



FINDING THE
COURAGE TO HAVE
DIFFICULT
CONVERSATIONS

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About Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

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What is ‘nonviolence’?

Nonviolence is the closest literal translation of the Sanscrit word *ahimsa* – which means love and the complete absence of violence in word and thought, as well as action. It denotes ‘perfection’. If we were to achieve this state of perfection, we would be able to accept the full humanity of every person, no matter how upset we are with what they do.

We would be able to stay open, calm, loving and curious in the face of criticism, blame or judgment.

When we see others as evil or unable to care, we give ourselves the licence to overpower and vanquish them. But if we embrace nonviolence, we harbour no resentment. We have no enemies.

Not only would we separate the person from the action: we would also be able to see the universal human needs they were trying to meet – albeit maybe in unacceptable ways. When we were confronted with problems, we would look for solutions that work for everyone.

Nonviolence means that you may not offend anybody; you may not harbour uncharitable thoughts, even in connection with those you consider your enemies. To one who follows this doctrine, there are no enemies.

Mahatma Gandhi

A credo for nonviolence

I care about the wellbeing of other people even if what I value is at stake and I abhor their behaviour or attitudes.

I face the fear that prevents me acting in tune with my core values and my truth, and I choose to be courageous.

I see in each person our shared humanity.

I use my belief in our shared humanity to reach out to people.

In reaching out, I look for ways forward that work for all of us.

I focus on what I want to create, not just on what I oppose and don't want.

I commit to developing my ability to respond from choice rather than to react out of habit or as a result of my instant judgments and evaluations.

Where to start

Cultivate a daily practice that includes:

- a desire for truthfulness
- humility
- tolerance
- loving kindness.

Pursue these ideals for their own sake, because you believe in them.

Monitor your intentions. Do they serve to connect you with others or do they create a separation?

Listen to the way you speak. Notice when your words convey 'violence'.

Have the courage to speak your truth – but not as a way of venting your frustration or anger. Speak it with care and compassion for yourself and for others.

Be open to the possibility that 'your way' is not the only way.

Be curious! Instead of evaluating and judging others, reach out to them, the better to understand their needs.

The process of Nonviolent Communication guides us towards achieving that state of mind and finding the words to express it. It helps us to make life work for all of us.

What gets in the way?

When we have an emotional reaction to something, our ability to think is affected. Here is a very simple representation of what happens.

Our emotional thermometer



GREEN ZONE	ORANGE ZONE	RED ZONE
<p>We are aware of our feelings but not overwhelmed by them.</p> <p>We are functioning well.</p> <p>We're fully in touch with our knowledge, skills, intelligence and creativity</p>	<p>Our level of emotional arousal is going up. We are losing connection with our needs and our compassion for other people.</p> <p>Our thinking becomes polarised.</p> <p>We are thinking in terms of should/shouldn't; good/bad; right/wrong. Our ability to access our skills and creativity is compromised.</p>	<p>Our brain has been hi-jacked by our emotions. We cannot think straight nor can we extend any compassion or understanding towards other people.</p> <p>We resort to fight or flight – or maybe simply freeze. The likelihood of reaching a mutually acceptable outcome is low.</p>
Based on a concept developed by Jenny Edwards and Alison Harper		

Do you ever think like this? (Most of us do!)

I'm right – and I'm going to prove that you're wrong.

There's only one way to think about this – and it's my way.

What you did is wrong – I don't need to inquire into your side of the story.

I feel anxious/fearful/angry around you. I don't like feeling like this – and it's your fault. YOU must change.

The world is divided into winners and losers.

I don't have a choice.

People who do wrong **deserve** punishment.

Thinking like this tends to lead to opposition and conflict. It gets in the way of our connecting with each other and understanding our respective needs. It's 'violent'.

It creates distance and separation. It locks us into 'binary thinking', such as either/or, good or bad, right or wrong. It prevents us from looking for new, creative and different ways of moving forward – ways that neither you nor I have thought of, but which could emerge from joint explorations.

