

Nonviolent Communication Basics

With David Weinstock

“We can make life miserable or wonderful for ourselves and others depending upon how we think and communicate.” ~ Marshall Rosenberg

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a language of compassion and offers a path for positive social change to come back to when we lose our way in the complexities of relationship. The integration of thinking, feeling, and intuition is at the heart of NVC training and the domain of the consciousness it cultivates. Practicing NVC grounds word and action in a consciousness that cultivates compassionate connection with others by identifying the “needs” that underlie our own and others’ feelings and actions. Here we will look at some of the very basic forms and distinctions of NVC, that Marshall Rosenberg, its founder refers to as the map and not the territory. The territory is the consciousness. Marshall’s book is a quick, easy, and an excellent read for those wanting to learn the basics. As with any art, these rudiments necessarily must be learned, practiced, understood, embodied and then let go of so as not to become rote and block creativity. Like training wheels on a bike, they help us learn but can eventually impede us.

Nonviolent Communication in its most expansive form is a way of life and its principles of non-violence can be practiced everywhere. Nonviolent Communication is brilliant in its simplicity, with many distinctions and nuanced skills to learn. NVC skills emphasize taking personal responsibility for our actions and the choices we make when we respond to others, as well as how to contribute to relationships based in cooperation and collaboration. With NVC we train with the **intention** to connect on the heart level and, as much as possible, keep our **attention** in the present moment and not stuck in the past of the “he-said” “she-said” blame and shame game.

Honesty and empathy are two parts to Nonviolent Communication’s core language skills.

- **Honesty** in the form of expressing your present-moment observations, feelings, needs, and requests.
- **Empathy** in the form of connecting with another person’s present-moment feelings and needs.

Empathy begins with self-empathy in the form of connecting with your own present-moment feelings and needs (experiencing them internally beyond simply naming them). Empathy, self-empathy and honesty are practiced and expressed through four components – observations, feelings, needs, and requests.

Observation: To state concrete, clear observations of actions you observe in yourself or the other person. It helps to describe observations as something that can be clearly captured on a video camera. Be sure to separate moral judgments and evaluations from the specific behaviors and conditions that are being observed. (This is much more difficult than it sounds.)

Feelings: State the feeling that the observation is triggering in you. Or, guess what the other person is feeling, and ask. Identify and articulate what you are feeling as distinguished from what you are thinking or the judgments you may have. Feelings include emotions, body sensations, moods, and states of mind.

Needs: Once you know what you are feeling, use that to help identify and articulate your needs. In NVC, “needs” are essential and universal human needs we all have in common such as safety, belonging, and understanding. NVC practices help distinguish needs from the strategies we use to meet our needs. If your perception of a need includes a specific person, place, action, or time, it is a strategy masquerading as a need.

Requests: Make requests that are clear, positive, actionable, and that honor one another’s needs. Be sure to tell the other person what you would like them to do, never what you want them not to do, or what you want them to stop doing. The primary difference between a request and a demand is that, if the other person says “no” to your request, there are never any negative repercussions.

NVC Quick Tips, Tools and Distinctions

Needs, not Wrong-ness

If you are feeling upset, instead of thinking about what’s wrong with others or yourself, think about what need of yours is not being met and what could be done to meet it.

Mourning and Celebration: We mourn what we love that we miss and celebrate what is present in our lives that we love. Both, forms of gratitude are essential to healing and their expression honors life.

The Four “D”s are ways of thinking that disconnect us from ourselves and others:

- **Diagnosis**— judgment, blame, criticism and labeling
- **Denial**— of responsibility for our own feelings and actions, or denying someone else theirs
- **Demand**— a form of coercion rather than request
- **Deserve**- assuming that certain behaviors merit certain consequences

Don’t put your “but” in someone’s face especially if they are angry. Learn to replace the word “but” with “and” and then re-work the sentence into a more congruent and positive statement.

Sorry

Whenever you want to say you are sorry, instead of self-deprecating supplication, express your sadness and true regrets for what you have done and what you would have loved to have done instead. A different way of saying I am sorry might be,
“I regret what I just said, it didn’t meet my need to help us connect in ways that honor one another.”

Exaggerations and Generalizations

Mixing what you actually observe with exaggerations and generalizations will invite reaction. Be careful using such words like never, frequently, always, usually, a lot, many, seldom, etc. Practice being as clear as possible with the words you use to describe what you observe.

“Should-ing”

“Should” is a socially acceptable yet somewhat veiled demanding way of telling someone(or ourselves) what to do. Whenever “should” is spoken, notice how it feels to receive, then translate it into a question to yourself as to whether it is something you willingly choose to do or not.

