

# HONEST, AUTHENTIC LIVING: HOW NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION HELPS

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## HOW IT ALL STARTED

In 1997, I made a decision that had a profound influence on my professional and personal life.

The notion of ‘Nonviolent Communication’ (NVC) had floated past me more than once. But like so many people, I associated violence with physical behaviour. And that certainly wasn’t how I saw myself. In fact, I rarely even raised my voice.

At the time, I would have rated highly my state of health and well-being. I wouldn’t have described myself as stressed. I thought I was doing OK.

So how would Nonviolent Communication help me?

The question was unanswered until I stumbled across it a third time. This time, curiosity got the better of me. I read the original book by Marshall Rosenberg and I was hooked.

I attended workshops, conventions, apprenticed myself to a more experienced practitioner and as soon as possible, became a certified trainer.

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## WHY WAS NVC SO IMPORTANT?

With the benefit of hindsight, I was achieving peace at the expense of what Brené Brown describes as ‘whole-hearted living’. I bought calm by avoiding confrontation, conflict or the possibility that I might upset people. I didn’t have the skills to engage fully with potential difficult or awkward situations. I was what Marshall Rosenberg would have called ‘a nice dead person’. I wasn’t fully showing up in life.

My discovery of Nonviolent Communication revealed to me a very different way of being. It showed me what was stopping me from being fully grounded and present. And with that knowledge came the possibility of withstanding the buffeting and pressures of other people’s demands, criticisms, attacks, frustrations and judgments, as well as the strength and courage to express myself honestly, authentically and respectfully.

I continue to experience it as a path to true dialogue, in which everyone’s voice is heard and considered.

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## ORIGINS OF NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC)

The process of NVC was developed by Marshall Rosenberg, who trained in the 1960s as a clinical psychologist.

NVC emerged out of Marshall’s curiosity about why some people seemed able to hold onto their essential humanity, despite appalling circumstances whilst others seemed to enjoy making life unpleasant for people. How was it, he asked himself, that as a young schoolboy, he was bullied

because he was Jewish, by young people who seemed to enjoy inflicting pain? On the other hand, what was it enabled his uncle to look after an elderly relative for years, with unflinching love and kindness?

As a professional psychologist, he became disillusioned with the way his profession treated patients according to their diagnostic label, rather than as people in distress. He experienced greater success by reaching out compassionately, and embracing Carl Roger's concept of unconditional positive regard.

Looking outside his own experience, he explored what it was that enabled some people to survive in the concentration camps when others perished under the same circumstances. Further back in history, he looked to Gandhi for inspiration, too.

Driven by his desire to understand how some people managed to stay true to the compassionate nature that they were born with, and to share his insights in an accessible form, what he eventually called 'Nonviolent Communication' began to emerge.

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## THE NVC PROCESS: A VERY BRIEF OVERVIEW

### THE INTENTION

At the heart of NVC is the belief that our worlds work better when we strive to connect compassionately with one another.

This means that even under challenging and difficult circumstances, we hold onto the intention to:

- understand how habitual reactions and patterns of behaviour – in ourselves and in others – can get in the way
- notice when we are in danger of lapsing into 'win-lose', 'right-wrong' and 'good-bad' mindsets that lead us into tit-for-tat retaliation, insistence on getting our own way at another's expense, and inappropriate use of power
- look for ways forward that work not just for ourselves but for others too.

### ATTENTION

NVC guides us towards putting our **attention** in the present. All too often, we react to what people say or do because we filter it through the lens of our past experiences and all the baggage associated with them.

## THE FOUR-STEP PROCESS

There are four apparently simple steps that help us operationalise the ethos of NVC.

### 1. Observation

What are we seeing or hearing? Can we describe it to ourselves without filtering it through our evaluative thoughts, judgments and preconceived notions?

## 2. Feelings

What do we feel about what we've seen or heard? If our observation has been coloured by the meaning we've attributed to it, then our feelings will result from that meaning, rather than from what was actually said or done.

## 3. Needs

What do our feelings tell us about what we're needing? If we're experiencing uncomfortable feelings, then it's most likely that what was said or done was not in tune with our needs and values.

## 4. Requests

If we want to take action in order to get our needs met, making a request (instead of a demand or giving an order) increases the willingness of other people to engage with us.

