Words in This Story

manners - n. a way in which people act usually when dealing with other people

obligate - v. to make a person do something because it is the right thing to do

okay - n. used to ask for or express agreement, approval

disappointment - n. the state of being made sad because of an action or decision

actually - adv. used to refer to what is true or real

boss - n. the person in charge at a job

dynamic - n. the way that two or more people behave with each other because of a particular situation

stack up - v. compare to something else

Saying 'Sorry' Might Not Help Person You’re Rejecting

Did you ever have to say "no" to somebody? Such as a classmate who asks to go to lunch with you, or a roommate who asks if you would like to continue living together in the future?

New research suggests that, at least socially, a rejection should not include an apology. In other words, saying you are sorry does not make the person being rejected feel any better.

In fact, it might make the rejected person feel worse.

That is surprising. Many people consider it to be good manners to say they are sorry when they turn down a request.

Gili Freedman is doing postdoctoral research at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. She just published her study on rejection in Frontiers in Psychology. For her research, she asked over 1,000 people to respond to different examples of social rejection.

Freedman -- and other researchers -- did the research while she was completing her doctoral studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

In one example, the researchers asked people for their reaction after a person named Taylor asked to join a co-worker who went out to lunch every Friday.

In another case, they asked for people's reactions when Taylor asked a roommate whether they could continue to live with each other in the future.

The participants did not know whether Taylor was a man or a woman.

In both cases, and in other social experiments, Taylor was told "no." But in some cases, the person rejecting Taylor offered an apology, such as "I'm sorry." In other cases, the people doing the rejecting did not say they were sorry.

People were asked how they would feel if they were being turned down, just as Taylor was. Most said they would be more hurt by a rejection with an apology, than a rejection without an apology.

Freedman said the reason is that apologies make people feel like they need to say that the rejection was okay -- even when they felt like it was not okay. Rejection without an apology lets them express their feelings of disappointment, hurt or anger more easily.

"It seems like apologies actually increase hurt feelings, rather than decreasing them, which is often our goal when we want to let someone down easy."

Freedman also said that an apology often makes the person doing the rejecting feel better -- even as it makes the person being rejected feel worse.

Her research deals only with social interactions. A business situation might be very different. If a manager rejects a job candidate or a boss must tell an employee that he or she is being let go from a job, Freedman said, reactions to apologies may be different.

"You can imagine, there are a lot of differences between me rejecting a friend for a coffee date, versus me firing someone. There is a different power dynamic. There are different consequences. So, we would have to do further research to see how apologies stack up in a business rejection."

One famous line from the novel "Love Story" says "Love means never having to say you're sorry."

"Love Story" became a movie in 1970. Both the book and film were written by Erich Segal. The movie is a tragic love story between Jenny and Oliver, played by Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal.

Freedman was asked whether Love Story's writer got it right with those famous words. She said that she is a little too young to remember the 1970 movie.

But she did say, "I think in this case -- in a social rejection at least, saying you're sorry might have some unintended consequences."

I'm Bruce Alpert.

Bruce Alpert reported on this story for Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section and share your views on 51VOA.COM. When you turn someone down, do you offer an apology? Do you say you're sorry? Or do you just say "no?"