

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT | HARRIET LERNER | MARCH 1, 2018

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Harriet Lerner it is such a pleasure to speak to you.

HARRIET LERNER: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: I'm excited now about your newest book about apologies, *Why Won't You Apologize?: Healing Big Betrayals and Everyday Hurts*.

I want to ask you, I want to jump right in, and ask you if you, if someone came to you for a consultation because they had a big apology they needed to make to someone very important to them where there had been a big breach — walk me through the sort of do's and don'ts. What are the most important things for someone not to do if they want the apology to go well? And what are the most important things to do?

HARRIET LERNER: I should start by saying, Anne, that the truth is that very few people come to me for therapy because they want to be a better apologizer. They come to me in therapy because they desperately want the apology and they're not getting it. And that's very, very painful for them and they want to understand why can't this person apologize. So that would be very impressive if someone came to therapy with the primary goal of wanting to apologize better. So what would they need to know?

First of all the apology would need to be sincere, for starters. They would need to know what to avoid to give a good apology because there are so many ways that we reflexively muck the apology up. So I would want to help them to avoid those ways.

For example, let's talk about the top three ways that people muck up an apology. And one is with the word 'but.' "I'm sorry that I forgot to call you on your birthday but I was just overloaded with work. Everything fell through the cracks." The word 'but' almost always signifies a rationalization, an excuse or a criticism. So the first thing I would want them to know is get your 'but' out of your apology.

And the second way that people muck it up, and this can be very subtle, is that we focus on the other person's feelings and reactions, rather than our own behavior. For example, to apologize by saying, "I'm so sorry that I offended you with that joke that I told." That's not an apology. The apology would be "The joke that I told was insensitive. It was out of line. I apologize for being so insensitive and I want you to know it will not happen again." So I would want that person to know that they needed to name the behavior that they were apologizing for rather than focusing on the other person's feelings.

And also important is that an apology shouldn't be a quick way out of a conversation. If the person is coming to see me in therapy because the hurt or the harm that they did is something serious — it's not just spilling red wine on their friends carpet — then it's not enough to say 'I'm sorry.' I want them to know they may be in for a long distance run and that 'I'm sorry' is a good start, but it may involve a number of conversations where the wrongdoer really has to sit on the hot seat and listen to the hurt party's anger and pain and really be present with that and carry some of the pain. And that is a very difficult thing to do.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: I appreciate you saying that. And how often, you know, I think some people say an apology because they sort of want it to be over. And you're really saying, no, it actually opens a door to an extended conversation.

What if the person won't tell you their feelings of hurt and anger? You're prepared to sit and listen, but that person feels so hurt and so distrusting of you that they're not willing to share the impact it had on them. How do you begin to heal if you can't go there?

HARRIET LERNER: That's an interesting question and that leads me to back up and say that it's not helpful to offer an apology to someone who really doesn't want to hear from you. So that would be a starter. That's my association to your question, Anne, because sometimes people want to give an apology because they want to lower their guilt quotient or they are working the steps they're working the 12 steps and they don't

think enough about, does this person really want an apology? Do they really want to hear from me?

And, for example, I was working with someone in therapy who wanted to call a friend who was no longer a friend, but many, many years back she had slept with her friend's husband. And then ten years later she wanted to call this friend and apologize and explain and it was clear to me that that would be an intrusive apology.

So, first of all, your apology is not for you and you don't apologize if it's just going to hurt the other person or be intrusive. But let's say that's not the case. So your question is: you apologize and the other person does not want to share more; they don't want to share their thoughts and feelings and pain. I think the best thing to say to that person would be — you're the one who gave the apology, the other person doesn't want to go into it — to say, "I don't want to be intrusive, and I understand that you're not wanting to have this conversation now. I only want you to know that if you are ever ready to talk about it, to talk about the pain I caused and how it affected you, I want you to know that I am here to listen.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: I love that. It, at least, gives the person something they feel they can do without intruding upon the other person. Sort of honors the needs of both parties

HARRIET LERNER: Right. It honors the needs of both parties because it's not useful or sensitive to push heart — it's not useful or sensitive to push the hurt party to share their feelings. It is sensitive to say, "Is there more you haven't told me? If you're wanting to talk more, I want you to know I am here to listen, and I want to listen."

