

I'M SORRY TO HEAR THAT

by Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

These five little words could help save some relationships. Let's take a look at why these words are so significant.

Recently, a client, frustrated by his partner's chronic litany of complaints, considered terminating their engagement. He explained to me: "She's no fun to be around. She's always complaining about her co-workers, her family, her neighbors, her health, ad nasium. It just doesn't end. Whether I try to problem solve with her or tell her how to fix something, she always has an excuse for why my suggestions wouldn't work. I can't stand it anymore. I can't go on this way." My client is at his wits end and is looking for a new solution, so I propose a new response he can use the next time this happens.

"Maybe all she wants is a bit of empathy," I say. "When she complains, don't offer a solution, just say, 'I'm sorry to hear that.'"

"I doubt those words would satisfy her," he quickly says.

"Your current response isn't working. Isn't this worth a try? After, all, you've told me of her many fine qualities," I remark.

He agrees to follow my suggestion and make the words, "I'm sorry to hear that" his new mantra. We also discuss the importance of the non-verbal aspects of his presentation matching the intent of the words. If not said in a genuine manner, these words could backfire, I warn him.

At the next session, only one week later, the patient arrived beaming. "It worked! I had to say 'I'm sorry to hear that,' many times, but she finally stopped ranting. I know the ranting will start again, but I'll just continue with my new approach. She's worth it. No one is perfect."

He probably will have to continue his mantra until she realizes he sincerely cares for her and is truly sorry to hear her complaints. Given adequate time and tenderness, her *chronic* complaints may be extinguished. The power of love may help lessen her need to complain. "Sometimes," I tell him, "people don't know how to ask for what they truly want." I also point out that occasional complaining is normal.

My client and I explore the fact that not all complainers are seeking sympathy. Some people may actually welcome real solutions to a problem. I tell him it is always helpful to ask, "Would you like me to offer a suggestion," before he launches into a problem solving mode. "Only after you've receive an affirmative response that suggestions are welcomed, should you offer them," I add. "But beware. In spite of someone saying they'd like your help, their behavior may not match their words. So, if you're confronted with many, "Yes, buts," then it is time to re-implement the magic words, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Relationships aren't perfect and my client seems to understand this. He is willing to alter his own behavior to try and improve his situation with his fiancée. This is a much more productive approach than trying to get his partner to change. One relationship truth I've come to understand over two decades of practice with couples, is this: "You can't change another person. The more you try, the worse it gets. Heels are dug in, resentments build, and power struggles become commonplace. If you want things to be different, work on changing yourself."

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