

The Basics of Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

Reducing Conflict in Relationships thru Maintaining Emotional Boundaries

Why does NVC work? Simply stated, NVC works because it differentiates observations of reality from interpretations of reality. Interpretative thinking is often communicated as judgments, implies wrongness, and creates defensiveness. While thoughts may be useful in helping us to understand and make sense of an ever-changing world, they are not reality itself. When we confuse our thoughts about reality for reality itself, we set ourselves up for conflict and disappointment. NVC works because it focuses on describing what is real based on observations of reality, and intentionally leaves evaluative and judgmental thinking out of the conversation.

Accurate, clear, and specific observations of reality are morally neutral and difficult to argue with. We tend to hear observations without becoming defensive or thinking that we have done something wrong, which encourages a consciousness of understanding and connection that brings people closer together. Evaluative thinking is an expression of a “right vs wrong” state of mind, and fuels a “win-lose” attitude that alienates us from the very people we desire to be close to. It is not possible to both judge someone as “wrong” and empathically understand them at the same time because they come from two different states of consciousness.

Conflict in relationship is likely to happen when emotional boundaries are obscure or permeable, and occurs when:

1. You attempt to make someone else responsible for something that belongs to you.
2. You take responsibility for something that belongs to someone else.
3. You try to control something that belongs to someone else (i.e.: their ability to choose).
4. You meet your needs at the expense of someone else’s needs.

As you can see, all four of these conditions are dependent on you. That’s good news, as conflict can end in your relationships when you learn new ways to meet your needs while maintaining healthy emotional boundaries.

In NVC, taking responsibility means acknowledging and owning anything that you source (that comes from or belongs to you) such as your feelings, needs, choices, behaviors, attitudes, and thoughts (including interpretations, opinions, preferences, beliefs, judgments, assumptions and expectations). This may come as a bit of a shock, but no one else “makes” you mad. Only the thought that something or someone “should” be different than the way they are can make you mad. Like all of us, you have a need for consideration and respect, and the responsibility for meeting your needs belongs only to you. Is it nice when others contribute to your needs? Absolutely. Is it another person’s job to meet your needs? No. Do relationships thrive when we respond to each other’s feelings and needs? Yes. Do relationships become enmeshed, codependent and divisive when we assign responsibility for our feelings and needs to others? Yes, but only every time.

A word of caution: Just because you stop blaming others for your feelings and needs does not mean your spouse, partner or teenager will suddenly change their attitude or behaviors. But change will not likely happen until you take the lead in modeling what it means to take responsibility for everything that comes from or belongs to you. And when you set the example, in time, others will likely follow because life is more rewarding and enjoyable when there is less conflict. However, learning and using the tools of NVC does take time, patience, and a lot of practice. It is much easier to blame others for the feelings we don’t like than to be with the pain and hurt behind the anger. We simply are not comfortable or used to owning our own stuff. It does take work, and sometimes when we stop projecting our feelings onto others and start looking at our own stuff a lot of accumulated pain rises to the surface.

NVC focuses on building trust in relationships through mutual cooperation and understanding, often resulting in long-lasting behavioral changes. However, if getting others to change their behaviors now is what you most want, then NVC may not be for you. The fastest way to get someone to behave the way you want is to use pain, shame, blame, fear, or the threat of punishment, but it will come at the cost of trust in your relationship. And the behaviors aren’t likely to last long once the relationship starts to lose trust. This strategy may have even worked in the past, especially with adults or children who tend to value closeness and pleasing others over autonomy and independence. Over time, however, this strategy is likely to be corrosive to the relationship resulting in resentment, contempt, fear, low self-esteem, and continued conflict. In short, it will cost you the love, cooperation, and understanding that *is* your relationship. You may have to decide what is more important; the behaviors you desire now or the relationship you hope to create? Interestingly, *care* is the product of a relationship built on trust and mutuality, and with care comes cooperation and the behaviors you were hoping to encourage.