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: So let's move now to the other things to do when there is an apology that's welcomed. So we've sort of said what not to do, but what are the things, if I was going to be making an apology, to keep in mind that I should do?

HARRIET LERNER: You should be sincere. You should take full responsibility for what you said or did or failed to say or do without a hint of obfuscation or bringing up the other person's crime sheet — without any ifs ands and buts and that is very difficult.

I mean we are wired for defensiveness and it's quite amazing how easily we will slip into vague obfuscating language that, actually, it's not clear what we are apologizing for, what we're taking responsibility for. So that clarity, the avoidance of bringing up what the other person did wrong during the apology, it's very difficult

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Right, it involves a lot of self-discipline.

HARRIET LERNER: I have an example in the book where it was so difficult for me to offer an apology because I was just so mad that my good friend wouldn't see her part in it. And what happened is that she was launching her first book. She had just written her first book. And she had a big book party in New York and she invited me to come and it was difficult for me to come. I live in Kansas. It was a bad time and, you know, but I wanted to be there because the older I get the more I realized how important it is to show up for these rituals.

So I get to her book party and I only know one person there. I don't know her other friends and because I'm shy about talking to people that I don't know I sat with the one person that I did know well and we just sat there for about an hour and a half in the corner. And I was talking to her and we didn't even notice when there was a toast in the other room.

So when I got back to Kansas the next day I got a call from my friend and I thought she was going to thank me for coming to the book party. And instead she was furious at me and acted as if I had ruined the party. And said, you know, how could you have sat in the corner with this one person and ignored everyone else and I had friends who wanted to meet you. And I said to her — I offered her a sort of I'm sorry but not an apology. I said to her, "Well, I'm really sorry, but why didn't you tell me, why didn't you just come over and tap me on the shoulder and say Harriet circulate?" I mean this is a very close friend of mine. She knew me. She knew the person I was talking to and my friend got more angry.

She said, "It is not my job to supervise you. That is not my responsibility." And I got very angry and defensive because I couldn't believe that she would be such a martyr and, you know, just be angry during the party and not just tap me on the shoulder and say, "Go circulate." So I didn't I didn't apologize.

And then, of course, it helped that I was writing a book on apologies. I thought I'd better really think about this. You know, I really thought about it and I realized that if she had the courage to confront me that was not

the time when I should criticize her back. And I recognize that whether or not she could see her part in this, that I had screwed up. That this was her book party. It was her big day and I had sat there in the corner with one other person. So I did call her a day or two later and I offered a sincere apology for acting in a way that was insensitive and unconscionable.

And, of course, secretly I had the wish that she could have taken a teensy amount of responsibility. I had the wish that she had said, “Well Harriet, you know, I participated in the problem too because I should have said something to you.” I let go of that. I'd let go of that wish. My friend has a lot of strengths, but a strength that she does not have is the ability to see her part in the problems that bring her pain. So what was so important about my apologizing is that I was able to do the right thing. I was able to step up to the apology plate. I was being able to recognize that I was behaving like a jerk, and I let go of the issue of was I 70% to blame? Was I 20% to blame? I let it go and I offered a genuine apology.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: If she had said back to you — I'm just trying to imagine her feelings and experience — if she had said to you, “Harriet, you're so important to me and I'm so proud that you're my friend, and I wanted people to see you because I'm so proud of you. And that you were here to endorse my book, that meant so much to me, and I secretly hoped that you would actually make a toast too, only I was too shy to tell you.” If she had confessed that kind of feeling? I mean, you'd already let go of your wish that she, on her part, but if she had been able to say something like that — I don't even know if she felt that way, of course — do you think that would have helped even more?

HARRIET LERNER: I think she did feel that way and I think she was so angry that she did not introduce — you know, she called me and basically blasted me. And if she had done what we all should do when we want an apology, which is to start with a positive, to say, “It meant so much to me that you came out. You know, you're very important to me.” All of the things that you said so beautifully and, to be honest, I mean those are all the right things to say. To be honest, I think I still — knowing me, because I always want the other person to see their part — I still would have said, “Why the hell, you know, didn't you come over and say something to me? And again, like I said, we're all wired for a defensiveness. We are all wired for defensiveness.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: So I guess being an expert on apologies means that you're still human.

HARRIET LERNER: Exactly. You know, I mean, with my husband Steve, for example, I am very good at apologizing for my percent of the problem as I calculate it. Always less than 50%. And I expect him to apologize for his part of the problem — as I calculate it, of course. And we don't always do the same math. Steve does bad math.

