

Autopilot Apologies

4/13/23

Sarah here. We hope that you enjoyed last week's blog on cross-generational communication. This week, we're talking about another issue that can show up when we communicate with others: autopilot apologies.



What are autopilot apologies? They're apologies that happen almost reflexively, without even thinking. People who struggle with autopilot apologies tend to apologize repeatedly during routine conversations, which may leave the listener feeling confused and wondering what the speaker is apologizing for. Consider this sample dialogue between coworkers:

Allie: "Hey, Mischa."

Mischa: "Oh- I'm so glad you're at this training too!"

Allie: "Do you need a partner for this exercise? Sorry to bug you."

Mischa: "Um, yeah, I definitely need a partner. You aren't bugging me. I don't know many people here at the office yet, so I'm happy to see you."

Allie: "Oh, okay. Sorry I'm so bad at reading situations. Ugh- I just dropped my pen. Sorry I'm such a klutz."

Mischa: "Should we sit over there?"

Allie: "Yeah, that sounds good. I don't know what we're supposed to be doing though. Sorry if I'm not much help."

Mischa: "Well, how about we just wait to hear what the facilitator says, and we'll go from there."

In that brief exchange, Allie said a whopping 4 apologies but it's likely that Mischa didn't think any apologies were necessary. After all, she seemed relieved that Allie approached her and that they could partner up, so Allie wasn't bugging her. And since they were awaiting instructions from the facilitator, it wasn't surprising that Allie didn't know what to do.

In the previous sample exchange, Allie seemed to doubt herself and lack confidence. But there are many reasons people may fall into the autopilot apologies trap. Reasons for autopilot apologies include:

- Cultural/community-based expectations (this is a more common behavior among women than men, especially in societies historically controlled by men)
- Low self-esteem/self-confidence
- Self-doubt
- Excessive guilt (for your own actions or for the actions of others who *don't* apologize for their misbehavior)
- People pleasing (wanting everyone to be happy)
- Mental health conditions, like depressive and anxiety disorders
- Having a history of trauma



“I’m sorry!”
“Stop saying sorry.”
“Okay... sorry.”

Regardless of the reason for the autopilot apologies, the good news is that you can do things to break out of this habit! Slow down. Breathe and take a moment *before* you speak. Ask yourself *what* you're apologizing for. If you're genuinely remorseful for something and it warrants an apology, then apologize. If, on the other hand, you didn't do anything wrong and you don't have a reason to apologize, then don't. Remember, apologies are for times you have *actually* said or done something wrong, not just for times you feel uncertain or uncomfortable in a situation. Being mindful and present during conversations can help you be more aware of what



and how you're communicating. By being intentional in your communication, you can decrease autopilot apologies and make sure you're actually saying what you mean.