WHAT YOU HAVE TO FEEL IF YOU'RE REALLY SORRY--PART II

REMORSE, WHAT IT IS, WHAT IT ISN'T

The eleventh edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines remorse as "a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs." Picture these two images: a rat gnawing a hole through the floor, a dog gnawing on a bone. From these images, it's clear that "gnawing" means wearing away something by biting or chewing on it. Distress is pain or suffering that affects the body or mind. A gnawing distress, then, is distress that gnaws away, bites and chews, at one's mind and spirit. In the case of remorse, the cause of this gnawing distress is the guilt a person feels for something he did that was wrong. True remorse does just that: It leads to a gnawing anxiety and distress within.

The Oxford dictionary (oxforddictionaries.com) adds another dimension to its definition of remorse: "deep <u>regret</u> [italics mine] or guilt for a wrong." For our intentions and purposes here, the words regret and remorse are not interchangeable or synonymous terms, and here's why: A student who gets caught cheating on a test may fully regret what he did, but not necessarily be remorseful about it: "Damn, I wish I hadn't done that. Now I'm going to get suspended for three days, and I'm

going to get punished at home. My mother's going to take my ride away and ground me for the weekend. What the hell, man!" It should be clear that this fellow's not feeling remorse, only regret. Regret has to do with wishing one hadn't taken a certain course of action because it either led to punishment or some other undesirable outcome; regret is self-focused. Regret can lead a person to feel sorrow and grief over something he did, but these might just be the result of the pain he feels for himself and not for the other people who were affected by his actions. Regret, then, doesn't necessarily lead to remorse.

To be clear, we will define remorse as, "having genuine feelings of guilt and sorrow for causing hurt and pain to someone else." Please note that while owning up to your mistakes and saying you take responsibility for your actions are important steps to take, they do not define remorse. These actions are a part of the way one expresses remorse. Remorse is a <u>feeling</u>, not an action.

Most of us are capable of feeling remorse once we learn how. Taking the time to forgive those who hurt you during your childhood is a critical first step to being able to imagine yourself walking in another person's shoes, feeling a mother's pain and anguish over losing her child, for example. Learning to feel remorse can't be done overnight. It can take weeks, months, even years, to fully come to know feelings of remorse,

to feel compassion and empathy for those you have hurt, and to truly own those feelings. If you have the courage and will to do the work, you'll get there, and you'll transform your life in the process.

YOUR VICTIM

Feeling remorse for the suffering you have caused others must begin with learning how to experience empathy and compassion for others. By definition, empathy is the action of understanding, being aware of and sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another. Compassion is the capacity to feel sorrow for another person's suffering or misfortune.

Several years ago, my younger brother was devastated over the sudden death of a dog he had raised and cared for since it was a puppy. I learned about his loss when I called him on the phone a day or two after his dog passed away. The second my brother heard my voice, he started to cry as he told me what had happened to his beloved dog. Hearing and feeling the pain in his voice, I teared up, too. I felt his sorrow and I was saddened by his loss. My compassion ran deep as I shared in my brother's distress. I also felt empathy for him, as I had lost my very first dog Teddy when I was six years old, and it left me devastated, too. It was easy, then, to understand and

be sensitive to and aware of my brother's feelings. I was able to walk in my brother's shoes because I had experienced the same kind of loss that he was going through at that very moment.

It is much easier to feel empathy for another person when we ourselves have experienced grief similar to theirs. But what about when we have no frame of reference for feeling empathy? How do we empathize with our victims and their families then? The answer is, we practice empathy. We take the time to imagine what it's like to walk in another person's shoes, to understand that person's feelings, thoughts, their hurt and pain.

Step one

On a fresh piece of paper write down the names of each one of your victim(s). If you don't know the victim's name, call the person Sir or Ma'am. Beside each victim's name, write down everything you know about the person, e.g., age, race, gender, marital status, etc. It may be that you know very little about your victim, but it's important that you write down what you do know. Once you've done that, begin a paragraph and describe in detail just what you did to victimize each person. If you assaulted your victim, describe the assault; if you raped a woman, describe the rape, if you robbed someone at gunpoint, describe the robbery. Whatever you did, it is important that you write it down without skipping over the details. Be completely honest.

While we can never fully understand or fully experience the pain and suffering our actions have caused another human being, through practice and actively engaging our imaginations we can learn to feel another's suffering vicariously. Perhaps you enjoy reading novels and/or watching movies. If so, you probably already know what it means to experience something vicariously. Simply stated, the word means experiencing or realizing something through the use of our imaginations and our sympathetic participation in the experience of another. If you've ever read Stephen King's Misery (or seen the movie five times like I have!), you probably found yourself tensing up every time the key turned in the lock of Paul's bedroom door and Annie appeared in the doorway with a syringe in her hand, or a sledge hammer. ("You dirty bird, you!") You could also feel Paul's helplessness, his terror, as he lay in that bed completely at the mercy of this crazy woman. You no doubt cringed and grimaced, too, the moment Annie slammed the sledge hammer against Paul's ankle and cried out, "God, I love you, Paul!" (Yikes!) Your imagination transported you right there in the scene, you participated vicariously in the story.

