

# Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life

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## 1. Giving from the heart

NVC guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others respectful and empathic attention.

### The NVC Process

First, we observe what is actually happening in a situation: what we are observing others saying or doing that is either enriching or not enriching our life? The trick is to be able to articulate this observation without introducing any judgment or evaluation – to simply say what people are doing that we either like or don't like. Next, we state how we feel when we observe this action: are we hurtful, scared, joyful, amused, irritated? And thirdly, we say what needs of ours are connected to the feelings we have identified.

For example, a mother might express these three pieces to her teenage son by saying, "Felix, when I see two balls of soiled socks under the coffee table and another three next to the TV, I feel irritated because I am needing more order in the rooms that we share in common."

She would immediately follow with the force component Dash a very specific request: "would you be willing to put your socks in your room or in the washing machine?" This force component address is what we are wanting from the other person that would enrich our lives or make life more wonderful for us. Thus, part of NVC is to express these four pieces of information very clearly, whether verbally or by other means.

As we keep our attention focused on the areas mentioned, and help others do likewise, we establish a flow of communication, back-and-forth, until compassion manifest naturally: what I am observing, feeling, and needing; what I am requesting to enrich my life; what you are observing, feeling, and needing; what you are requesting to enrich your life.

1. The concrete actions we observe that affect our well-being.
2. How we feel in relation to what we observe.
3. The needs values desires etc. that create our feelings.
4. The concrete actions we request in order to reach our lives.

Our dialogue continued, with him expressing his pain for nearly 20 more minutes, and me listening for the feeling need behind each statement. I didn't agree or disagree.

## 2. Communication that blocks compassion

Long before I reached adulthood, I learned to communicate in an impersonal way that did not require me to reveal what was going on inside myself.

When we speak this language, we think and communicate in terms of what's wrong with others for behaving in certain ways or, occasionally, which wrong with ourselves for not understanding or responding as we would like. Our attention is focused on classifying, analyzing, and determining levels of wrongness rather than what we in others need and I'm not getting. Thus if my partner wants more attention than I'm giving her, she is "needy and dependent". But if I want more affection than she's giving me, then she is "aloof and insensitive".

Another form of judgment is the use of comparisons.

Another kind of life-alienated communication is denial of responsibility. Communication is life-alienating when it clouds our awareness that we are each responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Communicating our desires as demands is yet another form of language that blocks compassion.

## 4. Identifying and expressing feelings

A common confusion, generated by the English language, is our use of the word *feel* without actually expressing a feeling. For example, in the sentence, "I feel I didn't get a fair deal," the words *I feel* could be more actually replaced with *I think*.

Likewise, it is helpful to differentiate between words that describe what we think others are doing around us, and words that describe actual feelings.

"I feel misunderstood." Here the word *misunderstood* indicates my assessment of the other person's level of understanding rather than an actual feeling. In the situation, I may be feeling anxious or annoyed or some other emotion.

## 5. Taking responsibility for our feelings

The third component of NVC until now has meant of the root of our feelings. NVC heightens our awareness that what others say and do may be the stimulus, but never to the cause, of our feelings. We see that our feelings result from how we choose to receive what others say and do, as well as from our particular needs and expectations in that moment. With this third component, we are led to accept responsibility for what we do to generate our own feelings.

In each of these instances, we can deepen our awareness of our own responsibility by substituting the phrase, "I feel... Because I..." For example:

1. "I feel really infuriated when spelling mistakes like that appear in our public brochures, because I want our company to project a professional image."
2. "I feel angry that the supervisor broke her promise, because I was counting on getting that long weekend to visit my brother."
3. "Mommy feels disappointed when you don't finish your food, because I want you to grow up strong and healthy."

Judgments, criticisms, diagnoses, and interpretation of others are all really needed expressions of our needs. If someone says, "you never understand me," they are really telling us that they need to be understood is not

being fulfilled. If a wife says, “you’ve been working late every night this week; you love your work more than you love me,” she is saying that her need for intimacy is not being met.

If we express our needs, we have a better chance of getting them met.

Unfortunately, most of us have never been taught to think in terms of needs. We are accustomed to thinking about what’s wrong with other people when our needs are being fulfilled. Thus, if we want a coat to be hung up in the closet, we may characterize our children as lazy for leaving them on the couch. We may interpret our coworkers as irresponsible when they don’t go about their tasks the way we would prefer them to.

