Common Responses to Being Told You Have Caused Harm

Individuals who have been told that they have caused harm may experience a wide range of feelings and responses. This information sheet lists some common responses and what it may sound or feel like from the perspective of the individual. It can be helpful in identifying responses during training, providing strategies for learners’ reflection and self-care, and assisting learners with understanding and re-framing responses so that they can take steps towards accountability.

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| **Response** | **What It May Sound or Feel Like** | **Possible Outcomes** |
| Vulnerability | Sensation of being exposed to more potential harm, or increased intimacy with the person who was harmed | Feeling vulnerable can be really frightening and provoke us to become angry or defensive |
| “Shame spiral” | Overwhelming feelings of shame or embarrassment about having caused harm, difficulty getting grounded to move forward | Difficulty participating in efforts to move forward because all focus is driven inwards to our own personal hurt |
| Minimization | Reducing the harm identified to one’s own perception or measurement of what’s hurtful, including your intentions rather than the impact the actions had (e.g. “it was only a joke” or “it was meant as a compliment”). | For the person who was harmed, this can feel invalidating and hurtful. It also sends the message that your feelings and perceptions are more accurate and valuable than their own. |
| Justification | Qualifying the actions that caused harm as necessary or justifiable. This might sound like “Well if you hadn’t \_\_\_\_”, or “But you laughed the last time”, or “I didn’t hear you say no”. | For the person who was harmed, they will likely feel blamed for what happened. Additionally, feeling justified in one’s actions is separate from causing hurt and needing to be accountable to it. |
| Focus on intent | Similarly to minimization and justification, places all attention and power in the hands of the person who caused harm to define the action, its worth and its impact. It might feel more comfortable to focus on our intentions rather than impact. | For the person who was harmed, this might feel invalidating, and reinforce a sense of powerlessness and not being heard. It will likely hamper efforts to move forward together in an effective way. Intent does not cancel out impact. |
| Interrogate | Asking questions to clarify an experience in a persistent manner, rather than a conversational dialogue. | For the person being harmed, they may feel like they are on trial or that someone believes they’re lying about what happened. |
| Deflection | This may include focusing on other people’s actions as more harmful than one’s own, or on factors that are irrelevant to the present circumstances. | This takes precious time and energy away from the situation at hand to resolve. |
| Grief or sadness | Questioning who we are or thought we were, reflecting on past experiences or harm or being harmed, sadness about the harmed that we caused. May also feel like embarrassment or shame. | Grief or sadness that isn’t addressed effectively may get in the way of moving forward. People may sink deeper into the feeling or numb themselves to the feeling entirely. |
| Defensive | Rather than consider that everyone is capable of causing harm, or that one action does not define a person’s entire character, we might feel like we’re being labelled as a “bad person” or a monster. | This response can get in the way of being present and grounded enough to truly listen to another person. It keeps focus on the person who caused harm. |
| Reframe | Comes from a place of not wanting to accept harm has happened. May sound like “Maybe you feel more like \_\_\_\_\_” or “Maybe they meant \_\_\_ instead of \_\_\_\_”. | This sends the message to the person who was harmed that their own perceptions and experiences are not accurate or reliable. |
| Overwhelm | Emotionally “shut down” or numb, or possibly racing thoughts and difficulty concentrating. | This may hamper the ability to listen, process information or make decisions in a meaningful way. |
| Outrage or anger | Self-explanatory | This may scare the person who’s experienced harm, increase their suffering and impact their decision to speak up again in the future. |
| Escalation of harm | Increased violence, physically, emotionally or verbally. Includes retaliation. | Additional suffering for the person who experienced harm, and potentially more serious consequences for the person escalating. |

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