

ACCOUNTABILITY IN HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Facilitator's Activity and Discussion Guide



“We are aiming for practice, not perfection. We will hurt, misunderstand, and harm each other....The point is to learn how to be accountable when we inevitably mess up, so that we know what to do.”

— Mia Mingus

Acknowledgments

The content on accountability for the *Accountability in Healthy Relationships Facilitator’s Activity and Discussion Guide* is adapted from *The Four Parts of Accountability & How to Give a Genuine Apology* by Mia Mingus. The Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence honors Mia Mingus’s work along with adrienne maree brown, bell hooks, and others working to change our relationships and change our world.

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Introduction

Conflict, hurt feelings, misunderstandings, or small harms can all happen in healthy relationships. Most of us – adults and young people – do not know how to move through conflict and be accountable for our actions. It is not unusual for people who make a mistake to make up an excuse, freeze or disengage, or make an insincere or quick apology without changing our behavior. We can learn – and continue learning – about being accountable in our relationships.

Accountability is about understanding the impact of our choices. One way to practice accountability is by making apologies that acknowledge the harm that was done, the impact we have had on another person, how we will make things right, and most importantly, how we will change our behavior so that the hurt or harm does not happen again.

Apologizing well is a fundamental part of accountability. It is a skill that we should *all* understand and practice consistently in our relationships. You cannot take accountability if you do not know how to apologize meaningfully and authentically.

This discussion guide focuses on practices of accountability and apology for people in healthy, caring relationships. This helps us break patterns of harm, abuse, and violence while rebuilding trust and healing.

If we cannot handle the small things between us, how will we be able to handle the big things? Learning how to address these smaller hurts or breaks in trust, can help us learn the basic skills we need to address larger harms. It can also help to reduce and prevent larger forms of harm and violence (e.g. hurt becoming conflict, conflict becoming harm, harm becoming violence). For example, if you cannot have a direct conversation with your friend about how they hurt your feelings or the toxic language your roommate used, then how will you be able to respond effectively to sexual violence or abuse in your community or family?

— Mia Mingus

While unhealthy behaviors can be harmful, it doesn't necessarily mean someone is in an abusive relationship. In abusive relationships, there is usually a pattern of behavior involving threats, intimidation, or coercion. People who are abusive commonly do not accept any accountability for their harm, and blaming the person they harm often becomes part of the abuse.

If someone is being abused or severely harmed or if they are abusing someone, these accountability practices are not recommended. If someone thinks that they are in a dangerous situation, encourage them to trust their instincts and get help.

This practice guide focuses on how young people can apologize better to people they have hurt or harmed. While we have all received terrible apologies and have people in our lives who need to learn how to apologize better, this guide provides a chance for young people to reflect on their own accountability, not someone else's.

This guide supports facilitators to lead conversations and activities to achieve the following objectives:

- Participants will understand the four parts of accountability.
- Participants will learn and practice how to give an authentic apology.

Getting Started

Target Audience

High school-aged students.

Reach Out to Young People in Schools and in the Community

Engage young people in learning about accountability by going to where they are – in schools, faith congregations, youth organizations, and other youth-serving community locations.

Build Relationships with Schools

Consider contacting a school health teacher, counselor, or someone in the school that you are connected with to identify opportunities to facilitate the activities in this guide. You can also reach out to student leadership groups or school-based clubs, such as academics, athletics, band, or after school programming, to find young people to participate. Be authentic and creative in how you build relationships with schools and thoughtful how you connect with young people who may not otherwise be involved in programs like this.

Youth-Serving Community Organizations

Identify youth serving organizations that may be interested in the facilitated activities such as 4-H, Girl and Boy Scouts. Reach out to organizations who work with young people who are Black, Brown or Indigenous, young people with disabilities or who are Deaf, young people who are LGBTQIA+, and young people who live in low-income households or who are immigrants or have been resettled through the refugee process, so that young people from all communities have access to the information contained in this guide. If you have experience working with youth in juvenile correctional settings, consider facilitating these activities in juvenile correctional institutions or with juvenile probation groups.

Mandatory Reporting and Preparing a Safe(r) Space

If you are a mandated reporter, be sure to disclose that information to the young people at the outset of the conversation. Share what types of information trigger your reporting duties, who you would have to report to and how the report would be made. Encourage participants to seek out a counselor or other trusted adult if they would like to speak with someone after the session.

