

## **EXCUSES MUST GO!**

**By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.**

It's a universal fact: all of us dislike hearing an excuse. Despite the transparency of most excuses, we still persist in offering them. I've often wondered, "why do we persist in making excuses and why do we think we're so good at it? After all, most people can see right through even our "best excuse." It is rare that we pull the wool over anyone's eyes. Think back to the last excuse you made. How effective was it anyway?

### **EXCUSE OR EXPLANATION**

Before anyone gets defensive, let me distinguish between an "excuse" and an "explanation." Excuses are designed to justify your position or actions and remove you from blame. Explanations are an innocent attempt to clarify your behavior. For instance, in response to being late for work, an excuse might be, "My alarm didn't go off" whereas an explanation might be, "I forgot to set my alarm properly so I overslept and I'm late." Clearly, the excuse avoids responsibility, while the explanation describes and accepts responsibility.

### **FOUR REASONS WHY WE MAKE EXCUSES**

Excuses are annoying, yet we tend to offer them with ease when we get in a jam. Why? 1) Perhaps we're afraid of being perceived as incompetent, rejected, unloved, etc. if the truth casts us in a negative light. For instance, if you promised your spouse you'd pick up the dry cleaning on your way home from work and you forgot, what would you do? If you're fearful you'll be attacked for being irresponsible, you may make up something such as, "The cleaners were closed when I got there." If you're willing to take the heat for not following through, you more likely to say something like, "I totally forgot to pick up the laundry. I'm very sorry. I'll make a sign to put in the car so I don't forget tomorrow."

As you can see, many excuses are sprinkled with "white lies," as well. If you tend to resist telling the truth, ask yourself this question: "What is the worst thing that could happen if I just tell the truth instead of making an excuse?" Usually, the answer is not so bad and certainly, not as negative as being "caught in a lame excuse." People respect honesty even when they dislike the other person's behavior.

2) Sometimes we turn to excuses because we're running on adrenaline and are over-committed and unable to live up to promises we make. You can reverse this negative habit by deliberately under-promising and then over-delivering. You can also commit to leaving 15 minutes early for meetings or appointments if you are chronically late. If you re-arrange some unproductive habits, you'll find yourself less and less in a situation where you're tempted to makeup an excuse. If you stop and decide to upgrade your standards of behavior for yourself, telling the truth will become your only choice.

3) Excuses also flow from a fear of punishment. Some people believe they can conjure up a strong enough excuse to escape well-deserved punishment. They temporarily feel clever when they escape what they deserve. For instance, an employee risks losing a job promotion because she chooses to go on a skiing trip, rather than meet an important

project deadline. On Monday morning, she tells her boss she couldn't complete the project because her computer crashed. If her boss asks why she didn't have the information on disk, she responds with another excuse. Excuses tend to accumulate and like a tower built on quick sand, they eventually topple. When we're caught in an excuse, we feel little and ashamed. In the long run, it really is easier to tell the truth and deal with the consequences. Once we've accepted the consequences, we'll be much less likely to repeat that same mistake a second time.

4) Chronic excuse offerings are sometimes associated with emotional immaturity. People who refuse to grow-up are people who want to avoid assuming responsibility for themselves. To them, excuses offer a way to blame others and to avoid personal accountability. To the immature, excuses are a way of maintaining the illusion of always "being right and beyond reproach." Since there are no perfect people, grown-ups understand and accept their mistakes as a learning experience and use them for self-improvement.

### **SUMMARY**

If you're a chronic excuse maker, you may have come to believe that your excuses are justified. Over time, people often come to believe what they tell others due to a psychological process called "cognitive dissonance." That is, when our words and beliefs don't match, we change them in order to resolve the internal "disconnect." But remember, the very psychological and mental processes of dreaming up excuses is both emotionally draining and personally demeaning. Your self-respect suffers, even when someone else is unaware that you've covered over the truth. So make a decision to switch from using excuses to making explanations.

**© Copyright, 2001 Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.**