But NVC isn't about preventing ourselves from thinking like this. Instead, it's about listening to such thinking and working out what lies beneath it. That way, we maintain an open mind AND an open heart.

‘Violent’ thinking in action

You do something that I don’t like. I get upset/angry/frustrated/despairing. I hold you responsible for putting me in this painful place.

Because I hold you responsible for my upset, it’s you who must change your ways. So I tell you in no uncertain terms what’s wrong with you, in an attempt to make you change.

Now it’s your turn to get upset. So you go on the defensive. You give a tit-for-tat response.

This enrages me even more. So I repeat my criticisms. I might even add in some contempt.

You either shout back or else ‘stonewall’ – refusing to engage, and instead you either walk out or retreat into some activity that shuts me out.

**OUCH! THIS IS
SO PAINFUL**

We are both hurting. We both think we were in the right. We don’t know how to repair the damage. There’s a long ‘stand-off’ period before we talk to each other again.

The hurt leaves its mark. Gradually, over time, we risk becoming more distant from one another.

Nonviolent thinking in action


You do something that I don't like. I get upset/angry/frustrated/despairing. Instead of blaming you for how I am feeling, I acknowledge that my feelings are my responsibility.

I ask myself 'Why am I feeling this way?' and my answer is not about you. Instead, it is about me. For example 'I am feeling upset because I am wanting some consideration' or 'I am angry because I want to be heard and taken notice of'. In other words, it's about my values and needs. It's not about you. You are the trigger. But my reaction is mine.

So when I choose to respond to what you have done or said, I am talking about what is going on for me. I am not criticising or attacking you.

When I can speak like this, you are less likely to get defensive. We can have a conversation about what has happened.

The result is that we have a better understanding of each other. We can then look for ways of resolving the problem that take **both of us** into account.



**AH, THAT
FEELS SO
MUCH
BETTER!**

**We are not trying to establish who is right and who is wrong.
We are not arguing about what is good and what is bad.
Instead, we are both taking an honest look at ourselves,
accepting that we are imperfect human beings trying to find a
respectful and collaborative way forward.**

'Winning or losing is not the point. It's 'How can we live together in peace' - Israeli business man, reported in Guardian newspaper

The basis of the NVC process

The framework that we aspire to keep to

Our engagement with others is enhanced in a particularly life-enriching way when our:

- **INTENTION** is to connect
 - compassionately
 - with ourselves and with others
- **ATTENTION** is on what's alive in us and others NOW.

The choices that bring communication to life

We can choose to **connect silently with ourselves** so that we transform our habitual reactions into an awareness of our own feelings and needs

We might choose to **receive others** by listening with an open heart and becoming aware of their feelings and needs

We might choose to **express ourselves** to others in terms of our feelings and needs.

Key steps that help to keep us in the framework and make life-enriching choices

Observations (what am I responding to?)

Feelings (what do I feel about it?)

Needs (what needs of mine are or are not met?)

Requests (what might I ask to meet my needs?)

Case study #1 ‘Do it NOW’

The cautionary tale

The agreement was that Little Sister would wash the dishes and Big Sister would dry them. But Big Sister got engrossed in computer games - again. Repeated reminders went unheeded. Dad ran out of patience and switched off the computer mid-game. 'Do the drying up NOW, please.'

Grudgingly, Big Sister completed her task - in silence. She went upstairs to bed - in silence. It wasn't until mid-afternoon the following day that she emerged - in silence.

She suffered. The family suffered. Compliance came with a heavy price tag attached.

The mindset

Dad's inner thoughts were:

- 'Not again!'
- 'This isn't fair – Little Sister has done her share so Big sister should too.'
- 'She should do as she's told.'

Notice that Dad was influenced by:

- past incidents
- ideas about what should happen.