It is a good idea to have a list of local resources available, so that you can connect participants who need additional support. Post information for local resources and helplines at the start and end of the conversation. If you do not have any local resources, you can provide national helpline numbers which are included in an appendix to this document.

Be aware of any recent incidents of abuse, sexual assault, rape, harassment, hate crimes or other violent acts that occurred in the school or community. Ask adults or students at the school or organization if they are aware of any incidents that have affected local youth in case the conversation triggers disclosure and the need for a counselor on sight.

It is important that participants are committed to creating a safe(r) space for open and honest discussion with each other. Participants should commit to a level of confidentiality in the group agreements, including that they will not repeat any personal information shared outside of the group discussion.

Keep in mind, it is likely that some participants have had personal experiences of violence. Pay attention to body language that may indicate that a participant is upset or uncomfortable. Approach that person privately after the activities and ask if they would like to speak to someone at the school or in the community.

Inclusive and Accessible Language

Make sure the language you use reflects your community and is inclusive and accessible to the young people participating in the conversation. The language we choose has a lot of power and should be intentionally inclusive and accessible.

Preparation

Order the digital posters or brochure or download the digital posters and one-page handout on *Accountability in Healthy Relationships* for students at www.engagingvoices.org. Practice each lesson thoroughly; be organized and ready to facilitate the activities and discussion without distractions. Ground yourself with deep and low breathing exercises prior to the conversation. Hydrate and be fully present.

Session Length and Number of Participants

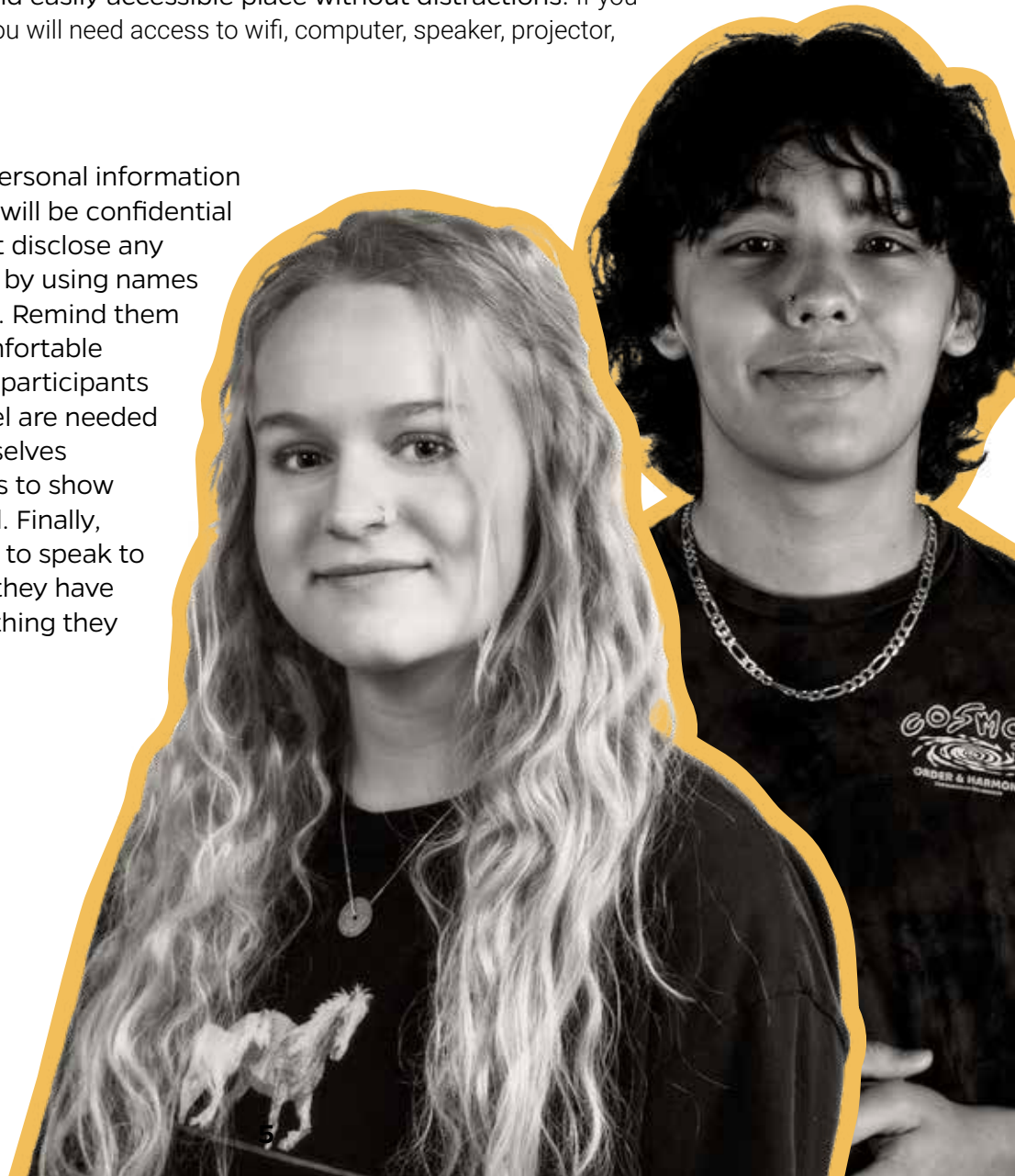
A minimum of 50 minutes is recommended to complete the activities in this guide. Each activity is designed for a group of 10-30 young people. Keep the activities moving at a relaxed pace so people feel free to express themselves. You can also customize the guide by omitting or expanding activities based on time and your group needs. Be flexible and adapt as needed to the young people in the room!