Reflecting

When things get emotional, ask if you can reflect what the other is saying because you really want to hear what they want you to understand. When someone really experiences you doing your best to understand him or her, there is very little for them to resist.

Demand or Request

When asking someone to do something, check first to see if you are making a request or if it is really a demand.

It's Hard to do a Don't

Instead of requesting what you DON'T want someone to do, say what you DO want the person to do in clear, positive, do-able language.

Find Common Ground

Before agreeing or disagreeing with anyone's opinions, try to tune in to what the person is feeling and needing.

Yes behind the No

Instead of saying "no," say what need of yours is preventing you from saying "yes."

Expressing Gratitude

Instead of praising someone who did something you like, express your gratitude by telling the person what need of yours that action met.

Moral Judgments and Labeling

Liberate our selves from verbs" to be" Thinking someone is _____

Whenever you use the words, "You are....", remember that you are either labeling or making a personal judgment of another.

Appreciation is not a Need. We are often taught to use appreciation as a way of manipulation instead of a sincere celebration of how my life has been enriched. Appreciation is a request for confirmation that I have contributed to your well-being.

40 words

We can often lose connection by using more than 40 words at a time in any heated dialogue.

Beware of Labels

Move away from the use of static labels to analyze, criticize, or categorize. Practice speaking in ways that recognize and honor one another as changing beings.

Needs and Feelings

A brilliant distinction that NVC brings forth is that our deeper individual and mutual needs are one and the same, and that where we get hung up is in the strategies we choose to meet our needs. Identifying needs gives us both the focus and the energy to find the necessary words and take effective action—to form the kinds of requests that produce life-enriching results. Marshall and other trainers often give a list of words that help identify needs. Increasing our "needs and feelings" vocabulary to express such qualities of being is revelatory and essential, but words alone fall short in expressing the actual beauty and scope of what needs actually are. Universal human needs are something that we all share, and the notion is that we all have an equal right to have our needs met. I extend this idea to include the non-human world as well, recognizing our partnership and equality with the plants, animals, and earth as a whole. In other words, no one's spirit is greater or lesser. It is how we think, judge, and interpret that differs. When we focus primarily on our different ways of thinking, we can easily lose sight of our humanness and the deep needs that we all share.

Needs

9 needs in order of physical to spiritual

Sustenance, Safety, Love, Empathy, Creativity, Play, Rest, Community, Autonomy, Meaning

More Needs

acceptance	safety	authenticity	
affection	security	integrity	awareness
appreciation	stability	presence	challenge
belonging	support	joy	clarity
cooperation	to see and be seen	humor	competence
communication	to understand	beauty	consciousness
closeness	to be understood	communion	creativity
community	trust	ease	discovery
companionship	warmth	equality	efficacy
compassion	air	harmony	effectiveness
consideration	food	inspiration	growth
consistency	movement/exercise	order	hope
empathy	rest/sleep	choice	learning
inclusion	sexual expression	freedom	mourning
intimacy	safety	independence	participation
love	shelter	space	purpose
mutuality	touch	stimulation	self-expression
nurturing	water	to matter	

Feelings

Words describe experience. Most of us have a very limited vocabulary for how we feel. We feel good, ok, bad, tired, busy, or sad. Expanding our vocabulary and ability to feel into sensation and articulate the nuances of what we feel clarifies the messages we send. Thoughts convey to the listener what we are thinking. Feelings convey to the listener our emotional and/or physical states.

Generally, thoughts precede what we feel and what we feel can dominate our thoughts. Thoughts or beliefs (which are also thoughts) may be conscious or unconscious. Some of our core beliefs are buried deep below the surface of our awareness. A feeling can occur alone, and the mind will search for a thought, a story, to attach to it. That is precarious, because often the story actually isn't connected to the feeling, but our mind likes to have an explanation. In order to be fully understood when discussing a conflict, the listener needs to know the speaker's thoughts and feelings. Therefore, feelings and thoughts need to be clearly differentiated and articulated. This all matters for one simple reason: thoughts and feelings are two different types of data. More data and accurate data expressed gives us the best shot at being understood, loved, and respected. When we hear the word "I feel" followed by "like," "as if," or "that" and then a pronoun or a person's name, the statement is most likely a thought, not an actual feeling. Let's explore this somatically:

1. First imagine you are speaking with someone. Now, with feeling, say each sentence below, one at a time, as if each were true for you. After each sentence, notice if what you are actually feeling is actually clear to you or not.

- · I feel *like you* do not understand me.
- · It feels *as if we* are never going to be together.
- · I feel *like you* don't care about a clean house.

