives into connection, disagreements are inevitable. Conflict itself is not the enemy. What matters is how we handle it. Relationships that thrive are not those without conflict, but those where conflict becomes a doorway to greater understanding, trust, and intimacy. Conflict resolution and repair are the practices that turn rupture into resilience.

Resolution begins with the recognition that conflict holds both danger and opportunity. On one hand, unresolved conflict can create bitterness, distance, and repeated cycles of misunderstanding. On the other hand, when approached with care, conflict can reveal hidden needs, strengthen communication, and deepen connection. The key is not avoiding disagreement but learning to navigate it skillfully.

The first step in resolution is regulation. Conflict often stirs strong emotions. When our nervous systems are activated, we are more likely to react defensively or aggressively, escalating the situation. Pausing to breathe, take a break, or ground ourselves helps create space for constructive dialogue. It is important to remember that resolution is not possible when either person is flooded with emotion. A regulated body creates the conditions for a regulated conversation.

The second step is clarity. Often conflict escalates because the real issue is obscured by layers of accusation, assumption, or old wounds. Slowing down to ask, “What is this really about for me?” helps bring focus. For example, a fight about household chores may actually be about feeling unsupported, while a disagreement about plans may be about needing more freedom. Speaking from the core need, rather than the surface-level complaint, brings clarity and invites the other person to respond with understanding.

Repair is the process that follows rupture. Repair means turning back toward one another after disconnection, offering acknowledgment, and rebuilding trust. A sincere apology is one pathway to repair, but repair goes beyond words. It is expressed through actions, changed behavior, and ongoing commitment. For example, saying, “I am sorry I dismissed your feelings, and I will practice listening more fully,” communicates both acknowledgment and intention for change.

Mutual responsibility is key to repair. Even if one person initiated the hurt, both can take steps toward reconnection. This might mean one person apologizing, while the other practices forgiveness. Repair is not about erasing the conflict but about tending to the relationship so that it becomes stronger through challenge. Each repair strengthens trust, sending the message: “We can weather storms together.”

Another important element of repair is perspective-taking. When we pause to imagine the other’s experience, empathy grows. We may not agree with their perspective, but understanding softens defensiveness. Saying, “I see this was painful for you, even though I experienced it differently,” creates room for connection. Repair requires us to move from being adversaries to being partners seeking mutual understanding.

Conflict resolution also benefits from agreed-upon practices. Couples, friends, or colleagues can create shared rituals for repair. This might include taking time apart and then coming back together to share feelings, or using specific language such as, “I want to repair.” These practices remind us that conflict does not have to mean rupture forever, it can become part of the ongoing rhythm of connection.

It is important to remember that repair does not always mean agreement. Sometimes conflict ends with a mutual decision to disagree while still choosing connection. The heart of repair is not perfect alignment but the reaffirmation of respect and care. When we know that conflict will not destroy the bond, we feel safer to show up authentically.

# Alternative View

Not all conflicts can or should be repaired. In relationships marked by ongoing harm, abuse, or lack of accountability, repair may not be safe or possible. In these cases, resolution may involve boundaries or even separation. Repair requires genuine willingness from both sides. When one person refuses accountability, the healthiest choice may be to step away rather than force reconciliation.

# Activity

Can you recall a time when conflict ultimately led to improved understanding and stronger bonds in a relationship?

What personal strategies do you employ to maintain composure and self-regulation during disagreements?

How do you typically approach the process of repairing relationships after a conflict, and what aspects of this process do you find most difficult?

What new rituals or agreements could you implement to enhance the effectiveness of repair in your significant relationships?

# Sources

John Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 2011  
 Harriet Lerner, *The Dance of Connection*, 2001  
 Dan Siegel, *Mindsight*, 2010

# Domain

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Tab 6

# Week

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# Day Title

The Anatomy of a Good Apology

# Lesson Name

Communication as a Bridge

# Meme

(insert meme image)

# Summary

A good apology has four key components: acknowledging what we did wrong, naming how it harmed the other person, explaining why it happened, and committing to how we will ensure it will not happen again. Tone, timing, and sincerity are equally important. Apologies are not about erasing the past but about repairing trust and creating a stronger foundation for the future.

# Daily Passage

Apologies are essential tools for healing and repair in relationships. They signal that we recognize when our actions have caused harm and that we are committed to restoring trust. Yet not all apologies bring healing. Many of us have received half-hearted or dismissive apologies, such as “I’m sorry you feel that way” or “I didn’t mean it”. These lukewarm apologies leave us feeling unseen. A true apology requires humility, responsibility, and care. When done well, it not only repairs the present rupture but also strengthens the foundation of the relationship for the future.

A good apology has four essential components. First, it acknowledges what we did wrong. This step requires specificity. Instead of saying, “I’m sorry if I upset you,” we name the action clearly: “I am sorry I raised my voice and dismissed your perspective.” Naming the behavior shows that we are taking responsibility for the actual harm, not just the other person’s reaction.

The second component is acknowledging how our action harmed the other person. This moves the apology from self-centered to relational. For example: “I know that when I dismissed your perspective, you felt unheard and disrespected.” This step communicates empathy, demonstrating that we care about the impact of our actions, not just our own intention.

The third component is explaining why it happened. This is not an excuse but an honest reflection. For example: “I was overwhelmed and reacted defensively instead of listening.” Naming the reason helps the other understand what led to the behavior and signals that we are self-aware. It reassures them that we are not minimizing the action but seeking to understand it so it can change.

The fourth component is committing to how we will ensure it does not happen again. Repair requires more than words; it requires change. For instance: “Next time I feel defensive, I will take a breath and ask for a pause instead of shutting you down.” This step reassures the other person that the apology is not empty but connected to action. Trust rebuilds not only through acknowledgment but also through consistent follow-through.

Together, these four elements; acknowledging what we did wrong, naming how it harmed the other person, explaining why it happened, and committing to change, form the anatomy of a good apology. They create space for healing, accountability, and renewed trust.

A good apology also requires timing and tone. Rushing into an apology before the other person is ready can feel dismissive, while delaying too long can deepen hurt. Tone matters as much as words. Sincerity, openness, and humility allow the apology to land with authenticity. Defensive or sarcastic tones undermine even the most carefully chosen words.

It is also important to avoid conditional language. Phrases like “I’m sorry if you were hurt” or “I’m sorry but you also…” shift responsibility away from ourselves. A genuine apology does not include excuses, minimization, or blame-shifting. Instead, it stays focused on our part of the dynamic.

In some cases, repair requires more than one conversation. A single apology may not fully restore trust, especially if the harm was deep or repeated. In these situations, ongoing actions are part of the apology. Showing up consistently with changed behavior communicates sincerity more than words alone.

Apologies are not just for romantic relationships. They are equally vital in friendships, family dynamics, and work environments. In every context, a true apology demonstrates respect for the other person’s dignity and commitment to the health of the connection.

# Alternative View

While apologies are powerful, they are not magic solutions. An apology does not automatically erase hurt, and forgiveness cannot be forced. In some cases, especially where harm is repeated without change, apologies lose meaning. The most powerful apology is not words but consistent behavior that honors the commitment to do better.

# Activity

Recall a time when you received a meaningful apology. What made it powerful?

When have you given an apology that felt authentic and healing?

Which of the four components do you find easiest, and which is most difficult for you?

What is one small step you can take to strengthen how you apologize in your relationships?

# Sources

Harriet Lerner, *Why Won’t You Apologize?*, 2017  
 John Gottman, *The Science of Trust*, 2011  
 Brene Brown, *Rising Strong*, 2015

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