Setting Up the Physical Environment and Materials

Create a safe(r), comfortable, and easily accessible place without distractions. If you choose to use the optional video, you will need access to wifi, computer, speaker, projector, and wall/screen.

Community Agreements

Ask participants to agree that personal information shared during the conversation will be confidential and that participants should not disclose any information about other people by using names or other identifying information. Remind them to only share what they are comfortable sharing. If there is time, ask the participants what other agreements they feel are needed to create a safe space for themselves and their peers. Ask participants to show agreement by raising their hand. Finally, remember to invite participants to speak to a counselor after the session if they have more they want to say or something they want to share in private.



Accountability in Relationships Activities (50 - 120 minutes)

Opening (5-10 minutes)

Purpose: To build a shared understanding of accountability in relationships.

Introduce yourself, pronouns, and the topic of accountability in healthy relationships. Provide the definition of accountability on a large piece of paper on the wall.

Accountability in Healthy Relationships Video Posters : Download at www.engagingvoices.org.

What is Accountability Video (Optional): <https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-accountability-2/>

This is a 16 minute video that features multiple people sharing their views on the meaning of accountability. The video posters or video are ways to begin the conversation and to inform your group's understanding of accountability.

Brief Lecture

Share the following information:

What is accountability? Accountability is about understanding the impact of your actions; making an apology that acknowledges and names the harm that was done, the impact you had on someone else and how you will make things right; and how you will change your behavior so that the hurt or harm does not happen again.

Accountability is not merely confessing what you've done; it is a **process that must be practiced**. It will look different in different relationships depending on the nature and quality of the relationship and the context and type of conflict or harm.

Accountability does not have to be scary, though it will never be easy or comfortable.

Accountability **requires being honest, authentic and courageous**. Accountability is about how you can apologize better, not how someone else can apologize better to you.

Facilitator Note: Reinforce that the practice of accountability and apology is **not meant for anyone in an abusive relationship** or for anyone who is in a relationship with someone who has power over them. Write or post the contact information for your local domestic violence program and the National Teen Dating Violence Helpline on the wall or hand out materials with the helpline number.

Ice Breaker (Option 1) — 1-2-4 All Activity (10 minutes)

Share the following scenario with all of the participants:

Imagine that you are in a relationship with someone you care about. You usually spend Friday nights together. A few days ago, someone you have wanted to be friends with invited you to go to a movie Friday night and you said yes.

You were afraid you were going to hurt the feelings of your friend you usually spend Friday nights with, so you lied and said you had a family dinner that night and couldn't hang out. You were nervous about lying, so when the person you were in a relationship with texted you Friday night, but you didn't text back. On Saturday, you avoided talking about Friday night, and are hoping the person you are in a relationship with doesn't find out you lied. Now it's been more than a month and you never told the person you were in a relationship with the truth.

Ask the full group to consider this question: If you were the person that lied, what would you do?

Alternatively, ask the full group to consider this question: Think about a time when you did some small hurtful thing to someone you cared about and did not genuinely apologize. Maybe you forgot to text them back, maybe you forgot their birthday, or said something hurtful. Reflect on the impact of your actions and avoidance to apologize on your relationship.