And, of course, writing this book I poke myself about being my best self and I'm much better able to say, you know, I apologize for my part in this. I apologize for being so critical, without having to make the point that I think he's still 57.4%, you know, to blame for the whole thing.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Right. So I want to come back to the sort of do's and don'ts because I think there might be more. So what I'm hearing you say is the steps of a good apology include, first, you really have to be sincere. It has to be wholehearted. The second thing I hear you say is you have to take full responsibility for what you said or did or didn't do without bringing up their part, their percentage. Are there other things in the ingredients of a good apology list?

HARRIET LERNER: Let's go back to something I mentioned briefly which is that the good apology requires us to really listen and we automatically, when we're being criticized by someone who wants the apology, we automatically listen defensively. Meaning we automatically listen for the errors, the exaggerations, the inaccuracies that will indeed be there. So we listen for what we don't agree with. So then we can get up on our high horse and we can make corrections etc. Pay attention to how you listen when someone is criticizing you or they say those dreaded words, “we have to talk.” And you'll find that if you don't make an intentional effort to change it, that you are listening for what you don't agree with. You're not listening with an open heart, to really get what the other person is saying, the essence of what they want you to understand. And listening well is so important because it's not the words quote ‘I'm sorry’ that really heals the injury. The hurt party wants us to really get it. They want us to validate and care about their feelings. They want us to carry some of the pain that we've caused them to feel.

So the real apology for something important is saying to that person, the hurt party, “Yes, I get it. I screwed up. I was wrong. Your feelings make sense and I want you to know not only that I would never do that again, but I'm going to be thinking about this for a long time. It's not going to slip out of my head.” So no apology will have meaning if we haven't listened carefully to the hurt party's anger and pain. And no one wants to do that with that person is accusing us of causing it. It is the hardest thing in the world to really listen.

And I should also say, Anne, that listening is not a very sexy subject. It is a very un-sexy subject. People are much more motivated to improve their talking skills than they are to improve their listening skills. So, you know, it's interesting because listening is everything. Listening is what determines whether that other person wants to be with us and is happy to see us at the end of the day and whether our apology is real. And yet we just want to get through. So, if only our wish to understand the other person were as great as our wish to be understood, it would be a different world.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Sometimes that's my mantra, Harriet. If I have to make an apology that's really important, I sort of go in: "Remember, Anne. Remember the point is to understand them, not to not to be understood." I really have to be sort of like reminded approximately every 30 seconds.

HARRIET LERNER: Exactly. Exactly. And to understand them and to not be listening for the inaccuracies or the exaggerations.

Now I should add something to that because often when I'm working with people in therapy I suggest that they think in terms of two conversations if they're going into a conversation where the other person is going to criticize them or confront them. It's very useful to think of two conversations. And in the first conversation you only listen to understand. And you apologize for that piece that you can get. There may need to be a second conversation because very often we may see something differently and it is very important to be able to speak to differences that matter.

So in a second conversation, for example, a mother might say to her daughter, "I've been thinking a lot about what you told me about how I ignored you at the time of my divorcing dad and I am thinking a lot about that and I am sorry from the bottom of my heart because I am now thinking about the consequences that that had for you. There's one thing you said that I don't agree with and that is I don't believe that I was responsible for your dad's drinking. I'm responsible for my behavior. I'm not responsible for your dad's behavior. I wish that he had gotten help for himself with his drinking, but that is something I don't take responsibility for. So tell me," the mother might continue with her adult daughter, "What is it like for you that we see this so differently?"

And you know — and this is an important thing about the two conversations because if someone is confronting you and they want an apology, yes, you need to first only listen to what you can get and apologize to that — but that doesn't mean that you stay silent when there's been an accusation that you really don't agree with. It's just you don't bring that up as part of the apology because it will, it will undo the apology.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Do you suggest that people set it up in the beginning like let's plan to have two conversations?