- I feel *like Bob is* heading for some big problems

2. Now we'll add a true feeling after the word "feel." Read this set of sentences and see if what you feel is clearer

- I feel frustrated when you tell me you will be on time and then you arrive late.
- I feel hopeless trying to find the connection I so want with you.
- I feel pissed when I come home to such a mess.
- I feel scared when I see Bob drinking every night.

This first set of sentences each express a thought rather than a feeling. Receiving such statements will most likely be heard as an evaluation or criticism.

The second set of sentences conveys clearly the feeling experienced by the speaker. When our communication transmits that we are taking responsibility for our feelings, the listener will relax more and is less likely to hear blame or judgment.

Feelings when your needs are satisfied:

compassionate	thrilled	appreciative	calm
friendly	vibrant	moved	clear headed
loving	open	thankful	comfortable
open hearted	proud	touched	centered
sympathetic	safe	amazed	content
tender	secure	awed	fulfilled
warm	animated	wonder	mellow
absorbed	ardent	amused	quiet
alert	aroused	delighted	relaxed
curious	astonished	glad	relieved
engrossed	dazzled	happy	satisfied
enchanted	eager	jubilant	serene
entranced	energetic	pleased	still
fascinated	enthusiastic	tickled	tranquil
interested	giddy	blissful	trusting
intrigued	invigorated	ecstatic	enlivened
involved	lively	elated	rejuvenated
spellbound	passionate	enthralled	renewed
stimulated	surprised	exuberant	rested
expectant	optimistic	radiant	restored

Feelings when your needs are not satisfied:

apprehensive	dazed	ashamed	distressed
dread	hesitant	chagrined	distraught
foreboding	lost	flustered	edgy
frightened	mystified	guilty	fidgety
mistrustful	perplexed	mortified	frazzled
panicked	puzzled	self-conscious	irritable
petrified	torn	beat	jittery
scared	alienated	burned out	nervous
suspicious	aloof	depleted	overwhelmed
terrified	apathetic	exhausted	restless
wary	bored	lethargic	stressed out
worried	cold	listless	fragile
aggravated	detached	sleepy	guarded
dismayed	distant	tired	helpless
disgruntled	distracted	weary	insecure
displeased	indifferent	worn out	leery
exasperated	numb	agony	reserved
frustrated	removed	anguished	sensitive
impatient	uninterested	bereaved	shaky
irritated	withdrawn	devastated	envious
irked	agitated	grief stricken	jealous
enraged	alarmed	heartbroken	longing
furious	discombobulated	hurt	nostalgic
incensed	disconcerted	lonely	pinning
indignant	disturbed	miserable	heavy hearted
irate	perturbed	regretful	hopeless
livid	rattled	remorseful	melancholy
outraged	restless	depressed	unhappy
resentful	shocked	dejected	wretched wistful
animosity	startled	despair	

Some Marshallisms

Here are some quotes of Marshall Rosenberg that he shared in his trainings:

- “Every diagnosis is a self-fulfilling prophecy. What you see is who you get.”
- “When you see someone as complaining you are already in diagnosis. You have to learn how to enjoy their pain.”
- “Empathic connection before fixing.”
- “Only empathize if it is something you are doing for yourself. When it meets your need to go surfing with the divine energy. If not, then do something else.”
- “There is a difference between asking if that is clear and would you tell me what you heard.”
- “When you want someone to change, consider both what would it be that you’d like the other person to do differently and what do you want their reasons to be for doing it.”
- “When your feeling positive your needs are met.”
- “When your feeling negative your needs are not met.”
- “We all meet our needs to the best of our abilities.”
- “Anything that is worth doing is worth doing poorly.”
- “Empathize, don’t justify.”
- “Unexpressed fear is almost always heard as aggression.”
- “Rewards take the rewards out of it.”
- “Respect as a feeling is a bit dangerous because we think we get it from another.”
- “To give is domination, if I cannot receive.”
- “When someone is talking a lot, look for [the] need under the pain that is moving him or her to talk.”
- “When some one is talking a lot you can say, I need to stop and need to know what you want from me. The feeling under the words must be patient.”
- On regrets he said, “We do things we wouldn’t have done if we knew then what we are learning now.”
- “Do not think what you say is empathy, this is off target; empathy is where we connect our consciousness with our intentions.”
- “A hug is a mug when you give it to someone when they need empathy. When you do it to get rid of the pain because you can’t stand their pain.”
- “We are responsible for our intentions and actions.”
- “How others reinterpret our actions and intentions is what creates their feelings, this is out of our control and we cannot be responsible for their feelings.”
- “When people keep repeating themselves is where they need empathy.”
- “*We can only experience pain when it touches beauty.*”
- “Don’t try to be perfect try to get less stupid”.