Sequence of Steps and Time Allocation:

Individual Reflection: Ask the group to silently reflect on the question. How could this situation have been handled differently? (1 minute)

Paired Conversation: Generate ideas in pairs, building on ideas from self-reflection. (2 minutes)

Combine into Foursome: Share and develop ideas from your pair in foursomes (notice similarities and differences) (4 minutes).

Full Group: Ask, “what is one idea that stood out in your conversation?” Each group shares one idea with all. (5 minutes.)

Adjust the time frames as needed

Ice Breaker (Option 2) — Mingle/Huddle (15 minutes)

Purpose

Get the conversation started! This activity will help participants learn about the impact of accountability. Participants are encouraged to think about the ways they have or have not been accountable for their own behaviors.

Objectives

Participants will understand how accountability can foster healthy relationships.

Set Up

Have access to music (phone/speaker).

Play music and ask young people to move randomly around the room and greet one another. Make needed accommodations to remove any physical barriers to the activity, such as having a circle of chairs.

Pause the music and ask the young people to huddle in groups of three to four, and then ask one question (it can be helpful to have the questions on a slide for ease and visibility). Give the young people a minute to reflect on the question, then ask them to begin sharing their thoughts in the small groups. Each person should give a 30 second or less response in their huddle. The other participants should practice deep listening – remind them to not interrupt or respond to their peers, just listen. After each conversation dies down, ask the young people to move around again to the music, then huddle with a new group of people – each time asking the next question. Let participants know that they are not obligated to share or disclose anything they do not feel comfortable sharing during the activity.

Select 3 or 4 questions depending on the time available. Start with a light question and choose the questions that reflect the level of trust in the group.

- Describe the signs of a healthy relationship. [Honesty; Respect; Kindness; Healthy Conflict; Trust; Independence; Equality; Comfortable Pace; Taking Responsibility]
- We all make mistakes in our relationships. Tell a brief story about a small mistake that you made in a relationship with someone you care about - like forgetting a birthday or forgetting to text someone back. [This question should validate that we all make mistakes even if we don't mean to!]
- When you think about apologizing for your actions in a relationship with someone you care about, what feelings come up for you?
- Think about a time when you were accountable for a mistake or something hurtful you did and share how you felt.
- Think about a time when you were *not* accountable for a mistake or something hurtful you did and share how you felt.

Debrief

After this group activity, ask for people to raise their hand [be aware of the need for an accommodation] if they have ever experienced the following:

- Been hurt and didn't get an apology.
- Hurt someone and didn't apologize.
- Received a really good apology.
- Wanted to apologize for something but felt like you waited too long.

Summary

We've all been there. It's helpful to practice to know what to do when these moments arise in our relationships.

- Validate that many of us have been taught to be afraid of being accountable. Accountability does not have to be scary, though it will never be easy or comfortable. Accountability requires authenticity – being true to yourself – and courage.
- Reinforce that we need to practice conversations about accountability and our feelings of shame, fear, guilt, embarrassment, and insecurity when we have done something to hurt someone else.
- Demonstrate commonality of experiences as well as where people experience differences.
- Create connections between their stories and the ways in which they were socialized by society to have those experiences.

Practicing Accountability! Role Play (15 minutes)

Paired exercise: break the group into pairs. Hand out the 4 elements in the Appendix OR write them on a large piece of paper and post on the wall.

Ask the young people to generate fictional scenarios or share the scenarios below as examples:

Scenarios:

