

# Writing a Letter of Apology



**H**ealing the hurts of the past is a huge challenge for men because we must face and acknowledge our sense of shame and guilt. In order to put abuse behind us and take others along with us involves two important processes: the first is looking at genuine apologies, and the second is resignation from the Abuse Club. However, a word of caution. Others may not be ready or prepared to hear or trust your wish to be different. Promises are only believed when they are actioned.

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One of the questions men often ask is: 'Now that I have changed, why don't others get on with life, and forgive and forget?' I invite you to take responsibility for earning the right to respect, and not be caught up in your own needs to have the situation settle down in a way that you want. Are you prepared to allow family members and others to proceed at their own pace, or do you want them to fit in with your pace? Will you exert pressure on them to forgive and forget, or are you prepared to live with their need to forgive and forget in their own time? If you put the pressure on — like you did when you were being abusive — others will perceive you as not having changed and not having taken their needs into account.

Alan Jenkins, in his book *Invitations to Responsibility*, has developed a useful framework for a letter of responsibility to those affected by abuse. The Old Rule Book teaches men that apologising is an admission of weakness, but consider a different way of viewing an apology: it takes a great deal of courage and strength to face up to your part in the story and demonstrate that you are now taking responsibility for your actions.

Here is the letter that Fred (50) wrote to his wife June (51), who had left him three months previously. How do you think it measures up in terms of honesty and courage?

*Dear June, I am writing this letter to you because of my concern for you and how sad I feel about what I have put you through in the past twenty years of our married life. I am very sorry for how I have threatened you, verbally abused you, restricted who you could see and not supported you in your role of being a mother to our children.*

*I now understand that I was not man enough to be clear about how to be a proper husband and dumped on you all my frustration about my own feelings of inadequacy. I thank you for leaving (you know I didn't at the time) because I have learnt to face up to myself and who I am as a person.*

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*It is now clear that I am responsible for the abuse I inflicted upon you. I was not a responsible and respectful husband to you. I should have taken up your suggestions to seek help but my pride, or what I thought was pride, got in the way.*

*I now have a beginning appreciation of how hard life has been for you. You must have been terribly frightened of my anger and abuse. I chose not to connect your regular trips to the doctor for depression with the way I acted towards you. By ignoring this I put my needs ahead of yours, not valuing you for who you are. I was not sensitive to your feelings, only my own. It must have been hard for you living with me, always on the go, involved in my clubs and societies, always the respected person out there in the world, while at home I was a bastard. I would have felt cheated if I was in your shoes.*

*I also now realise that I dumped my problems onto you instead of looking at what was going on for myself. You carried the responsibility for what were my issues which I now understand as me not wanting to face up to the years of abuse.*

*You may be surprised to hear this after all the times you have taken the risk to encourage me to go to counselling, but I have just attended a group for men who have abused others. It was difficult for me to face myself but I am learning and understanding more about myself, what it was like for you and Jamie, Kate and Trish, and how I can be different.*

*Every day I have to keep reminding myself of how I can be respectful to others, but am very aware of how fragile this new way of thinking is for me. I have had fifty years of being a bully and for the first time in my life can admit how scared I feel about being old and alone, cut off from my family. This could be the cost of how I have behaved.*

*I intend to be responsible for my own feelings and behaviours and have decided that I want to be a fun grandfather for my grandchildren when they arrive. I intend to keep working on myself to understand how I tick. I am also going to talk with Jamie, in particular, about how I have acted in my life because I see him going down a similar road that I went down and I don't want this for him. I'll also send Kate and Trish a letter and invite them to talk with me.*

*I am hesitant to ask you to meet with me but I would like to talk with you about what I now understand. I realise that you may not want to do this after what I have put you through. I am open to doing this with a counsellor if this would feel safer for you. I will respect whatever decision you make.*



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*June, I am truly sorry. I know that in the past I have said sorry many times. This time I feel I can say it in a way that is genuine.*

*Fred*

Fred has managed to resist the temptation to find excuses for his behaviour, clearly claiming responsibility for his abusive behaviour. He has also been able to look at the wider picture, the impact on June and their three children, as well as clearly stating his intentions for the future. He has respected June's choice whether to respond or not. The framework for such a letter is important. It is very easy to slip back into the old blaming, trivialising and sidetracking from the issues. This is a letter of responsibility, not a chance to write down all the excuses for why you acted in a certain way. Here is a step-by-step way to cover the important issues.

## Framework for a Letter of Responsibility

### 1. Reason for Writing

This is a statement about your concerns and caring for those who have been on the receiving end of abusive behaviour. Stay with statements that talk about yourself such as 'I am writing to you because I feel ... about what I have put you through.'

### 2. Statement of Apology

It is important to detail the types of abuse that you have used. This conveys to the other person that you are not trivialising your behaviour. For example 'I am very sorry for verbally abusing you, hitting you, threatening you.' Acknowledge that you have avoided facing up to these issues and exactly how you have done that: 'I avoided facing up to the seriousness of my abusiveness and violence towards you by saying things like "If you were different then I wouldn't get so angry." I now understand that this put the responsibility and blame onto you. Also, I now understand that I used anger as an excuse. It was easier to say I was angry than to say I was abusive or violent.'

### 3. Statement of Responsibility

Clearly state who was responsible for the abuse and why: 'It was my fault that I was abusive, not yours.' 'I should not have subjected you to my reign of terror. No one should have to put up with this type of behaviour.' 'I should have found a more respectful way to deal with my feelings of fear and inadequacy, instead of expecting others to do the worrying and look after my issues.'

Affirm the choices that partners or others have made to remove themselves from a situation or to reach out for help: 'I think you did the right thing in leaving.' 'By contacting that counsellor you have



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said enough is enough. I realise it must have taken a lot of courage to do that, knowing how I would react.'

## 4. Statement about Understanding the Impact

The importance of this section is to show what you understand about the impact of your behaviour on others. Until you can do this it is unlikely others will trust your changes. An important part of your process of change is being able to put yourself in others' shoes. This lets you make sense of their reactions, attitudes and behaviour: 'I am now beginning to understand how hard it has been living with me.' 'You must have been frightened when I came home drunk, not knowing what sort of mood I would be in. 'You must have felt trapped by my abusive attitude and behaviour towards you.'

## 5. Statement of What You are Doing about It

Where mistrust exists in a relationship as a result of abusiveness, partners, family, friends and acquaintances want to know what is going to be different: 'I am going off to a counsellor His name is..... I have told him that I am going to work through my issues and give you the space and time to deal with yours. I won't hassle you about how much time it takes or how much it costs.'


## 6. Recurrence of the Problem

This is a safety back-up and conveys to the other person how serious you are prepared to be about the changes you are making: 'If I am ever in a position where I am likely to be a threat to you or the children, I'll take time out, which means I will leave and not come back until I can guarantee I can be safe to be around.' 'If I am ever verbally abusive to you or the children again, I will take responsibility for myself by going to stay with my brother I have talked this through with him and he is aware of the situation.' 'If I am moody I will take time out until I can be with you and the children in a way that doesn't upset or worry you.'

## 7. Statement of Future Intent

This is important as it reminds you and others about what your intentions are: 'I will never hit you again.' 'I will respect you for who you are and allow you the freedom to be your own person.' 'I will not try to control you in any way and will negotiate with you about issues that I have trouble dealing with or accepting.'

## Exercise

-  Now write your own responsibility letter to those affected by your abuse. Check it carefully to make sure there are no excuses or blaming in it. Use the Respect Test to measure its



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appropriateness. Have someone who supports you read it over to check that there is nothing in it that is not genuine. You may have to have a couple of attempts to get it right.



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