HARRIET LERNER: They set it up? One second. You set it up with yourself. In other words, the mother wouldn't say to her daughter when the daughter says, "We have to talk. I have so much anger about what happened, but you know about the divorce. It's just like I've never gotten over it." It is not useful for the mother to say, "Well, we're going to have two conversations." What's important is that the mother can say that to her own self, that she can say, "Self, this is going to be really hard, but I need to be totally present and really listen and ask questions to help me to better understand. And to say to my daughter, 'Is there more that you haven't told me?' And to let her know I'll be thinking about it and to apologize, and that I need to save my differences for another conversation." So that's something you say to yourself. It's not something you announce to your daughter.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: OK, that's really helpful. I want to talk now about gender dynamics and apologies. We've been witnessing countless attempts at apology in response to the #MeToo movement and on the part of the men, and there's sort of a whole new genre of expertise right now springing up which is sort of a critique of the apology, and how it falls short in so many ways.

But I wanted to ask you to comment — I'm sure you read these apologies, as so many of us do — and I'm curious if you could help me understand the pressures on men that are different than those on women around making apologies.

HARRIET LERNER: Beginning with Weinstein onward, you don't really need to be an apology expert to recognize a sleazy gaslighting non apology. It's important to understand that a public apology — after the difficult facts have come out in the open — a public apology is not like a private apology. A public apology is a performance. It is simply a performance. It is to save one's own reputation and one's own skin. Which is

amazing to me that those famous powerful men didn't just hire someone to help them write a proper apology.

So a personal apology is very different, and a personal apology has the potential most often to heal the relationship and to be sincere.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: I think, you know, there's a sense in the culture, I think, that women can sometimes over apologize and that men can sometimes under apologize. And if we get beyond kind of righteous blaming, satisfying as that is, I'd like to understand what are the forces that men are contending with when they are faced with the need to apologize? What makes it? Does — is it harder for them culturally because of how we understand masculinity? How would you understand that?

HARRIET LERNER: It's easy for everybody, men and women, to apologize for something simple. If you spill red wine on your friend's carpet. Gender — it's just not a factor. You're going to immediately say, "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. And you know let me pay the cleaning bill and so forth." If it's something larger than that, in general, men have a more difficult time apologizing. Perhaps the number one risk factor for being an under apologeter is being raised male and for being over apologeter, being raised female.

I know women in my generation were raised to feel guilty and apologetic for using up valuable oxygen in the room. I mean, we were raised to be guilty about everything. Guilty if we were leaving our work for children and guilty if we were leaving our children for work. And guilty if we didn't have children and guilty if we didn't have work. And guilty about feeling guilty because guilt isn't good for children and so forth. So you know women can be in the habit of just giving this endless stream of useless sorries.

And, you know, I was with a good friend in a restaurant and I think before the food even arrived she had made like eight sorries. Like oh, oh sorry did you want to sit here? And oh, did you want to look at that menu? Oh I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, I interrupted you.

You know so some of us over apologize to us if we had gone to Miss Manners Apology Finishing School. men don't do that. And, in general, if you're a woman who does that, it's good to tone it down because over apologizing interrupts the flow of normal conversation and it will irritate your friends. And in the workplace, of course, it undermines your authority. So that's the over apologizing business.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Can I interject here? Let's stay with women for a minute longer before we jump to men. I wanted to tell you a story about this that really horrified me and to ask for your response. You may know the book *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker who is a guy who works often to protect high profile people from dangerous threats.

HARRIET LERNER: Right. I read in a long time ago.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: OK, so he tells the story of a serial rapist who is caught raping the 26th woman that he rapes. And he tells the forensic psychologist how he selected his victims. And he describes parking his van near the exit of the supermarket, and going into the supermarket with his cart and selecting someone who might be of interest to him. And intentionally bumping her with his cart if she turned around and said, "Oh I'm sorry" even though he clearly had bumped her while she was standing still in the aisle. He would then make a mental note and track her progress through the supermarket and make a point of bumping her a second time. If on the second intentional aggressive bump she turned to him recognized it was the same guy and again said, "Oh, I'm sorry" he would then follow her out of the supermarket, grab her, bundle her into his van and rape her. Now feeling, I think, fairly confident she would not scream and not fight back. And this worked apparently 25 out of 26 times.

So I read that and it really put this whole problem of a women over apologizing into a whole new dangerous light and sort of it goes even beyond the risk factors that you just named about interrupting conversation and being irritating and so on. It made it feel kind of imperative that, oh, this is something to get past. Not, hank goodness, that everybody's in the supermarket screening people like that, thank goodness, but how do you help a woman who over apologizes begin to shift that practice?

