



Remorse Or Repentance?

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled "All Psyched Up" for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of "Life is An Adventure...every step of the way" and "Open for Business Success" is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email office@drlindahancock.com

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Frequently I am asked to work with clients who have behaved in a manner that leads to serious consequences. When someone assaults another person, abuses substances while working a safety-sensitive job position or commits a criminal act, they may be Court-ordered or required by an employer to have a psychological assessment.

During the initial clinical interview, I frequently observe nervousness, fear reactions and even tears. The client may minimize his or her actions, state that this was the first time that this circumstance had occurred or try to assure me that "this will never happen again". Despite their sincerity, however, I realize that change requires much more than promises.

Recently I listened to a judge who was interviewed on CNN regarding Paris Hilton's incarceration. He was asked "What do you think will happen now that Paris Hilton has become a born-again Christian?" The judge wisely replied "Everyone becomes a Christian their first week in jail".

You see, when people face exposure for their inappropriate decisions, they experience great mental and emotional pressure. The resulting tears and promises can be misinterpreted as being those of a person who really wants to change their ways. Remorse, however, does not always lead to positive change. In fact, the person who is remorseful often cries merely because they are "caught" and not because they want to change.

Repentance is a term that best describes long-term positive change. Imagine standing and facing one direction for a long period of time and then, after true heart-felt regret, turning one hundred and eighty degrees to face the opposite direction. When a person does this in their lives and never falters from walking only in the new direction, without even looking back over his or her shoulder, we will witness true change.

People usually do not assume new patterns instantly. Someone who has been lying since childhood has made falsehood a strong and ingrained habit. The only way that they can prove their sincerity and commitment to telling the truth is to allow time for them to prove they have indeed changed. Their promises are not enough and you do not need to believe them without evidence. In fact, if someone states that they have "turned over a new leaf", watch them for at least eighteen months. Eighteen months! Yes, eighteen months.

If someone has spent years developing habits that lead to abuse, addictions or criminal activity, they will need adequate time to develop new skills, resources and opportunities which will replace the old ways.

Never allow someone to convince you that you have a problem for not believing their promises. Once they have made poor choices, the onus is on them to prove that they are crying because of a repentant heart and not just because of a remorse because they "got caught".

Time will be the test for you also. When you have been exposed for inappropriate behaviours will you respond with remorse or repentance? The choice is yours.