

Nonviolent Communication Summary

By Marshall Rosenberg

How often do you have a conversation that doesn't end the way you'd hoped? And, have you ever felt exasperated or offended by what someone else has said to you? Communication is one of the most important aspects of everyday life, yet we're often combative, without meaning to be. This is where Nonviolent Communication comes into play.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is relevant in all daily interactions. *Nonviolent Communication* invites us to find a way to communicate our deepest needs, and to understand the needs of others. If done with honesty and empathy, NVC's language leads us to develop constructive strategies to improve conflict resolution in all spheres.

The late Marshall Rosenberg, trained as a psychotherapist, before developing NVC in community settings. His work was influenced by his training in psychology, particularly the humanistic approach of Carl Rogers. He founded the Center for Nonviolent Communication, an international peacekeeping organization, offering programs based on the principles discussed in the book. These programs have been used in conflict zones such as Rwanda and the Middle East, and are equally effective at home, or in a therapy room.

Here's a brief overview of some of the critical ideas. Firstly we gain an understanding of "life-alienating" communication, and how NVC provides an alternative, to not only enhance our personal lives, but also to build group consensus and reduce societal violence. He then outlines NVC's four-step process, which helps us access our needs and express them clearly. Finally, we're guided towards identifying the needs of others,

irrespective of the setting.

Defining Life-Alienating Communication

Human beings are naturally compassionate, and we seek harmony in our everyday lives. However, cultural influences such as what we learn from our families and workplaces, unconsciously mold life-alienating communication.

Life-alienating communication has different aspects. Let's start with the familiar phrase, 'the problem with you is that you're too selfish!'

Statements such as these, take a moralistic stand, and we make a judgment call as to what's good or bad. This is particularly evident when someone's behavior is out of line with our belief system. In cases like these, we tend to make it a 'who is what' story, with blame, insults and categorizations, such as smart or ignorant, and attractive or unattractive.

Ironically, using this communication, doesn't serve anyone well. Usually, both parties become defensive, pushing the other away, which escalates the possibility of violence.

The second component is making comparisons. In an interesting experiment in *How to Make Yourself Miserable* by Dan Greenburg, participants were asked to look at a series of pictures. The humorous experiment was conducted, in order to gauge how people respond to current media standards of good looks. Participants were shown photos of men and women, and then asked to compare their own looks and measurements to those in the picture. Once they'd done this, participants were asked to reflect on how this comparison made them feel.

Unsurprisingly these comparisons made the subjects feel inadequate and unhappy. And ultimately, such feelings lead to a reduction of kindness and empathy towards others.

It's the third component that's especially dangerous, and this is where people might say something like, 'I lied to the client because the boss told me to,' or, 'You make me feel guilty.' Comments such as these, allow us to escape accountability. We use a language that does not allow us to choose our responses, which reduces our responsibility towards how we think, feel and behave.

Other forms of life-alienating communication include making requests that sound like demands, or believing that we can make people do what we want them to do. Or we adopt the approach of 'who deserves what,' where we communicate that specific actions deserve a reward, and others a punishment. These communication methods are entrenched in our personal and societal narratives, but Nonviolent Communication is the alternative to this.

Let's Unpack NVC

NVC goes beyond mere words – it's about communicating consciously and with good intentions. It's not mechanistic, or aimed at changing others, and it only works if we want non-hierarchical relationships based on honesty and empathy.

This underpins the four crucial steps of NVC. The first step is becoming aware of what we're observing, and once we're aware of this, we can move on to how we feel about our observations. The third step allows us to indicate what we need, based on our feelings. Only once we can

express our needs, can we determine what to request in a specific way that will enrich our lives.

Consider this example of a mother and her son, using the four NVC components.

'Felix, when I see a pair of dirty socks under the coffee table, and another three next to the TV, I feel irritated.'

In this sentence, you'll notice the mother's observation, as well as how this observation makes her feel. These are components one and two. She may continue by saying, 'I am irritated because I need to live in a tidy living area, because we all share the space.' In this instance, she's identifying her need. Finally, she might conclude by bringing in the fourth component, 'please put your socks in the washing machine,' which brings in her specific request to make her life more comfortable.

Observations Impact Our Well-Being

Observations are all about what we see, what we hear, what we remember, and what we imagine. It's also important to realize that observations impact on our wellbeing.

When it comes to observation, there's a crucial caveat. This caveat is that we have to distinguish between observations and evaluations. This is because an evaluation is laden with blame or criticism. For example, a combination of both an evaluation, and an observation, is 'Doug procrastinates.' This is an observation because it describes Doug's actions. Still, there's a definite judgment, in the descriptor 'procrastinates.' If we were to change this to a free-standing observation,

we could say something like, 'Doug only studies for exams the night before.'

A way to avoid judgemental evaluations, is to bring in time and context. For example, if we were to say 'Hank Smith is a poor soccer player,' this is laden with criticism. By inserting time and place into this observation, we can change the phrase to a more neutral sentiment about Hank Smith. So we could say something like, 'Hank Smith hasn't scored a goal in twenty games.' Can you notice the difference?

When we express our feelings about the observation we have made, we need a vocabulary of feelings. Feelings are not easy to express, and they're seldom neutral, so we're provided with some helpful terms and exercises to get us started.

The tricky part is that the feeling has to be separate from words that better describe our thoughts and interpretations. So, let's start by looking at a thought-based expression, 'I feel inadequate as a guitar player.' Despite including the word 'feel,' the expression doesn't relate to a tangible feeling. So, if we were to rephrase this with an expression of feeling, we could say something like, 'I'm impatient with myself because I'm not improving.'