Emotional liberation involves stating clearly what we need in a way that communicates we are equally concerned that the needs of others be fulfilled. NVC is designed to support us in relating at this level. The third component of NVC is the acknowledgment of the needs behind our feelings. What others say and do maybe the stimulus for, but never the cause of, our feelings. When someone communicates negatively, we have four options as to how to receive the message: 1) blame ourselves, 2) blame others, 3) sense our own feelings and needs, 4) sense the feelings and needs hidden in the other person’s negative message.

## 6. Requesting that which would enrich life

When our needs are not being fulfilled, we follow the expression of what we are observing, feeling, and needing with a specific request: we ask for actions that might fulfill our needs. How do we express our requests so that others are more willing to respond compassionately to our needs?

Using positive action language: first of all, we express what we are requesting rather than what we are not requesting.

“I asked him not to spend so much time at work. Three weeks later, he responded by announcing that he signed up for golf tournament!” She had successfully communicated to him what she did not want—his spending so much time at work—but had failed to request what she did want. Encouraged to reword her request, she thought a minute and said, “I wish I had told him that I would like him to spend at least one evening a week at home with the children and me.”

A similar lack of clarity occurred between a father and his 15-year-old son when they came in for counseling. “All I want is for you to start showing a little responsibility, and ‘claim the father.’” “Is that asking too much?” I suggested that he specify what it would take for his son to demonstrate the responsibility he was seeking. After discussion on how to clarify his request, the father responded sheepishly, “well, it doesn’t sound so good, but when I say that I want responsibility, what I really mean is that I want him to do what I ask, without question—to jump when I say jump, and to smile while doing it.” He then agreed with me that if his son were to actually behave in this way, it would demonstrate obedience rather than responsibility.

When we simply express our feelings, it may not be clear to the listener what we want them to do. However, in other instances, we may express our discomfort and incorrectly assume that the listener has understood the underlying request. For example, a woman might say to her husband, “I am annoyed you forgot the butter and onions I asked you to pick up for dinner.” While it may be obvious to her that she is asking him to go back to the store, the husband may think that her words were uttered solely to make him feel guilty.

... the wife heard the husband's frustration but was clueless as to what he was asking for. Equally problematic is the reverse situation Dash when people state the request without first communicating the feelings and needs behind them. This is especially true when the request takes the form of a question. "Why don't you go and get a haircut?" Can easily be heard by youngsters as a demand or an attack and less parents remember to first reveal their own feelings and needs: "we're worried that your hair is getting so long it might keep you from seeing things, especially when you're on your bike. How about a haircut?"

And assertion like "you didn't hear me," "that's not what I said," or "you're misunderstanding me," may easily lead Peter to think that he is being chastised. Since the teacher perceives Peter as having clearly responded to her request for reflection, she might say, "I'm grateful to you for telling me what you heard I can see that I didn't make myself as clear as I would have liked, so let me try again."

## Requesting Honesty

After we have openly expressed ourselves and receive the understanding we want, we are often eager to know the other persons reaction to what we've said. Usually the honesty would like to receive takes one of three directions:

1. Sometimes would like to know the feelings that are stimulated by what we said, and the reasons for those feelings. We might request this by asking "I would like you to tell me how you feel about what I just said, and your reasons for feeling as you do."
2. Sometimes would like to know something about our listeners thoughts in response to what they just had to say. At these times, it's important to specify which thoughts would like them to share. For example, we might say, "I'd like you to tell me if you predict that my proposal would be successful, and if not, would you believe would prevent at success," rather than simply saying, "I'd like you to tell me what you think about what I've said." When we don't specify which thoughts would like to receive, the other person may respond at great length with thoughts that aren't the ones we are seeking.
3. Sometimes we'd like to know whether the person is willing to take certain actions that we've recommended. Such a request may sound like this: "I'd like you to tell me if you would be willing to postpone our meeting for one week."

The use of NVC requires that we be conscious of the specific form of honesty we would like to receive, and make that request for honesty in concrete language.

## Requests vs Demands

We can help others trust that we are requesting, not demanding, by indicating that we would only want them to comply if they can do so willingly. Thus we might ask, "Would you be willing to set the table?" rather than "I would like you to set the table." However the most powerful way to communicate that we are making a genuine request is to empathize with people when they don't agree to this request.

