

Confession Killers

If you want to diminish the value of a confession, use one of these three phrases.

“I’m sorry if I’ve done something to upset you.”

When you use “if” in a confession, what people often hear is, “I don’t know that I’ve done anything wrong, but since you’re obviously upset, here’s a token apology to get you off my back. By the way, since I don’t see that I’ve done anything wrong, I have no idea how I may need to change. So it’s only a matter of time before I do the same thing again.”

“It wasn’t intentional.”

When you use these words, some people will hear, “I did not deliberately set out to hurt you. But I obviously didn’t make much of an effort to avoid hurting you either.”

“It wasn’t personal.”

When you say this, it’s all too easy for people to hear, “It wasn’t personal to me so you shouldn’t take it personally (even though it hurt you).”

These are probably not the messages you intend to communicate. And of course not everyone will interpret these words as harshly as I’ve suggested. But many people may interpret them this way, and that misunderstanding could trigger a downward spiral in your conversation and possibly your relationship.

If you’d like to avoid make confessions that are easily misinterpreted, I encourage you to plan your words by prayerfully reflecting on the Seven A’s of Confession.

Address everyone involved (All those whom you affected)

Avoid if, but, and maybe (Do not try to excuse or diminish the effect of your wrongs)

Admit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)

Acknowledge the hurt (Express sorrow for hurting someone)

Accept the consequences (Such as making restitution)

Alter your behavior (Change your attitudes and actions)

Ask for forgiveness

You don’t need to use all seven elements in every confession, and you certainly don’t want to turn this into a Pharisaical checklist. But the more thoughtfully and sincerely you plan your words, the more likely your confession is to promote genuine forgiveness and reconciliation.

– Ken Sande

Reflection Questions:

Why do we tend to use the three phrases given above?

What can you say if you sense that you've offended someone but truly don't understand what you may have done wrong?

Jesus says we will have to give an account someday even for our "careless words" (Matthew 12:36).

What commandments do we violate if we speak or act thoughtlessly toward others (Matthew 7:12); Matthew 22:39); (Ephesians 4:29).

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Matthew 12:36 But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.

Matthew 7:12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Matthew 22:39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Ephesians 4:29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.