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### WHAT STRUCK ME MOST POWERFULLY?

What I and many others have been particularly struck by is the concept of 'needs' as used in NVC.

'Needs' are the energies that underpin what we do. Because they are universal, they provide a bridge into one another's worlds. If you speak intemperately, but I am willing to guess at the unexpressed needs behind your outburst, then we stand a chance of eventually understanding one another – and I benefit from not internalising your 'attack'.

So even if I am accused of things that I might find painful to hear, my level of emotional arousal is moderated by my intention to understand what unmet needs might lie behind the criticism.

So much of our worries and anxieties stem from the meaning we give to what we see and hear. We filter events through our own personal sense-making devices and then experience feelings in relation to that meaning. But the meaning we give is our own. We can reduce this self-induced stress by checking things out. Even if we get confirmation of our fears, the clarity that comes from the information helps us stay grounded, knowing what we are up against.

### EXAMPLES OF NEEDS

<p><b>AUTONOMY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Choose one's dreams, goals and values</li><li>• Choose one's plans for fulfilling one's dreams, goals and values</li><li>• Making one's own choices about how to live moment by moment</li></ul> <p><b>INTEGRITY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Authenticity</li><li>• Meaning</li></ul>	<p><b>PHYSICAL NURTURANCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Air, food and water</li><li>• Movement/exercise</li><li>• Protection from life-threatening forms of life: viruses; bacteria; insects; predatory animals, particularly human beings</li><li>• Rest and relaxation</li><li>• Sexual expression</li><li>• Shelter</li><li>• Touch</li></ul>
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<p><b>INTERDEPENDENCE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance</li> <li>• Closeness</li> <li>• Consideration</li> <li>• Contribution to the enrichment of life (exercising one's power by giving that which contributes to life)</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Honesty</li> <li>• Appreciation</li> <li>• Love</li> <li>• Reassurance</li> <li>• Respect</li> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Warmth</li> </ul>	<p><b>CELEBRATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Celebrate the creation of life</li> <li>• Mourn that which is lost</li> </ul> <p><b>SPIRITUAL COMMUNION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beauty</li> <li>• Harmony</li> <li>• Inspiration</li> <li>• Order</li> <li>• Peace</li> </ul> <p><b>PLAY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fun</li> <li>• Creativity</li> </ul>
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## COUNTERACTING THOSE CRITICAL INNER VOICES THAT TROUBLE US

Most of us are highly skilled at putting pressure on ourselves. We pile on the 'oughts' and the 'shoulds'. We criticise ourselves when we don't live up to our own expectations. We tend to blame ourselves when things go wrong.

Alternatively, if we're not directing such thought patterns against ourselves, we're most probably putting them onto other people.

Either way, we drive up our levels of emotional arousal and in so doing, we reduce our ability to live in accordance with our values.

Stepping back and reflecting on our needs and how we might express them – or listening out for other people's needs, however hidden, keeps us grounded and less stressed.

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## APPLYING THE NVC PROCESS TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### CHANGE THE THOUGHT – CHANGE THE OUTCOME

When we are unable to separate what we see and hear from the thoughts we have about it, we are in the grip of our habitual reactions.

Once we can make the separation, and understand that our reactions are a function of the meaning we've given to what we've seen or heard, then we are likely to be more grounded and better placed to choose how we respond.

## SELF-BELIEF STARTS WITH OURSELVES

When we are firmly rooted in awareness of our feelings and needs, we no longer try to manipulate our thoughts into positive self-belief. Instead, we have strong base from which to express ourselves.

## DON'T JUST DO WHAT YOU DID LAST YEAR

So much of what we do is shaped by our upbringing and schooling, expressed in often contradictory injunctions such as:

- 'Boys don't cry'
- 'Don't let people see you're upset, or they'll take advantage of you'
- 'Give as good as you get – otherwise people will walk all over you'
- 'Be nice'
- 'Don't stick your neck out'.

Such injunctions are intended to protect us from harm. But so long as we are in their grip, we keep on doing what we've always done. If we believe that standing up for ourselves means tit-for-tat retaliation then that's what we habitually resort to under stress.

NVC provides us with a very different and internally consistent model of how to be, even when we're under pressure. When we 'think connection', we remind ourselves to look for our own feelings and needs and then to do the same with other people. With that mindset, we break out of the habits that have constrained us for years, and step into a world of conscious choice in which our intention is to make life work for all of us.