As a result, he got very cross and impatient. Yes, the drying up got done – but at a price.

Nonviolent Communication shows a very different approach.

Rewinding the tape

The agreement

‘Sharing the washing up and drying’ was Dad’s choice of task. The two sisters accepted it at the time, but had no commitment to it. In making the agreement, Dad thought that his need was to get the washing up and drying taken care of. But that was just a strategy, in service of his desire for mutual support and consideration.

Getting more buy-in

Dad could have:

- expressed his real needs clearly
- discussed with the two sisters the contribution that they would willingly make
- reached an agreement jointly with them.

Request or demand?

Big Sister continued playing her computer game. Dad interpreted this as saying ‘No, I’m not going to do the drying up’ and eventually turned off the computer. He was making a demand – and Big Sister reacted badly.

If Dad had been truly making a request, he would have been open to discussion rather than **insisting** on immediate obedience.

The violence of insistence and the use of power

By using his power so angrily, Dad triggered a reaction. But was Big Sister really refusing to do the drying up? Or was she actually saying ‘Not yet’? Would she eventually have finished her game and then done the dishes? Dad didn’t wait to find out. He imposed his will on her, using his authority as an adult – at the expense of their relationship.

Case study #2: Why won't they do what I ask?

The cautionary tale

Ms Manager prided herself on the clarity and precision of her communication. She would say things like 'I need some help to finish a proposal. I'd like your input by 10.00 tomorrow.'

But then she would be surprised and dismayed at the response she got. Some of her team were openly resistant. Others complied – reluctantly.

Her mindset

- I'm the manager. It's my job to tell the team what to do.
- They ought to do what I ask.

What she didn't understand was that her team was hearing a demand, which carried the expectation that they would drop everything else and do what she said – no questions asked.

They didn't like it! Some of them rebelled. Her attitude fuelled their resentment, which began to seep out into irritable exchanges.

Others submitted unwillingly, grumbling behind her back.

Neither reaction made for effective team working.

What they wanted was to trust that she was thinking of them and their commitments, as well as of herself. If they had that trust, they would give their wholehearted support.

Rewinding the tape

When Ms Manager was under pressure to get her proposal finished, she would most likely have got the willing cooperation of her team if she had made it clear that she wanted to find a way forward that worked for them as well as for her. This would have come through if she had:

1. been more explicit about her needs.
e.g. 'I want this proposal to give a good impression of our team and what we can offer – and I'd really like some help with finishing the costs before tomorrow's deadline.'
2. asked for help in a way that showed respect and consideration for her team's workload.
'I know you're busy too. Would you spend 10 minutes with me now, so that we can work out how to get the costings that I need?'
3. further demonstrated her understanding of her team by reassuring them that she was aware of their needs rather than insisting on getting her own need for support met without considering their needs. She might convey this by inviting them into the planning:
'If it means delaying something else, then tell me and we'll take a fresh look at our priorities.'

Once the task was finished, she could have reinforced a spirit of collaboration by offering her sincere thanks and appreciation.

When people know that they are seen, heard and taken into consideration, they will be more strongly inclined to offer their support and commitment. Getting the needs of the whole team – including the manager – on the table is the foundation stone for doing this.

That's all very well, but....

... 'I haven't got time to do all that'

... 'I carry the can – so of course I tell people what I want them to do. It's the best way to get things done'

That is a common response – and it's one we are well schooled in. But there is another way of looking at things – which is to ask 'How can I make things work for all of us?'

In the short term, it might seem a lengthy and uncertain process – because none of us was born with the 'Guide to getting on with people' already installed in our brain. We learn from those around us. And what we learn steers us into the 'violent thinking' mentioned on Page 6.

But over time enabling everyone's voice to be heard and valued encourages co-operation and collaboration.

This is true for relationships between parents and children; managers and their teams; husbands and wives – indeed any group of people.