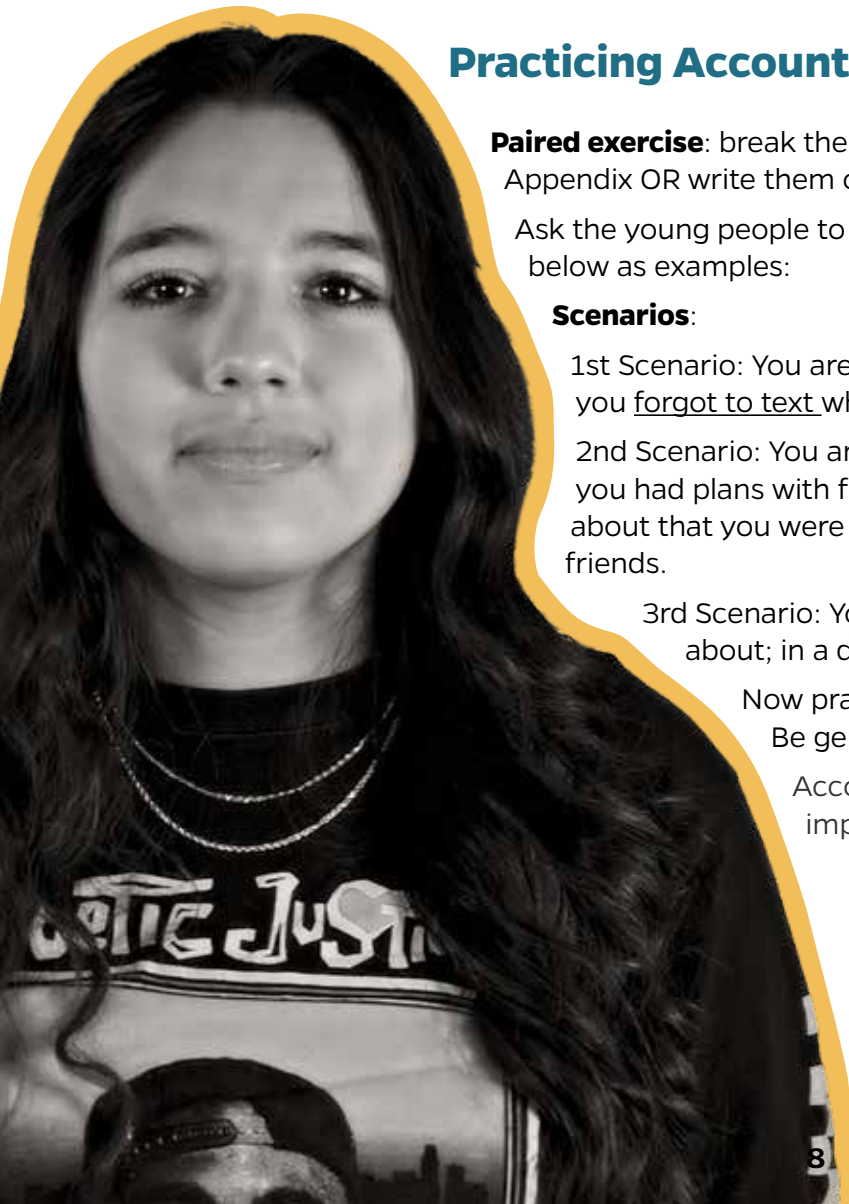
1st Scenario: You are in a relationship with someone you care about; you forgot to text when you said you would.

2nd Scenario: You are in a relationship with someone you care about; you had plans with friends but lied and told the person that you care about that you were staying home and instead went out with other friends.

3rd Scenario: You are in a relationship with someone you care about; in a disagreement you say something mean.

Now practice in pairs being accountable in a relationship. Be genuine. Give your full attention. Go slow, don't rush.

Accountability has **four parts** and each part is important to the entire process:



Part 1 - Self-Reflection is needed to understand your actions and the impact those actions had on yourself and the people you care about. Self-reflection helps you get to a place where you are willing to make things right. Pausing, looking inward and sitting with uncomfortable feelings, may help you understand the choices you made and how to make different choices in the future.

Questions to ask yourself:

“So what happened?”

“Why did I say or do that?”

“How did my words or actions impact the person I care about?”

“Knowing what I know now, what could I have done differently?”

Part 2 - Apologizing is a chance to acknowledge and take responsibility for the hurt or harm you caused. It is a way to demonstrate that you understand what you did and the impact of your actions. Apologizing is a fundamental part of rebuilding trust and requires us to practice being honest and vulnerable. Rebuilding trust is essential to fixing relationships, and when you hurt or harm others, trust is one of the first things that gets broken.

Words you might say:

“I’m sorry that I (name what you did) and that it impacted you (name how it caused harm). I want to rebuild trust and will make an active effort to (name the way you will change your behavior) in the future.”

“I thought a lot about my actions (be specific in describing your behavior) and how it impacted you and I’m so sorry. I commit to (name what you will do differently in the future) ?”

Part 3 - Repair needs to happen *in a relationship*. Repair means making amends and rebuilding trust. It is an opportunity to do the work to be in a healthy relationship with those you have hurt or harmed and with yourself. Repair can take a long time – you may need to apologize more than once.