HARRIET LERNER: That story is very interesting and it's very dramatic and I actually don't relate to that as being part of real life apart from the chaotic madness of one person. And I don't believe that, you know, if you over apologized that you are participating in having yourself seriously violated. I do think, as I said, I mean the consequences of over apologizing is that you diminish your own authority and you, as I said, you irritate your friends because they have to stop whatever it is that they're talking about and they have to reassure you, "Oh, no, it's ok. Don't worry about it."

There is a kind of over apologizing that's more serious for women. It's in a different category. And I see it most often when an adult daughter wants to confront their mother. Maybe from something in, you know, that happened in the past. Like the adult daughter, you know, to give a real example, who wants to say to the mother — and did say to the mother — how could you have neglected the fact that I was drinking when I was little? How could you have neglected my obvious deep depression and acted like it didn't exist? How could you have done that to me? So that's you know the daughter opens the conversation with this kind of confrontation. And the mother over apologizes in the particular kind of way that actually is hijacking the daughter's pain and the daughter's story.

So the mother immediately starts to cry, as this mother, you know, does, and says “Oh, my God, I'm such a bad mother. I never should have had children. I don't deserve to have children.” And she is so, gets so deeply into her own pain, you know, for being a bad mother that the daughter ends up consoling the mother. The daughter ends up saying, “Mom, don't worry about it. You did the best you could. Now I know you didn't intend to hurt me. Look, I'm OK.” And later the daughter feels like shit because the daughter went to her mother with the daughter's pain, her own pain, and the mother hijacked that pain with this over emotional, you know, poor me, I'm such a bad mother. How can I live with myself?

You know, the daughter, you know, came to me in therapy and said, “I can't confront my mother about anything because it just turns into her pain and I'm supposed to console her.” And that's a very different kind of over apologizing than my friend did in the restaurant who says, “Oh, I'm so sorry you wanted to sit here. Oh, I took your menu.” So, you know, that's an interesting kind of over apologizing because if a family member or friend is confronting you, you need to show genuine remorse and sorrow, but not to overdo it to the point that the hurt party — you're inviting the hurt party — to then take care of you.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Makes a lot of sense. Thank you. So let's let's talk about men now. What makes it so hard for men to apologize?

HARRIET LERNER: Apologizing means sharing vulnerability. It is vulnerable to apologize. You don't know how your apology will be received. You don't know if it will open up the floodgates to more criticism. A lot of men tell me this. A lot of married men say, “I don't want to apologize to my wife because my wife, she's just going to go on and on and on with more criticism and then use it against me.” So there is a vulnerability and apologizing, and, as we know, men are not raised to be experts and vulnerability.

So that is one thing. And when when it comes to again, when it comes to something serious I think men and women equally have a problem. In order to give a heartfelt apology for something really important you need to have a solid platform of self worth to stand on and from that higher platform you can look out at your bad behavior and you can see it as part of a more complex ever changing picture of who you are as a human being. People who do serious harm stand on a small rickety platform of self worth and they're not able to really get it. They're not able to really own the harm that they've done because it threatens to flip them into an identity of worthlessness and shame. And this is equally true for men and women.

So for example, and again going back to the adult daughter who is confronting a parent, often the parent can't get it. They're very defensive. They can't get it because they're being or they feel they're being asked by the daughter to accept an identity as a bad mother or a bad father. People can apologize for what they do, but we can't apologize for who we are. So, in my research on apologies in my being a clinical psychologist and therapist over four decades I would say that this is so hard for both men and women.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: I mean that really makes sense to me. And it feels like you're talking about the distinction between shame and guilt. That guilt is about specific behavior, and shame is about a global sense of self.

I find myself wondering if it's harder for men because vulnerability is more shamed for men, in general, and vulnerability is more socially allowable for women. If there's a sort of an additional piece for men that, you know, that gets associated with weakness in a way that vulnerability is not associated with weakness for women? What do you think about that?

HARRIET LERNER: It's, it's an interesting point. I think the, the first point you're raising about the difference between guilt and shame, is so crucial there. And your distinction that you made that shame is bad behavior — I'm sorry — the distinction you made that guilt is about behavior. When we behave in a way that violates our core values and beliefs and hurt someone it is good to feel guilty and we can apologize for what we've said and done or not said and done. But when, for example, the person confronting us is shaming us, like how could you do such a thing? How can any person do such a thing? What what is wrong with you? I think men and women equally cannot — they will wrap themselves in layers of denial and rationalization and

minimisation, and 'it didn't happen' and 'I didn't do it' and 'it wasn't my fault' because people will do anything to avoid shame.

