

## Why Are Amends Letters Helpful?

There are few relationships where there's an absolute right and wrong way to apologize. In most of your other relationships, it's typically enough to have good intentions, offer an explanation for why you did something that was hurtful, and to say you're sorry. However, as you may already know, there are many pitfalls in making amends to an adult child. Among other things, you may be accused of being insincere, your apology may get thrown back in your face, or you may be told that you're not taking enough responsibility.

Many parents also get caught up with the idea that they don't believe that they have anything to apologize for, or any amends to make. This perception reflects a misunderstanding of what adult children need when they want their parents to make amends. They also get caught up in the rightness or wrongness of their child's accusations without trying to understand the underlying emotion that is being expressed.

So I'd like to offer some guidance and clarification on this topic:

### WHY ARE LETTERS OF AMENDS OFTEN HELPFUL IN RECONCILIATION?

1) *It shows that you care.* "Of course I care. They know I care! Haven't I shown in it in about a million ways?" Yes, you have. But, that isn't the current game in town. The current game in town is the one where your adult child claims that you have wronged them in some way. When that is at play, all of your good efforts are pushed into the background. Not necessarily permanently, but permanently enough so that you can't just reach over and remind your child of them and have that be enough.

2) *Amends take courage:* Have you ever heard the saying, "It takes a strong person to say they're sorry." Our children respect us more if we can fearlessly take responsibility for whatever ways our choices or behavior were hurtful to them

3) *It contributes to clarifying what we're responsible for and what we're not.* Ironically, the longer and the louder that we protest that we were perfect as parents, the harder they will have to raise their voices

to prove we're wrong. That's why parents are often surprised by how distorted the child's memories are. Children may have to exaggerate them to feel like they're getting on our radar. "You were ALWAYS GONE." "You were ALWAYS SO SELF-CENTERED!" The healthy response is to simply acknowledge that when you were gone it was a problem and whatever ways you were focused on yourself was problematic to your child. You're not ever required to say, 'I was a miserable selfish lout (unless of course, you actually were). Most of the time, they don't require that.

4) *Separate realities*: it's helpful to children to eventually see that we understand the separate realities nature of family life. That parents can miss things that their children needed or wanted and be strong enough to simply accept that and not act like they should've been perfect.

5) *It will help you in your self-forgiveness and self-compassion*. Part of forgiving ourselves for whatever mistakes we made comes from feeling that we have done everything possible to repair the effect of our mistakes. If we believe that we've wronged our children, then we may believe that we're supposed to suffer for the rest of our lives. Knowing that we have done everything possible to reach out to our children and have tried to make amends for whatever mistakes we have made is one of the most powerful way to heal, not only our relationships with our children, but ourselves. Real parenting is a minefield of mistakes. No one gets out without making tons of them. I'm a psychologist and made so many you could write a book about them. Wait, I already did!