English is quite a nuanced language, so we're given exercises to get to grips with this. Let's try the following: Is the statement, 'I feel you don't love me,' based on the speaker's feelings?

The answer is, no. This is a statement that's more about what the other person could be feeling, not how the speaker is feeling.

We then need to acknowledge the need that lies beneath the feelings. A helpful way of doing this is to structure our sentences to indicate, 'I feel x because I need y'. So if you were to complain to your partner, 'I feel frustrated when you come home late.' This indicates a feeling as opposed to a need. A need would be expressed as, 'I feel frustrated when you come home late, because I was hoping we'd be able to get some front-row seats.'

The fourth component is requesting a desired action, but without sounding demanding. This requires clear and positive language, that focuses on what we do want instead of what we don't want. A suggestion is to start our request with phrasing like, 'Would you be willing to...?'

So let's test this again. Is the following an expressed need that requires a specific action? 'I'd like you to be honest with me about yesterday's meeting.' The answer is, no. It's not an expressed need because, 'be honest with me' doesn't request a specific action. It's better to say, 'Please tell me how you feel about my behavior in the meeting,' or 'What could I have done differently?'

Expressing Vulnerability Can Help Reduce Conflict

When we express our needs, this makes us vulnerable. Feelings of vulnerability tend to be discouraged in society, however, expressing vulnerability can drastically reduce conflict.

When we're faced with any negative communication, we have four

options. The first is that we can blame ourselves, and wonder why we're the cause of the negativity. The second is to place the blame squarely on the speaker. These first two options are unhealthy because they suggest that communication should be seen in terms of binaries, and that it's an either-or in terms of who's at fault. The sweet spot is to be conscious of our own needs and feelings and focus on what the other person's needs might be.

Let's focus first on expressing our own needs. Using NVC means that you connect your own feelings to a need, whether to your own needs, or the needs of others. So, you might feel disappointed and angry because your supervisor didn't show up for a meeting, and you could have used that time to catch up with family. If we don't express our needs, we can feel like emotional slaves, believing that we're responsible for everyone's happiness. Once we become aware of this, we may feel angry because we don't want the continual burden of these other feelings. Emotional liberation is when we learn to respond with compassion, rather than out of fear or guilt. And remember, it's absolutely fine to be vulnerable and to let people know what your needs are, and how these needs impact your feelings.

Using NVC to Engage With the Needs of Others

All communication is a two-way street, and NVC is no exception. In conjunction with expressing our needs, we have to learn to receive others' needs empathically. And the same four components apply. We need to listen to what others observe; then we need to engage with their feelings and needs. And finally, we should acknowledge their requests. When we're doing this, we should suspend our own thoughts, feelings, and judgments, and then, with an empty mind, listen deeply.

Many of us lean towards sympathy, as opposed to empathy. Empathy involves reflecting and paraphrasing, until we get to the core of what someone needs. Once we've done this, we need to allow them the space to request how best to meet these needs. Sometimes we may just need to take a deep breath and not speak at all. We actually say a lot when we don't speak, and instead focus on just listening to other people.

Furthermore, it's important to note that when we try to interpret what someone is saying from an intellectual standpoint, this blocks our empathy. Our empathy is blocked because we're too busy trying to tune into what someone else is thinking instead of connecting with their feelings.

Let's look at this scenario to determine whether or not this is an example of empathic listening.

Person A: You aren't my real mother!

Person B: Are you feeling frustrated because of how I'm interacting with you?

In this scenario, yes, Person B is empathically receiving what Person A is saying.

By being more empathetic, and by listening to the needs of others, it'll soon become apparent why NVC fits well when managing conflict.

Applying NVC in Conflict Resolution and Mediation

The approach of NVC in resolving conflict, is conceptually very different from most other conflict resolution processes. In terms of NVC, the aim is to fully meet both parties' needs instead of settling on a compromise. This is a challenging process because it means creating a dialogue that leads to workable plans, and relies on both sides making a caring and respectful connection, and recognizing common needs.

This book outlines the five-step process that we can use in conflict situations.

The first step is that both parties need to express their needs. Then each person needs to search for the underlying needs of the other party. Once they've done this, they need to take time to verify the accuracy of this understanding. This takes patience and a lot of listening, and importantly everyone needs to show as much empathy as possible, to comprehend the various needs accurately. Finally, once everyone is satisfied that needs have been communicated, the group starts to generate workable strategies to resolve the conflict.

It takes skill, patience, practice, and guesswork to access the needs in a message. We need to use 'present language' statements, such as saying, 'would you be willing to...?'

In Conclusion

NVC is a way of creating a more compassionate and empathetic society. Firstly, by being empathetic to our own needs, and building a human connection to ourselves, this will filter down to others. Rosenberg argues that we can't give something to someone else, if we don't have it to begin with. So we need to start listening to ourselves and identifying our feelings and needs. NVC's process is self-reflexive, and it means that we have to be acutely aware of how we feel, what we need, and how to express this. It may mean opening up to the possibility of feeling vulnerable, but it enables us to discard judgment. Furthermore, by creating a critical awareness, we're more likely to develop crucial listening skills and understand the needs and feelings of others.

In short, nonviolent communication is a language of compassion. It's designed to help us access our needs, and those of others, to strengthen relationships that long for healing, and to reduce societal violence.