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Genuine Remorse

By David Jack Cherrington
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The development of moral character occurs when we realize that we have done something wrong and we resolve to do better. However, this is not what we typically do. The natural tendency is to rationalize our misdeeds and justify what we have done wrong, which allows us to possess a certain sense of emotional comfort.

According to the character development model, the relationship between our attitudes and behaviors is a dynamic interaction in which our attitudes influence our behavior by the way we create *behavioral intentions* about how we intend to act. To the extent that our intentions are specific they will have a strong influence on our behaviors. Conversely, our behaviors have an impact on our attitudes by the way we explain our behaviors: our *behavioral explanations*.

Normally, our attitudes and behaviors are consistent: we act the way our attitudes and values tell us we should act. But, when there is an inconsistency caused by actions that violate our attitudes and values, we feel compelled to adjust them. The easiest way to create a sense of harmony is to rationalize our behaviors. This dynamic interaction is explained by the proverb: whenever there is conflict between our attitudes and behaviors, behavior always wins.

We observe manifestations of this rationalization process all the time. When we exceed speed limits, we justify our actions by thinking that others do it also, we're in a hurry, and it's no big deal. When we say we have finished a task that we haven't really completed, we excuse ourselves by thinking that we will have it finished soon. When we forget to attend a meeting, we dismiss it by saying we were busy and justify our lie by thinking that it is more important to appear responsible or that the other person doesn't actually need to know.

Each time we rationalize lying, it becomes easier to do in the future. Each misdeed that we justify diminishes our commitment to integrity. In time, we can become oblivious to the truth and have difficulty separating fact from fantasy. However, justifying our actions is not the only option open to us when we do something wrong. Although repeated rationalizations create habits that can be very difficult to break, we always have the option of recognizing that our actions are wrong and resolving to change. Successful change depends on whether our remorse is genuine.

Our testing center informed me that one of my students had been caught using his textbook to take an exam. This student sent me an email justifying his actions by saying that since students were allowed to use their books on the online quizzes he thought the exams were also open book. I instructed the testing center to let the student take another form of the exam and then asked the student to visit with me.

Before he came to see me, I learned that he also had been caught cheating in another course. As we visited in my office, I asked him if he was an honest person and he said he prided himself in being very honest. I asked if he cheated in any of his other classes and he said no. I asked where he attended high school and if cheating had been a problem there. He said he graduated from a California high school and that he hadn't seen any cheating. I told him that our course outline was very clear: that while students could use the textbook on the quizzes, the exams in the testing center were closed book. I

asked if he would write me an essay on his attitudes toward honesty and how honest he really was. He agreed to do so.

As he left my office he assured me of his honesty and I decided to say nothing about his alleged cheating in a second class. I have learned from experience that people need at least a day to think about the kind of person they want to be and admit that they are not as honest as they would like to think they are. I was right. The next day, I received the first of three emails from this student.

The student's emails explained how he cheated because he felt pressure from being on academic probation. He justified his cheating by thinking he needed good grades and each time he cheated it became a little easier. I told him that his excuse for using a book in the testing center was a premeditated excuse that he had thought about long before he entered the testing center and planned to use if he got caught. He agreed. I also told him that if I asked him to keep a record of everything he did for a week and bring it to me that it would be a record of what he wanted me to think more than a record of what he actually did. He didn't immediately agree with this assessment; but in his email the next day he admitted that he had lied to himself so many times that it was difficult to know what was true.

This was a very painful experience for this student and all three of his emails expressed great remorse for what he had done. On one hand, I was sad to see such anguish; but, on the other hand, I was pleased to see such genuine remorse. I have learned that the sincerity of one's remorse largely determines the firmness of one's resolve to change. Unless people feel a genuine sorrow for their mistakes, they are not adequately motivated to correct them. If the only reason we feel badly for exceeding the speed limit is because we got caught, we will not resolve to change our driving habits. We need to feel a genuine remorse for the misdeed, not just for being caught.

If our remorse is genuine, we will have a stronger determination to do better. This usually occurs when we become disgusted with ourselves or we see the consequences of our actions on others. Unless we feel sufficient pain from doing something wrong, we will not have sufficient incentive to resolve to do better. Our resolve must be more than a fleeting thought of "Oh well, I'll do better next time." Lasting change requires a thoughtful analysis of what we did wrong and how we plan to do better in the future. Unless we plan specific behavioral intentions regarding the right way to behave, it is unlikely that we will change.