

Sometimes you shouldn't say sorry

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Imagine you find out that your friend meets with mutual co-workers for

lunch every Friday. You ask to join, but your friend declines your request. Could the way they phrased this rejection make you feel more or less hurt about being snubbed?

A new study published in the open-access journal, *Frontiers in Psychology*, reveals that saying sorry when making a social [rejection](#) can have the opposite effect of its intention.

"Contrary to popular belief, apologies don't soften the blow of rejections," says Dr. Gili Freedman, lead author of this study, currently based at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA.

"Most people have had the experience of wanting to minimize the hurt of the person they are rejecting. But how exactly do you do that? Our research finds that despite their good intentions, people are going about it the wrong way. They often apologize, but that makes people feel worse and that they have to forgive the rejector before they are ready."

Previous research has focused on the target of the rejection, rather than those who carry it out and how they do it. There can be times when people cannot accept all invitations or wish to avoid a social encounter, but little is known about how they can protect the feelings of those being rejected.

Social norms dictate that we should forgive someone if they apologize, which puts the targets of [social rejection](#) in a difficult position if they aren't ready to do this or think the apology is insincere. With that in mind, Dr. Freedman performed several different tests to assess how often apologies were included in a social rejection and how the recipients felt and responded to them.

"We approached over a thousand people who were in town for various festivals so we could get a wide range of participants by capitalizing on

the free time that people had while waiting in queues."

They found 39% of people included an apology when asked to write a 'good way of saying no' to a social request, such as being able to meet up or to be roommates again. When asked how they would feel when put in this position themselves, those people shown a rejection containing an apology reported higher feelings of hurt.

Dr. Freedman then carried out specially designed face-to-face rejection experiments to account for the fact that people don't like to admit [negative feelings](#), such as the pain of rejection.

"We know that people often don't want to admit that they have hurt feelings, so in some of the studies, we looked at how much [people](#) wanted to seek revenge," explains Dr. Freedman. "Specifically, we looked at the degree to which rejectees imposed an unpleasant taste test of [hot sauce](#) on their rejectors."

It showed that those offered an apology when rejected from a set of group tasks, which included a taste test of hot sauce, exacted revenge by allocating more sauce to the person who had rejected them. This was despite being told they had a strong aversion spicy food!

Lastly, the researchers asked participants to view a video of a rejection in action, to assess if feelings of forgiveness can be affected. Those who saw the recipient receiving an [apology](#) thought they would feel more obliged to express forgiveness, despite not feeling it.

Dr. Freedman hopes to further this research by examining if the rejector is actually protecting their own [feelings](#) when apologizing.

"It is possible that rejectors may feel better about themselves if they apologize. We intend to examine when rejectors are motivated to feel

better about themselves and when they would rather put the rejectee's needs ahead of their own."

More information: Gili Freedman et al, When Saying Sorry May Not Help: The Impact of Apologies on Social Rejections, *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01375](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01375)

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