## DEAL WITH DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS NOW, NOT LATER

We tend to shy away from difficult conversations out of fear.

1. We fear that we will look stupid or be seen as unreasonable.
2. We fear that we will lose control of ourselves. And because we can't predict or control the outcomes of anything that we initiate, we fear that we won't be able to cope with what comes back at us.
3. We fear that nothing will make the other person change, so we do nothing. We allow ourselves to feel powerless.

The danger is that our fear makes things worse, because problems get swept under the carpet and become the unacknowledged elephant in the room.

NVC provides an alternative. Careful preparation based on self-empathy to identify our own feelings and needs, coupled with imagining where the other person might be coming from, opens up the possibility of dialogue.

## FIND REASONS TO SAY 'YES'

If we tend to lapse into 'please people' mode, then we will be pre-disposed to say 'yes'. But our 'yes' might be coming from an unconsidered place – a place dominated by thoughts of what we ought to do or fear of how 'No' would be received.

If, on the other hand, we ask ourselves 'what needs of mine would be met by saying 'yes'?', and then speak from that place, we can be confident that we will be responding authentically and with the joy of making a genuine contribution.

If we can't say 'yes' willingly, then we can explain why ( in terms of what needs saying 'yes' would not meet) and then follow up with an alternative offer along the lines of 'I'm not willing to do XYZ that you've asked me to do, but I do want to contribute. So how about I do ABC instead.'

## RENEGOTIATE

We put ourselves under pressure when we carry the mindset 'I have to carry on doing things this way. It took so much effort to get permission to do it my way. I would look foolish if I suggested changing things.'

This mindset comes from a position of fear. So on top of the impact of doing things in ways that no longer are fit for purpose, we put on ourselves the added stress of fearing the consequences of trying to do something about it.

An alternative would be to:

- Get very clear about the reasons for the original decision, and what has subsequently changed
- Be very clear about why the change is important, why it would benefit you and others, why the current situation requires it. Think about the needs you're wanting to meet by introducing changes.
- In asking for a change, be prepared to explain the past and current situations, show appreciation for people's past willingness to accept the change and work with it, and then outline the current situation. Then invite everyone's voice to be heard and acknowledged before exploring solutions.
- Be prepared to consider options other than the ones you had already thought of. If you are clear from the outset what criteria any new solution should meet, you will be able to measure any suggestion against those criteria. This helps to avoid the strongest voices having the greatest influence.

## FLIP IT

We get so attached to our own ideas, our expectations, what we think ought to happen, what must happen that we then create pressure on ourselves and on others.

NVC offers an alternative, which is to ask ourselves 'What really matters here? What values, needs are important to me right now? What am I telling myself about other people's willingness or otherwise to go along with me?'

## RELATIONSHIP FACTORS

NVC is a powerful and inspirational process for how we want to be in relationship. It helps us to transcend our habitual fight/flight tendencies, our defensiveness and propensity to blame others for how we feel, and guides us towards speaking and acting from a genuine, heart-felt and compassionate place.

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## CONCLUSION

When I first dipped my toe into NVC, I lay awake thinking of how I might use it, where I might take it, who I might share it with – for the benefits of humanity. It was something for others and I thought I could be the conduit through which ‘they who needed it’ could get it.

After a two-day workshop and came away convinced that I’d ‘got it’. And so I had – at an intellectual level.

What took me much longer to realise was what it meant to internalise the process and to integrate it into the way I saw the world, conversation by conversation.

I had completely overlooked that as a process, it starts with me. Not you. Not the rest of the world. Me.

If everyone treated each other in the way that NVC suggests, our relationships would be so much less stressful. We would no longer be beating ourselves up with thoughts of should, must, ought... and thinking the same about other people. We would not feel the pain of blame, criticism, and judgmental relationships.

We would be living an authentic life, in full connection with our own best selves as well as with other people’s.

It’s a life-long aspiration and in those moments when briefly we manage it, connection flourishes and life is so much less stressful.

### References:

*Nonviolent Communication : A language of life* Marshall Rosenberg, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2003 Published by PuddleDancer Press

*Daring Greatly*: Brené Brown, 2012. Published by the Penguin Group