And I'm reminded of my favorite Peanuts cartoon where it shows Lucy in her five cents psychiatry booth. And she says to Charlie Brown, "Charlie Brown, the problem with you is that you're you." And Charlie Brown says, "Well, what am I supposed to do with that?" And Lucy says, "Well, I just diagnosed the problem. You know, I don't do solutions." But it's an interesting cartoon because I think that for both men and women equally, that if we don't have a great big picture of ourselves, if we don't recognize, if we feel reduced, if our identity is reduced to the very worst things we've ever done, it becomes impossible to apologize. And it's a healthy kind of resistance because every human being is larger and more complex than the worst thing they ever did.

And there is, you know, an interesting thing that happens because when we're angry and disappointed with people we tend to label them. You know, this person is a bad mother. This person is a narcissist. This person is a predator. This person is a, you know, you can fill in the blanks. And when we label someone as if they are equal to the worst things they've ever done, that person will not apologize. They will not be able to access genuine remorse because they're beginning with a rickety platform of self-worth. And when you shame people you're just taking a hatchet to that rickety platform of self worth.

So I think that when we get to the more serious harm, like harm we do as parents, for example, I think men and women are pretty much the same in wanting to wrap ourselves in, you know, defensiveness and denial and rationalization.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: So if I come back to the #MeToo movement and these public apologies as performance, I wonder if part of what makes it so difficult for these performance apologies to go well is that it is the nature of celebrity and fame and publicity, in a way, precisely to define people in these very narrow ways. Can you comment on how these sort of performance public apologies might be influenced by this dynamic of not wanting your identity, your whole identity, to be wrapped up as a sex offender, say?

HARRIET LERNER: Well, of course. Of course, none of us want our accomplishments, our entire complex self, to be reduced to "you are a predator."

If you're the hurt party and we're talking about you know all of these celebrities and their dreadful apologies, your only job is to speak your truths. To do what you need to do for your own self. Most of these women, maybe all of them, did not want an apology from these powerful men. Really, they probably just wanted them to go away, and it wasn't their job to think about — as they talked about their own pain and what had been done to them — it was not their job to think about, well, am I approaching this in a way that is sensitive to the person who harmed me? Or that recognizes that person's full humanity etc. These public apologies are in a different category.

And they're problematic. I think they're problematic as well because these different aspects of harm these men have done really can not be leveled into one category. And I think that has happened. You know, and that makes it harder for people who've done lesser harm to give a sincere apology if they are being grouped in a category of people that you know have just done irreparable and unconscionable and repeated harm.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: I see, so you're talking about the sort of the distinction between somebody who has raped several people versus someone who, you know, forced a kiss that was not wanted? Is that what you're trying to?

HARRIET LERNER: Exactly. These are not the same.

Should we talk about — I know this might be too complex for a little bit of time — but, you know, it's been a really interesting, the chapter that people have most related to in the book is the one on forgiveness. The idea that, you know, so often, of course, we've all been hurt by people who will never apologize. All of us. Who will never get it. And then we're told, and this is so deep in the culture, that, well, you just have to forgive them because if you don't forgive them, you know, you're poisoning yourself and you're, you know, blah blah blah. So I don't know if you want to touch on that, or that's too complex to get in to.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Sure, there is one other thing I want to make sure to have time for, but, yes, I think forgiveness is really important. So let's go there now.

I was raised to believe that it was sort of a moral imperative that you should forgive and that you could never really heal unless you forgave somebody. And I was also raised to believe that if I was going to apologize I

should ask for forgiveness. And now, as an adult, I feel like those things feel like a lot of pressure on both parties and lead to people to sometimes feeling like a failure if they can't forgive.

So I'm curious to ask you what do you tell somebody who's been very hurt, who's feeling pressure to forgive and can't quite get there?