## 7. Receiving Empathically

**PRESENCE: DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING, STAND THERE**

The key ingredient of empathy is presence: we are wholly present with the other party and what they are experiencing. This quality of presence distinguishes empathy from either mental understanding or sympathy.

While we may choose at times to sympathize with others by feeling their feelings, it's helpful to be aware that during the moment we are offering sympathy, we are not empathizing.

LISTENING FOR FEELINGS AND NEEDS- As we've seen, all criticism, attack, insults, and judgements vanish when we focus attention on hearing the feelings and needs behind a message.

## 8. The Power of Empathy

### USING EMPATHY TO DEFUSE DANGER

"Remember when you said never to put your 'but' in the face of an angry person? I was all ready to start arguing with him; I was about to say, *But* I don't have a room! When I remembered your joke.

### EMPATHY TO REVIVE A LIFELESS CONVERSATION

We do this by tuning in to possible feelings and needs. Thus, if an aunt is repeating the story about how twenty years ago her husband deserted her and her two small children, we might interrupt by saying, "So, Auntie, it sounds like you are still feeling hurt, wishing you'd been treated more fairly." People are not aware that empathy is often what they are needing.

## 9. Connecting Compassionately with Ourselves

### TRANSLATE "HAVE TO" TO "CHOOSE TO"

After having acknowledged that you choose to do a particular activity, get in touch with the intention behind your choice by completing the statement, I choose ... because I want ....

## 10. Expressing Anger Fully

### STIMULUS VERSUS CAUSE: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

All violence is the result of people tricking themselves, as did this young man, into believing that their pain derives from other people and that consequently those people deserve to be punished.

## 11. Conflict Resolution and Mediation

### NVC CONFLICT RESOLUTION STEPS A QUICK OVERVIEW

Before we get deeper into a discussion of some of the other key elements of conflict resolution, let me give you a thumbnail sketch of the steps involved in resolving a conflict between ourselves and somebody else. There are five steps in this process. Either side may express their needs first, but for the sake of simplicity in this overview, let's assume we begin with our needs.

- First, we express our own needs.
- Second, we search for the real needs of the other person, no matter how they are expressing themselves. If they are not expressing a need, but instead an opinion, judgment, or analysis, we recognize that and continue to seek the need behind their words, the need underneath what they are saying.
- Third, we verify that we both accurately recognize the other person's needs, and if not, continue to seek the need behind their words.

- Fourth, we provide as much empathy as is required for us to mutually hear each other's needs accurately.
- And fifth, having clarified both parties' needs in the situation, we propose strategies for resolving the conflict, framing them in positive action language.

## ON NEEDS, STRATEGIES, AND ANALYSIS

Next, let's consider the difference between a person's needs and his or her strategy for fulfilling them. It is important, when resolving conflicts, that we can clearly recognize the difference between needs and strategies.

In order not to confuse needs and strategies, it is important to recall that *needs contain no reference to anybody taking any particular action*. On the other hand, strategies, which may appear in the form of requests, desires, wants, and "solutions," refer to *specific actions that specific people may take*.

## SENSING OTHERS' NEEDS, NO MATTER WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

To resolve conflicts using NVC, we need to train ourselves to hear people expressing needs regardless of how they do the expressing. If we really want to be of assistance to others, the first thing to learn is to translate *any* message into an expression of a need.

## USING PRESENT AND POSITIVE ACTION LANGUAGE TO RESOLVE CONFLICT

A *present language* statement refers to what is wanted *at this moment*. For example, one party might say, "I'd like you to tell me if you would be willing to –" and describe the action they'd like the other party to take. The use of a present language request that begins with "Would you be willing to ..." helps foster a respectful discussion. If the other side answers that they are not willing, it invites the next step of understanding what prevents their willingness.

On the other hand, in the absence of present language, a request such as "I'd like you to go to the show with me Saturday night" fails to convey what's being asked of the listener *at that moment*. The use of present language to hone such a request, for example "Would you be willing to tell me whether you will go to the show with me Saturday night?," supports clarity and ongoing connection in the exchange. We can further clarify the request by indicating what we may want from the other person in the present moment, "Would you be willing to tell me how you feel about going to the show with me Saturday night?" The clearer we are regarding the response we want right now from the other party, the more effectively we move the conflict toward resolution.