

The Practice of NonViolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (**NVC**) is a simple method for clear, empathic communication consisting of four steps: Stating observations, then feelings, then needs, then requests. NVC aims to find a way for all present to get what really matters to them without the use of guilt, humiliation, shame. It is useful for resolving conflicts, connecting with others, and living in a way that is conscious, present, and attuned to the genuine, living needs of yourself and others.

This material is adapted from Marshall Rosenberg's *Non Violent Communication, a Language of Life*.

Steps

1. State the observations that are leading you to feel the need to say something. These should be purely factual observations, **with no component of judgment or evaluation**.

For example, "It's 2:00 a.m. and I hear your stereo playing" states an observed fact, while "It's way too late to be making such an awful racket" makes an evaluation. "I just looked in the refrigerator and saw that there's no food, and I'm thinking that you didn't go grocery shopping" states an observed fact (with an inference explicitly stated), while "You wasted the whole day" makes an evaluation.

People often disagree about evaluations because they value things differently, but directly observable facts provide a common ground for communication.

2. State the feeling that the observation is triggering in you. Or, guess what the other person is feeling, and ask. Naming the emotion, without moral judgment, enables you to connect in a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation. Perform this step with the aim of accurately identifying the feeling that you or the other person are experiencing in that moment, not with the aim of shaming them for their feeling or otherwise trying to prevent them from feeling as they do.

For example, "There's half an hour to go before the show starts, and I see that you're pacing (*observation*). Are you nervous?" Or, "I see your dog running around without a leash and barking (*observation*). I'm scared."

Feelings are sometimes hard to put into words. For more on words for feelings see Rosenberg's book.

3. State the need that is the cause of that feeling. Or, guess the need that caused the feeling in the other person, and ask. When our needs are met, we have happy, positive feelings; when they are not met, we have negative feelings. By tuning into the feeling, you can often find the underlying need. Stating the need, without morally judging it, gives you both clarity about what is alive in you or the other person in that moment.

For example, "I see you looking away while I'm talking, and you've been speaking so quietly, I can't hear you (*observation*). I'm because I'm needing connection right now." Or, "I saw that your name wasn't mentioned in the acknowledgments. Are you feeling resentful because you're not getting the appreciation you need?" Needs have a special meaning in NVC they are common to all people, and not tied to any particular circumstance or strategy for fulfilling them. So, wanting to go to a movie with someone is

not a need, and a desire to spend time with a specific person is not a need. The need in that case might be companionship. You can meet your need for companionship in many ways, not just with that specific person and not just by going to a movie. See an attached sheet for a list of words for needs.

4. Make a concrete request for action to meet the need just identified. Ask clearly and specifically for what you want right now, rather than hinting or stating only what you don't want.

For example, "I notice that you haven't spoken in the last ten minutes (*observation*). Are you feeling bored? (*feeling*)" If the answer is yes, you might bring up your own feeling and propose an action: "Well, I'm bored, too. Hey, how would you like to go to the Exploratorium?" or perhaps, "I'm finding these people really interesting to talk with. How about we meet up in an hour when I'm done here?"

For the request to really be a request—and not a demand—allow the other person to say no or propose an alternative. You take responsibility for getting your own needs met, and you let them take responsibility for theirs.

When you do something together, you want it to be because you both voluntarily consent to it, as a way of fulfilling your own genuine needs and desires, not out of guilt or pressure. Sometimes you can find an action that meets both your needs, and sometimes you just have to amiably go your separate ways. If you're not ready to ask in this spirit, that's OK.

Here is a sentence template can help structure what you need to say:

"Are you feeling ____ because you are needing ____?" Empathize as well as you can to fill in the blanks, and you'll likely find yourself seeing the situation as the other person does.

"Are you angry because you are thinking ____?" Anger is triggered by thoughts, like "I think you lied" or "I think I deserve a raise more than so-and-so did." Uncover the thought, and you are on your way to uncovering the underlying need.

"I am wondering if you are feeling ____" is another way to empathize, without explicitly asking a question. The phrasing makes clear that this is your guess, and not an attempt to analyze the other person or *tell* them what they are feeling. So moderate *your* statement of feelings or needs with simple words like "if you might, how about, could this be, maybe,..."

"I see ____" or "I am hearing ____" are ways to state an observation clearly so that the other person hears it as an observation.