HARRIET LERNER: My favorite chapter in *Why Won't You Apologize?*, and the one that was most difficult to write is called, "*You Have To Forgive And Other Lies That Hurt You*" because there is a myth in this culture that there can be no peace or healing without forgiveness and forgiveness is the only path to a life that's not mired down in bitterness and hate. And, furthermore, if you don't forgive you're going to get all these physical problems and heart attacks etc. I mean, this is presented as scientific data. It is not true. You do not need to forgive someone who's hurt you. That shows no remorse or interest in listening to your feelings. You do need to let go of those corrosive aspects of anger and bitterness that keep you stuck. You know, that wake us up 3:00 in the morning. The brain's favorite time to wake us up with angry ruminations and bitterness and 'how could my ex do this?' and 'how could my mother say that? You know, that is not useful and we need to learn to let go of that.

But that does not require forgiveness and one of the things that I see — and, by the way, there are even therapists who push forgiveness — many people believe that forgiveness, like gratitude, is a universal a universally healing emotion. Gratitude, by the way, I do believe it's a universally healing emotion. So some people believe that forgiveness is this — you know, you need to forgive — and when we encourage forgiveness or push forgiveness, we actually leave the hurt party feeling alone and abandoned and betrayed all over again.

I see this all the time in families. The mother says to her daughter, "You know, what your father did happened a long time ago and he did the best he could and he was abused too. And you need to forgive him and you need to move on and not live in the past." This is like abandoning the hurt party all over again. So it's one thing to tell someone you care about that you hope they can find a way to protect themselves from carrying so much anger and pain, but it's another thing entirely to suggest that that they should forgive the wrongdoer and transcend their legitimate anger and pain by some act of will or or grace. And it is nobody's job to tell you to forgive or not to.

And in terms of the other part of your question, it is very common that people give an apology and they say, "Do you forgive me? Why don't you forgive me forgive me?" And there are some relationships or some marriages where that's a valued ritual, you know, or one person will say to the other, "You know, do you forgive me?" And that is valued. Often it's a mistake to ask for forgiveness. Repairing a wrongdoing takes time. And it's of no value to make the hurt party feel rushed or pressured. And a true apology does not ask the hurt party to do anything, not even to forgive.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Does a true apology include the offer to make restitution so that one offers to do something oneself? Do you think that the offer of restitution is necessary in a good apology?

HARRIET LERNER: It's absolutely necessary if it is called for. And, you know, we could look at little things. I mentioned if you spill red wine on your friend's carpet, you offered to pay the cleaning bill. I have friends who went to a restaurant and everything went wrong. And they complained and the head person came out and apologized 15 million times. You know, I'm so sorry and I'm so sorry. But he did not offer a reparation. He didn't say, "The entree is on us, you know. Or the wine and dessert is on us."

So those are simple things and for serious things, as well, a reparation can be very important. I worked with one father who had molested his daughter. It was a one time thing. And he did a lot of work in therapy on this and — not that, not that something like that can ever be repaired as if it never happened — but one of the things that he did in terms of reparation is that and he held several jobs that every Saturday, and he took another job, and he gave all of the money from that job to groups that helped women where there had been children sexual violations. You know, I'm not saying that all connections can be mended or that reparations can make everything right, but I believe reparations are very important.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: And brings to mind the you know the great sins of this country. You know, in terms of slavery or, you know, indigenous peoples and wondering whether reparations need to be part of a healing on a national level.

HARRIET LERNER: Of course our country has done a terrible, terrible job with its reparations and Germany is an example of where there have been, you know, if you go and google Germany's reparations for the Holocaust, it is extraordinary the reparations that that country has made and they're keeping that history

alive.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: I didn't know that I will look into it.

So Harriet at the risk of asking you a self-evident question and I think it's nonetheless really important, why does it matter whether or not we apologize? Why is apologizing important?

HARRIET LERNER: When I would tell my colleagues that I was working on a book about apologies they would roll their eyes. I would see their eyes roll back in their heads like how boring. [The fact is nothing is more important. We're all connected. We all screw up we all unwittingly hurt others, just as we are hurt by them. So the need to give and receive apologies is with us until our very last breath. And when done right the apology can be deeply healing. And when apologies are absent or they're done wrong they compromised relationships are they even and relationships. So this is a really important subject that we are talking about.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Do you wish they taught it in public school? I mean, given the importance of it, where do we learn about apologies? There's almost nowhere that we really learn how to apologize well.