The Four Steps of Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

NVC is the process of communicating accurate, clear, and specific observations of reality, without including evaluative or judgmental thoughts about reality. Accurate, clear, and specific observations of reality don't convey "I'm right and you're wrong", and encourage a consciousness of understanding and connection that brings people closer together. Expressing evaluative and judgmental thoughts leads to defensiveness and conflict that alienates and disconnects people from each other. The four steps of NVC are:

1. Observations: of what is happening (exterior behaviors or interior thoughts)

Exterior reality is anything that can or could be recorded by a video camera. What a video camera can't record are assumptions, beliefs or judgments such as *lying, manipulating, disobedient, disrespectful, inappropriate, rude, irresponsible, wrong, or bad*. A video camera simply records what was said or done free of evaluation, opinion or interpretation. If assumptions, beliefs or judgments are present in your mind, it may be helpful to start by observing them first: (e.g. "When I observe the thought I have that 'you are being disrespectful', I feel ...")

2. Feelings: Observing the energy that is alive in you

Feelings are emotional energies that register in our body. Feelings are neither good nor bad, and we don't choose our feelings. We know they are there because they either feel comfortable or uncomfortable; we either like them or we don't. There are hundreds of names for these energies, and a few common names are sad, happy, afraid, angry, excited, annoyed, and concerned. Surprisingly, most of us have a difficult time identifying or naming our feelings. When asked how we feel we often respond with a stream of thoughts that aren't actual feelings at all. Words often misstated as feelings are *disrespected, manipulated, misunderstood, unloved, ignored, abandoned, attacked, neglected, insulted and unappreciated*. These are actually evaluative thoughts that imply someone is doing something we don't like. Any word that follows "I feel as if ..." or "I feel like ..." or "I feel you ..." or "I feel that ..." will be followed by a thought, and not an emotion or feeling. To discover the feeling behind the thought, ask yourself "When I have this thought, what emotion do I feel?"

3. Needs/Values: Observing the cause of your feelings

Your feelings are caused when your needs are either met or unmet. Other people's words and behaviors are never the cause of your emotions (but yes, if someone punches you they do cause the physical pain you feel). This statement runs counter to both intuition and cultural beliefs, and may take some time to fully comprehend and accept. Although it may seem like it at times, no one else "makes" you angry. Someone may call you a name like "Shorty", and you may feel annoyed or angry because respect is something you greatly value and enjoy. Or, you might feel surprised or even amused because you are 6' tall and value and appreciate humor. While the other person is responsible for what he or she says or does, like calling you "Shorty", you are solely responsible for the meaning you assign to what was said or done, as well as for any emotions generated by your interpretation of the event. Whether you are angry or amused is dependent on you and your interpretation alone.

4. Requests: Problem solving thru maintaining boundaries and forming agreements

When we want something that belongs to someone else it is helpful to ask first to see if they would be willing to participate in responding to our request. A request allows for either a "yes" or "no". If a "no" is not acceptable, then it is a demand and not a request. While a demand may get you the behavior you want now, you will likely pay for it later in the form of attitude or accumulated resentment. Demands imply a sense of obligation, and take away the opportunity to give of free choice. Most people are naturally resistant to demands because we do not like being told that we don't have a choice when in reality, by definition, a decision always involves a choice. Despite the consequences, how often do children like to let their parents know that they are choosing to meet their own need for autonomy and choice rather than conform to their parent's demands? Granted, less often by children who value closeness and a desire to please, but they are not the reason you are here to learn new ways to communicate. It's the child that likes to make their own choices that stimulates your need for cooperation and ease. Demands break down trust in the relationship, trust that you will not attempt to make the other person responsible for something that belongs to you; your feelings and needs. Making requests and forming agreements that meet your needs in a way that works for both you and the other person creates an environment where people enjoy freely giving and contributing to each other's needs – and that's care!