



# What I Wish I'd Said

*The key to saying what you really want is figuring out what you're really feeling*  
BY SHEILA HEEN

THEY SEEMED SUCH SIMPLE WORDS: *I'm sorry.* Yet nothing in the world could have dragged them out of me that afternoon, when I was 13, standing in front of my mother. Days earlier, she had shared a secret with me and made it clear I was to tell no one. I promised I wouldn't. But I did. I told my best friend, and when it got back to my mother – doesn't it always? – she marched in and demanded, "How could you?" My heart sank. Then, looking my mother squarely in the eye, I denied breaking her confidence.

I lied. What I really wanted to say was, "I'm so sorry, Mom." But the words were trapped inside me. It's not that I was scared of what would happen if I came clean; I was grounded from the get-go. I couldn't apologize because I couldn't admit to myself that I had let my mother down. I was ashamed of what I had done and feared losing her trust. It was easier to embrace a lie than to confront the truth.

Of course, it took me years to figure that out. And I suppose I could still write off the

incident as adolescent bravado—if it weren't for the fact that, as adults, so many of us struggle to say what we really feel when things get difficult. Many of us can't even tell the hairdresser when the cut's too short.

#### THE FEAR WE ALL SHARE

Today I teach negotiation and conflict resolution at Harvard Law School, and as a consultant, I help people navigate some of the world's most difficult conversations. I've traveled the globe from Singapore to Cyprus, working with people who are embroiled in political, religious or racial conflicts.

I've learned that as tough as the most intractable international conflicts are, they have much in common with the conversations each of us encounters in our personal and professional lives every day: Telling someone you feel ignored. Ending a relationship. Asking for a raise. Talking with your daughter about her smoking. Apologizing.

One thing is always true: Not being able to say something has everything to do with being afraid to own up to what we feel. Believe me, the toughest negotiation you'll ever engage in won't take place over the phone or across your boss's desk. It will take place inside of you.

You won't be able to ask for what you need from a friend, parent, child, sibling or husband unless you first ask yourself what you need—and answer truthfully. And if, as was true of me at 13, you can't admit to yourself that something you've done has hurt someone else, you won't be able to apologize and your relationship with that person may never recover until you do.

#### DON'T JUDGE YOUR EMOTIONS

Difficult conversations are difficult because they can change the way people see us and the way we see ourselves. We want to be perceived as agreeable, but we *aren't* always agreeable. And that's okay.

My friend Joan, 42, seemed constitutionally unable to say "Please, just stop!" to her mother-in-law, who would regularly let herself into Joan's house to wash everything from the floors and windows to the family dog. Once, Joan came home to find that her mother-in-law had hired construction workers to build garage storage units; another, time she had repainted the back porch.

Joan would say, "You don't have to do that" or "You shouldn't have." Her mother-in-law would respond, "Oh, it's no trouble" or "Well, it needed doing." Joan's husband couldn't understand why she was so upset. After all, how can you be upset about someone helping you? "For so many years," Joan says, "I thought the problem was me. The fact that I felt

angry and resentful when my mother in-law helped must mean I'm a bad person."

Eventually, Joan stopped judging her feelings and realized that she and her mother-in-law simply had different expectations about how entwined their lives should be.

Joan finally broached the subject by saying, "You know, I never expected you to shoulder so much of the work around here." She added that she felt guilty about it and that she wanted to be in charge of her own home.

Her mother-in-law was surprisingly receptive. As they talked, it became clear that she was just looking for ways to be included. "Now we invite her for dinner or to help with the kids," says Joan. "I've taken control of my home, and when she helps out I feel genuinely appreciative."

#### HEALING WITH THE REACTION

My client Kendra, 34, hadn't spoken to her friend Anna in six years. An argument had torn them apart, and Kendra didn't know how to say both "You hurt me" and "I miss you."

"Our first two years of college, we were like sisters," Kendra recalls. "Nothing came between us. Then, during junior year, Anna drifted toward a group of kids who had more money than me. I was working two jobs and couldn't afford to eat out the way they did. One weekend when Anna was off with her new friends, I just got fed up. I wrote a letter to my boyfriend about how rich and inconsiderate they all were. But before I could mail it, Anna found the letter."

The stony silence that settled between them was painful for Kendra. "I was terrified that if I called Anna, she'd yell at me," Kendra says. So she let years go by, while the hurt lingered.

Eventually, Kendra realized she could not let the fear of someone else's reaction stop her from expressing herself: "Once I let go of worrying about how she would react, it took a huge amount of pressure off me. I could focus on being honest."

Kendra wrote a letter explaining how lonely and hurt she'd felt and that she was embarrassed by the nasty things she'd said. She wrote that she would understand if Anna was still upset.

When Anna received the letter, she picked up the phone; within minutes, both women were holding back tears. "Once she knew I still cared," Kendra says, "she was able to be honest with me, too. And she felt as bad as I did."

Last year, Kendra and Anna introduced their toddler sons to each other and began to rekindle their friendship.

Being honest about your feelings and needs is never easy and rarely risk-free. But it's an opportunity to invest in greater intimacy in your relationships—and in a deeper understanding of yourself.

## How to Speak Up

Below, some ways to tackle the conversations you dread:

**Plan some opening lines.** If you want to discuss a conflict in a relationship, keep your opener neutral. Try, for example, "I think we have different expectations about how much time we spend together. Can we talk about that?"

**If the other person becomes angry or starts to cry, don't say, "Calm down" or "You're overreacting."** This says you don't care about or understand her feelings. But if you feel overwhelmed by her reaction, say, "I'd like to think about what you've said. Can we talk about this again a little later?"

**Listen carefully.** It can't be a one-way conversation. You might be surprised by the other person's point of view—and having said your piece, you'll probably find it easier to keep an open mind.

— *From Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, published by Penguin.*