"I am thinking ____" is a way to express a thought so it is heard as a thought, which is capable of changing as you get new information or ideas.

"Would you be willing to ____?" is a clear way to make a request.

"Would you like it if I ____?" is a way to offer to help fulfill a need just identified, while leaving the other person still responsible for their own need.

A complete template for all four steps could go: "I see ____ . I am feeling ____ because I am needing ____ . Would you be willing to ____?" Or, "I see ____ . Are you feeling ____ because you are needing ____?" followed by

"Would it meet your need if I ____?" or a statement of your own feeling and need followed by a request.

Tips

As simple as NVC is, it can be much harder to put into practice than it looks. Read the book, attend a workshop or two, try it out in your own life and see what you learn. Make mistakes, see what went wrong, and try out what you've learned next time. In time, it flows naturally. It helps enormously to see it demonstrated by someone who is already good at it. There's a wealth of material about NVC beyond the four steps: ways of dealing with specific kinds of difficult situations (children, spouses, work situations, street gangs, countries at war, violent criminals, drug addicts), deeper ideas about needs vs. strategies and other key distinctions, alternatives to dominance, choosing among empathy for someone else, empathy for yourself, or expressing yourself, cultures where Nonviolent Communication is the normal style, and more.

Avoid saying "You made me feel ____", "I feel ____ because you did ____," and especially, "You're making me angry." These put responsibility for your feelings on the other person, and they skip identifying the need that is the true cause of your feeling. An alternative: "When you did ____, I felt ____ because I needed ____." On the other hand, as noted under "Formal & colloquial NVC", if less-explicit phrasing is communicating your needs just fine, without making one person responsible for another person's feelings, then it's not necessary to spell things out so fully.

You might not always guess what someone is actually feeling or needing when empathizing. The fact that you are listening and want to understand, without criticizing or judging or analyzing or advising or arguing, will quite often lead

them to open up more so that you have a better or different sense of what is going on. Genuine interest in the feelings and needs that are driving each other's actions will lead you someplace new, someplace that you can't predict before you have that understanding. Often you can help someone else open up by first honestly sharing your own feelings and needs.

NVC can be helpful even if the other person doesn't practice it or know anything about it. You can practice it unilaterally and get results. (See the example given in the Warnings below.)

When someone speaks to you in the language of condemnation, name-calling, or dominance, you can always *hear* what they say as an expression of their unmet needs. "You klutz! Shut up and sit down!" is likely an expression of an unmet need for elegance and beauty in motion. "You are such a lazy loafer. You are really making me angry!" could be an expression of their unmet need for efficiency or for helping others contribute their talents to life. You'll have to find out.

Warnings

In NVC, "needs" are not things that you must-have-or-else — i.e., it's not an excuse to say "you have to do this, because it's my need."

Empathy is not a mechanical process. Just saying certain words is not enough. You want to genuinely tune into the other person's emotions and needs, see the situation as they do. "Empathy is where we connect our attention, our consciousness. It's not what you say out loud." Sometimes it can help to imagine how you might feel in their situation. Listen past their words: what's really alive in them, what matters that's leading to their action or words?

In a highly emotional situation, showing empathy for one feeling will often draw out more feelings, many of them negative. When this happens, just keep empathizing.

For example, a roommate might say, "You put my sweater in the dryer and now it's ruined! You're a careless slob!" You might answer with empathy: "I hear that you're feeling upset because you're thinking that I'm not careful enough with your things." You might get an answer like, "You don't think about anyone but yourself!" Just keep empathizing: "Are you feeling angry because you're needing more care and consideration than I've been giving you?"

Depending on the intensity of emotion and how poor communication was in the past, you may have to go a number of rounds before you get a response like, "Yes! That's exactly what I mean! You don't care!" At this point, you can bring up new facts ("Actually, I didn't run the dryer today") or apologize or propose new action, like some way for your roommate to know that you do care.

Do not attempt to argue with an angry person, just hear them out. Once you have understood their genuine feelings and needs and shown them that you have heard them non-judgmentally, they may become ready to hear yours. And then you can search for specific action to take which benefits you both.

The basic technique is to first connect emotionally to identify each other's needs, then work out a solution or bring up reasons to understand things differently. Going straight to problem-solving or argument usually leaves people feeling not listened to or leads them to dig in their heels even more.