Ask yourself: 'What do I want someone's reasons to be for doing what I ask?'

If the reason is 'duty', 'I have to', 'if I don't there'll be trouble', you and they will suffer.

But when people act willingly, and because they care, there's a mutual benefit.

I know which I prefer!

The impact of NVC

A dreaded appraisal

Sandy (not her real name) had a very poor relationship with her boss. He had made several critical remarks about her performance but declined to provide any evidence to back up his judgments. With her annual appraisal just days away, she was feeling anxious and fearful about it, despite being confident about the quality of her work.

Just one ‘emergency’ session was sufficient for her to understand her fears and to learn some communication strategies to keep those fears from undermining her during the interview.

She emerged from her appraisal triumphant that she had held herself together and managed to stand up for herself despite her boss’s unsubstantiated evaluations of her.

Breakdown in a family relationship

‘It’s got so bad’ she said ‘it’s keeping me awake at night.

In four hour-long sessions, we explored the criticisms she had about a relative and about herself, and one by one, identified the feelings and needs behind them.

Gradually, empathy replaced the negative judgments. The intensity of her ruminations faded and no longer prevented her from sleeping. With a family event on the horizon, she envisaged being able to talk to her relative without fear of arguments or hurt.

A marriage on the brink

The couple were in deep despair and depression. They had drifted so far apart that they were on the brink of separating. They contacted me as a 'last chance', but without any real hope that their marriage could be saved.

Over a period of two months, their bitter, judgmental criticisms of one another gradually softened into more considerate and respectful dialogue. Their communication acquired a new and welcome depth and authenticity.

After two months, they felt confident that they had rebuilt their relationship. 'If we hadn't talked to you, we'd be in the divorce courts by now' they said. A year later, they invited me to their silver wedding anniversary.

Mediation

'Do you accept that your behaviour was unacceptable?' said one party. 'I don't recognise myself in what you say about me' said the other.

A long history of strained relations at work had come to a head, stimulating distress and confusion on both sides. With so much at stake, I was asked to mediate.

Over a period of two hours, the two parties listened to each other with a concentration and clarity that they had not previously achieved. The outcome was greater mutual understanding and an agreement about how to relate to one another in the future.

'I came out with my dignity intact' said the 'accused'.

What clients have said



What next?

The process of NVC appears simple – but from my own experience, it takes practice and a lot of awareness and self-regulation to put into practice and to appreciate its subtlety.

Here's what I offer you, to support your journey.

Want to learn NVC?

Workshops and practice group

Intense, practical, moving and fun! 1-2 day events exploring the ethos and application of NVC. Near Guildford, Surrey.

Go to www.jo-mchale.com/learn-nvc to see what's currently scheduled.

Self-study programme

Online course supplemented with Skype calls and email feedback. Ideal if you prefer to learn without needing to travel or find someone to look after your children.

Want to explore particular issues?

Individuals or Couples

Coaching in communication skills to reach out to people, heal hurt and rebuild connection. Face to face or by Skype.

Emergency first aid

Tricky situation coming up? Worried about how to handle it? Book a session to explore it from every angle, so that you feel more confident and ready for whatever might happen.

Going through divorce?

Contact me to talk about a special programme to support you through this stressful period.

Free resources

I've written numerous blogs, articles and case studies. You'll find them all on my website www.jo-mchale.com/blog or www.jo-mchale.com/resources.

Other options

For events by other UK trainers, go to www.nvc-uk.com.

For information about NVC worldwide go to www.cnvc.org.

Reading

Marshall Rosenberg, to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for developing the process of NVC, wrote: *'Nonviolent Communication: a language of life'* and *'Speaking Peace'*. I also recommend: *'Don't be nice: be real'* by Kelly Bryson and *'Being genuine'* by Thomas D'Ansembourg.

Contact me

I'd love to hear from you and to see how we might work together, exploring the contribution NVC can make to your life.

I live in Surrey, England.