Unless you've been hiding under a rock somewhere, you've probably seen one of those ASPCA commercials depicting abandoned dogs shivering in the cold, with open sores, distinct rib cages, their sad eyes gleaming at the camera, all while Sarah

McLachlan's haunting voice speaks to us in the background. I can imagine that as you watched, you felt sadness and compassion welling up inside you at the sight of those helpless animals. If you did, that's an indication that you are capable of feeling empathy and compassion. If you are able to feel compassion and empathy for a suffering animal, then you certainly have the ability to feel compassion, empathy and remorse for the pain and suffering you've caused your victim.

Now I'm going to ask you to use your imagination. I want you to think about the age and sex of your victim. If you don't know the exact age of your victim, just estimate it. Then I want you to think of someone in your life, either living or deceased, who is or was the same sex and close to the same age as your victim, someone you love or loved dearly. If you robbed or killed a sixty-five year old lady, for example, think of some elderly woman you have known and loved, perhaps an aunt or a grandmother or a neighbor lady who always treated you with loving kindness. Just think about how you would feel if this loving elderly woman you knew and loved had met a fate similar to your victim's. Take the time to think of the loss and the pain you and the rest of your family and the family of this elderly woman would feel. Think of all the people whose lives this woman touched, who loved this woman as you did and how deep their hurt and pain and anguish would be as a result of

their loss.

Try to imagine what your elderly victim was like. Maybe she had grown children of her own and grandchildren she was helping to raise. Maybe she did important volunteer work down at the local soup kitchen or homeless shelter. Humanize your victim in every way you can. If you make the effort, you can bring this woman's life and history into your imagination and sensitize yourself to the fact that she had a productive, meaningful life before you took it. She had rights, hopes and dreams, feelings and goals, and loved ones.

After spending time thinking about your victim(s) and the suffering you have caused them, after bringing your victim to life in your heart and imagination, it is time that you address your victim(s) personally.

Step one

When you say "I'm sorry" and honestly mean it, you are beginning the process of making amends for something you did that hurt someone else. Now that you have spent some time reflecting on the suffering your actions caused your victim, the next step is to write a letter of apology, even if your victim is no longer alive. The goal in your letter is to make your apologies sincere, specific and heartfelt.

When writing your letter(s), make sure you avoid using statements like: "I'm not making any excuses, but times were

hard," and "I was going through so much at the time," and "It's in the past now. Please forgive me."

DO include statements like: "I'm sorry that I hurt you," and "I now understand to the best of my ability the pain my actions have caused you," and "I was wrong," and "I understand that you may never be able to heal completely from the hurt I caused you," and "What can I do to help you feel better?"

Your letter of apology should be in two parts. In the first part, include specific statements that describe and acknowledge the actions you committed that hurt your victim:

Dear Mrs. Bell (use the name or title that best represents the person),

I have been thinking seriously about my life and I have some things I would like to say to you.

I know clearly that I hurt you when . . . .

I know clearly that I hurt you when . . . .

I know clearly that I hurt you when . . . .

(List as many statements of acknowledgment as you need to. Be specific about each wrong doing you committed.)

In the second part, include specific statements of apology:

Ma'am, I am deeply sorry for . . . .

Ma'am, I am deeply sorry for . . . .

Ma'am, I am deeply sorry for . . . .

Writing your letter(s) of apology is best done by yourself,

in private, and in one complete session. This is the time to express your genuine remorse for what you've done. This letter should be emotionally painful and uncomfortable to write if you have deep-down feelings of guilt and shame for your actions. By all means resist the urge to avoid your pain. Exercise courage, own it and feel it.

For your apologies to be complete, they must be expressed verbally to another person, someone you trust (a spouse, sibling, parent, counselor, psychologist, clergy person). Ideally, you would want to express your letters directly to your victim(s), but this is more often than not impossible and, in many cases, inappropriate to do. For example, it wouldn't be appropriate to offer an unsolicited apology to a family member of someone whose life you took. If you're incarcerated, always get advice from a counselor or someone else in authority to see if it is appropriate to make an apology directly to the person you have hurt.

I want to emphasize that it is <u>impossible</u> to complete the process of making a genuine apology without verbalizing your letter to someone. The reason is that, no matter what your spiritual or religious beliefs are, your unconscious mind demands closure, and closure can only be obtained by having someone "witness" the important process you have just completed. Choose a person you trust to be your witness.

A final note: Sometimes we ask others to forgive us. In my opinion, this request is never appropriate because when you ask for forgiveness, you are asking the victim to do something for you. You have no right to ask your victim for anything. All you can do is learn to forgive yourself. Make an apology. Don't ask for forgiveness.

Learning to feel genuine remorse for causing hurt and pain to your victim is a critical step in the process of becoming a responsible, productive human being. If you've taken the time to complete the work outlined in this chapter and have done so in a thougtful and sincere manner, you should be proud of yourself.

Finally, when it comes to the challenge of expressing your remorse to the authorities, remember that there is no sure-fire way to be successful in the endeavor. There is, however, one foolproof way of "proving" that your remorse is genuine when you're eventually released, and that is to <u>never repeat the offense again</u>. Good luck and may you have a peaceful journey!