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Excuse Me! How Rationalizing Weakens Relationships

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Excuse Me! How Rationalizing Weakens Relationships

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Photo: Pexel

In a marriage seminar I conducted, a wife mentioned her husband's frustrating habit of rationalizing when he apologized. She called this his "sorry, but" tendency, because he would admit he was wrong, *but* then give reasons why he did it. He would say, "Sorry, but I was stressed because of the kid's screaming." Or, "Sorry, but you really shouldn't be that upset."

We all agreed that it must be difficult to deal with his sorry butt, because when someone apologizes in a way that deflects responsibility, it is not effective. Have you ever had someone say: "I am sorry you feel that way" or "Sorry, but you deserved it"? It doesn't exactly feel great. Sincere apologies and taking responsibility for mistakes bring couples together, but excuses push them apart.

In one of my studies I examined rationalization. I brought in couples and separated them to keep them from reacting to each other during the interviews, then presented short vignettes of a fighting and deceiving relationship. I invited each person to reflect on how these stories applied to his or her (but not their partner's) behavior. Nearly everyone was able admit rationalizing their own poor behavior. One guy recalled yelling at his girlfriend, and said: "I'll try to make up excuses...I'll say, 'Well I had to do that because you were talking to me that way.'" He said that he excused his yelling to: "try to hype myself up, make myself look better."

Another man would leave when his girlfriend tried to discuss concerns. This made her irate, but his justification was that he no longer "hit her." He said "there's no way else to release my anger so...I'll go talk to some woman or go out to some bar." Since he had stopped being violent, he could claim that any other behavior was an improvement.

Rationalization is so common, we often don't notice it. We are especially blind to our own rationalization, because it feels better to believe excuses than admit we cause problems. There are plenty of reasons to rationalize, and it is easy to do. Maybe you didn't follow through on a commitment, so instead pointed out what you did do: "I didn't get to the dishes, but I worked hard to mow the lawn." Some claim their behavior could have been worse: "I don't babysit our daughter, but I am better than my dad, who never even changed diapers or cooked." Others rationalize bad relationship decisions. "I know I shouldn't get serious with him, but I am really lonely right now, and it probably won't go anywhere."

Regardless of how good an excuse seems, it will usually aggravate problems rather than resolve them. Consider how rationalization is used in your own relationship. When is it most likely? What effect does it have on you and the interaction with your partner?

Adapted from the upcoming book, *Love Me True: Overcoming the Surprising Ways we Deceive in*

Relationships.

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Reference

Jason B. Whiting, "The Role of Appraisal Distortion, Contempt, and Morality In Couple Conflict: A Grounded Theory," *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* 34, no. 1 (2008): 44-57.