HARRIET LERNER: Actually, in families we tend to get very bad lessons. For example, our parents don't apologize with clarity and the way we've talked about what a good apology is comprised of. And there is a gender difference. Fathers have more difficulty apologizing to children than mothers. They're more likely to take it as a loss of authority.

So the other mistake that parents make when it comes to teaching kids to apologize — this is really important because I am going to tell our listeners how to teach your kids to apologize with one sentence — And that is when your kid apologizes, simply say, “Thank you for the apology. I really appreciate it.”

Kids tell me in my research they hate apologies because when they apologize their mother or father doesn't say thank you for the apology; I appreciate it. Instead, there is a small lecture. ‘Well next time maybe you'll apologize without my having to ask you. And that was not a real apology. You know, you're looking down at your shoes. You look Suzy in the eye and you tell her how bad you feel or you go to your room. Ad you think about this and then you come out and give a real apology.’

And the kids are telling me, “I just want to put my fingers in my ears you know and get away.” So when your child apologizes you say thank you for the apology. I really appreciate it. Silence. If there is more to discuss, if you have more to say about empathy or the importance of apologies to whatever, save it for another conversation so that it doesn't make your child of whatever age feel like they want to put their fingers in their ears get away from you and they think, “What's the point? What's the point of apologizing?”

So, you know, it helps if in the first family, you know the most important contexts we first know, our parents both do a good job at apologizing and they learn to accept our apology without delivering a small lecture.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: That seems so right, Harriet. I think that the response you're coaching parents to give their kids feels actually really useful for adults to adults as well to to receive. When someone apologizes to you, what do you think the best way is to respond to a genuine apology?

HARRIET LERNER: You know, again it depends. Because if the good apology is enough I would certainly just say thank you for the apology. That means a lot to me, if I felt that it was a good apology. But if I was still sitting with a lot of anger and pain and things I felt I had to say, and things that felt the other person didn't get even though they knew they should apologize, then I would also say I want to talk about it more because I'm carrying a lot of hurt and pain. And I would like to have another conversation that doesn't need to be now. But I would like to have another conversation

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Yeah, that seems great. So I want to close where we began, when you said most of the people who come to you for consultation are people who want an apology as opposed to those who are trying to get better at it.

What are your do's and don'ts for someone who feels very wounded and wants to ask for an apology in an effective way?

HARRIET LERNER: It's often not useful to ask for an apology. It often makes the other person feel sort of backed in a corner or like they're being treated as a child. What is useful is to with brevity speak to your own pain. So, for example, if I wanted an apology from a friend I wouldn't go to them and say I want an apology. I would say, “The comment that you made in front of our friends the other night hurt my feelings. It was difficult

for me.” Silence. You know when we're anxious we tend to either not bring something up at all or we over talk it. So my tendency would be, you know, to go on and on, you know, in detail about exactly why my friend's comment was extremely insensitive and uncalled for and how she should have known better, rather than saying, “what you said hurt my feelings,” and then leaving space. It is so hard for people to say it shorter and leave that space and see what the other person says. So that's what I would do as opposed to requesting an apology or demanding an apology. It's really not useful.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: So let me ask you this, if people, you know, if I was listening to this driving in my car I would immediately start thinking of apologies that I hadn't yet made that I knew I should make and I might want to contact you for a consultation. Are you open to that? And how can people contact you if you are?

HARRIET LERNER: I don't do phone consultations. I do do, you know, lectures and keynotes. So I would say go to the book because there's more information. Not just my book, you know, I mean, there are many books. There's more information than we can begin to make use of.

And also to consult your own self. People pay an inordinate amount of money to experts when they're not doing what they already know would be a good idea to do. So check in with your own self if you feel that you've hurt someone and that you haven't in any way tried to repair it, because you probably have more wisdom about this than maybe any expert.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Well, Harriet Lerner, thank you so much for being my guest on Space Space radio. I have enjoyed this immensely and you've led me off into so many different conversations and memories in my mind I so appreciate the chance to listen to this again and again as we edit it so that it will sink in.

HARRIET LERNER: Well, thank you. It's been wonderful for me to talk about my currently favorite topic and to try to do better with it myself.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: It's an ongoing work probably for all of us.

HARRIET LERNER: Right! For at least one lifetime.

DR. ANNE HALLWARD: Yeah, exactly. Thank you, again. I hope you continue to feel better and I will let you know when we're done and when we hope it will air. We'll be in touch again.