Questions to ask yourself:

“How broken is the trust with the person I’ve harmed?”

“How can I rebuild trust with the person I’ve harmed?”

Words you might say: What do you need me to do to make it right?

Part 4 - Behavior Change is one of the hardest parts of accountability. It will likely take time to change your behavior and lots of practice. Talk to people you trust about your behavior that caused harm – mistakes, things you’re ashamed of or feel guilty about, things you need to apologize for, or times when you weren’t your best self. Understanding your behavior and how it impacted others, may help you identify ways to act differently in the future.

Coaching tips:

Practice receiving an apology – We want to practice listening for understanding. Do not interrupt the person giving the apology. After the apology, let them know if they actually addressed how you were hurt. We do not want to accept something that doesn’t actually address the hurt, but we do want to be open to other people’s accountability. Receiving an apology affirms that people can change. Accepting another’s apology doesn’t mean you owe them an ongoing relationship, or access to cause more harm. But receiving an apology also means being willing to let go of any need to punish the other, or to hold their behaviors over their head as if they aren’t accountable.

Practice changing your behavior – Ask young people to give an example of how they would change their behavior and how it would change their relationship, ask them to give concrete examples of what effective behavior change would be after they hurt someone’s feelings.

Journaling Activity (10 minutes)

Preparation: Ask everyone to have a sheet of paper and a writing tool.

Purpose: Encourage the young people to think about who *they* need to apologize to, rather than who needs to apologize to them. Normalize that we all have people we need to apologize and make amends to. We all have work to do and we can all be part of helping to build a culture of accountability in our relationships and communities.

What if we spent more time practicing accountability, not just talking about it? So often, we want other people to be accountable, but what if we practiced our own accountability more? What if we started with the small things and built up our skills for the big things? What if we remembered that addressing the small things between us helps to prevent the big things?

Journal (3 minutes): Write for 3 minutes in response to this prompt. Explain that they will not share what they wrote, but they will share how this activity made them feel.

Practice writing an apology to someone you care about and that you hurt in the past with an insensitive statement, a small lie, etc. Share how you reflected on why you did what you did, what emotions might be underlying your actions – fear, guilt, shame, greed, etc. What was the impact of your hurtful behavior? What do you need to do to make it right? Be genuine.

Paired Conversations (5 minutes)

Organize the young people into pairs and share what the experience was like to write a letter of apology using the four steps of accountability. They do not need to share what they had done or the person they did it to, only share what feelings came up for them.

Closing — Accountability (5 minutes)

*Being accountable is **how we can come to truly love ourselves, and give and receive love from others.**
Being accountable in our... relationships creates the pattern of societal accountability.*

— adrienne maree brown

Breathing - Thank them for leaning into the practice of accountability. Invite all of the young people to take three or more long and s-l-o-w deep breaths together. Model a simple breathing practice, raise your arms up for the inhale and lower on the exhale.

Facilitator shares key learnings.

Four parts to accountability

- 1. Self-Reflection** is needed to understand your actions and the impact they had on yourself and the people you care about, so that you can get to a place where you are willing to make things right.
- 2. Apologizing** demonstrates that you understand what you did and what the impact was. Apologizing is a fundamental part of the rebuilding of trust.
- 3. Repair** means making amends and rebuilding trust.
- 4. Behavior Change** to make sure you do not repeat your mistake or harm.

Proactive - Accountability should be **proactive**. Be honest about mistakes, rather than hoping no one finds out about what we've done. Ideally, we would proactively **communicate with others as soon as we know we've messed up** or haven't done what we said we would do.

Call to Action: We are all imperfect and make mistakes. Consider reaching out to someone you hurt in the past and practice accountability!

National Hotline Numbers

National Dating Abuse Helpline

1-866-331-9474 or www.loveisrespect.org to chat online

National Suicide Hotline

1-800-273-TALK (8255) or 988
Crisis Text Line (text HELLO to 741741)

Resources:

<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/what-is-accountability-2/>

<https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability/>

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/opinion/2022/07/25/love-accountability-adrienne-maree-brown>

Materials:

Posters and a pocket brochure and a downloadable one page PDF on *Accountability in Healthy Relationships* are available at no cost on www.engagingvoices.org



For more information on *Accountability in Healthy Relationships* or the prevention and response to teen dating violence in rural communities contact the Idaho Coalition Against Sexual & Domestic Violence or go to www.engagingvoices.org



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