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# INTRODUCTION

## *What Is Nonviolent Communication?*

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### THE HEART OF NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION

*“What I want in my life is compassion,  
a flow between myself and others based  
on a mutual giving from the heart.”*

—MARSHALL ROSENBERG

Believing that it is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate manner, I have been preoccupied most of my life with two questions. What happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature, leading us to behave violently and exploitatively? And conversely, what allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances?

While studying the factors that affect our ability to stay compassionate, I was struck by the crucial role of language and our use of words. I have since identified a specific approach to communicating—speaking and listening—that leads us to give from the heart, connecting us with ourselves and with each other in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish. I call this approach Nonviolent Communication, using the term nonviolence as Gandhi used it—to refer to our natural state of compassion

when violence has subsided from the heart. While we may not consider the way we talk to be “violent,” our words often lead to hurt and pain, whether for others or ourselves. In some communities, the process I am describing is known as Compassionate Communication. The abbreviation “NVC” is used throughout this workbook to refer to Nonviolent or Compassionate Communication.

### A WAY TO FOCUS ATTENTION

NVC is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions. It contains nothing new; all that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries. The intent is to remind us about what we already know—about how we humans were meant to relate to one another—and to assist us in living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge.

NVC guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of being habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on an awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying

others a respectful and empathic attention. In any exchange, we come to hear our own deeper needs and those of others. NVC trains us to observe carefully, and to be able to specify behaviors and conditions that are affecting us. We learn to identify and clearly articulate what we are concretely wanting in a given situation. The form is simple, yet powerfully transformative.

As NVC replaces our old patterns of defending, withdrawing, or attacking in the face of judgment and criticism, we come to perceive ourselves and others, as well as our intentions and relationships, in a new light. Resistance, defensiveness, and violent reactions are minimized. When we focus on clarifying what is being observed, felt, and needed rather than on diagnosing and judging, we discover the depth of our own compassion. Through its emphasis on deep listening—to ourselves as well as others—NVC fosters respect, attentiveness, and empathy, and engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart.

Although I refer to it as “a process of communication” or a “language of compassion,” NVC is more than a process or a language. On a deeper level, it is an ongoing reminder to keep our attention focused on a place where we are more likely to get what we are seeking.

There is a story of a man under a street lamp searching for something on all fours. A policeman passing by asked what he was doing. “Looking for my car keys,” replied the man, who appeared slightly drunk. “Did you drop them here?” inquired the officer. “No,” answered the man, “I dropped them in the alley.” Seeing the policeman’s baffled expression, the man hastened to explain, “But the light is much better here.”

I find that my cultural conditioning leads me

to focus attention on places where I am unlikely to get what I want. I developed NVC as a way to train my attention—to shine the light of consciousness—on places that have the potential to yield what I am seeking. What I want in my life is compassion, a flow between myself and others based on a mutual giving from the heart.

When we give from the heart, we do so out of a joy that springs forth whenever we willingly enrich another person’s life. This kind of giving benefits both the giver and the receiver. The receiver enjoys the gift without worrying about the consequences that accompany gifts given out of fear, guilt, shame, or desire for gain. The giver benefits from the enhanced self-esteem that results when we see our efforts contributing to someone’s well-being.

The use of NVC does not require that the persons with whom we are communicating be literate in NVC or even motivated to relate to us compassionately. If we stay with the principles of NVC, remain motivated solely to give and receive compassionately, and do everything we can to let others know this is our only motive, they will join us in the process, and eventually we will be able to respond compassionately to one another. I’m not saying that this always happens quickly. I do maintain, however, that compassion inevitably blossoms when we stay true to the principles and process of NVC.

## **THE NVC PROCESS**

To arrive at a mutual desire to give from the heart, we focus the light of consciousness on four areas—referred to as the four components of the NVC model.

First, we observe what is actually happening in a situation: what are we observing others saying

or doing that is either enriching or not enriching our life? The trick is to be able to articulate this observation without introducing any judgment or evaluation—to simply say what people are doing that we either like or don't like. Next, we state how we feel when we observe this action: are we hurt, scared, joyful, amused, irritated, etc.? And thirdly, we say what needs of ours are connected to the feelings we have identified. An awareness of these three components is present when we use NVC to clearly and honestly express how we are.

For example, a mother might express these three pieces to her teenage son by saying, "Felix, when I see two balls of soiled socks under the coffee table and another three next to the TV, I feel irritated because I am needing more order in the rooms that we share in common."

She would follow immediately with the fourth component—a very specific request: "Would you be willing to put your socks in your room or in the washing machine?" This fourth component addresses what we are wanting from the other person that would enrich our lives or make life more wonderful for us.

Thus, part of NVC is to express these four pieces of information very clearly, whether verbally or by other means. The other aspect of this communication consists of receiving the same four pieces of information from others. We connect with them by first sensing what they are observing, feeling, and needing, and then discover what would enrich their lives by receiving the fourth piece, their request.

As we keep our attention focused on the areas mentioned, and help others do likewise, we establish a flow of communication, back and forth, until compassion manifests naturally:

what I am observing, feeling, and needing; what I am requesting to enrich my life; what you are observing, feeling, and needing; what you are requesting to enrich your life ...

## **THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF THE PROCESS**

1. The concrete actions we are observing that are affecting our well-being
2. How we feel in relation to what we are observing
3. The needs, values, desires, etc., that are creating our feelings
4. The concrete actions we request in order to enrich our lives

When we use this process, we may begin either by expressing ourselves or by empathically receiving these four pieces of information from others. Although we will learn to listen for and verbally express each of these components, it is important to keep in mind that NVC does not consist of a set formula but adapts to various situations as well as personal and cultural styles. While I conveniently refer to NVC as a "process" or "language," it is possible to experience all four pieces of the process without uttering a single word. The essence of NVC is to be found in our consciousness of these four components, not in the actual words that are exchanged.

## **APPLYING NVC IN OUR LIVES AND WORLD**

When we use NVC in our interactions—with ourselves, with another person, or in a group—we become grounded in our natural

state of compassion. It is therefore an approach that can be effectively applied at all levels of communication and in diverse situations:

- intimate relationships
- families
- schools
- organizations and institutions
- therapy and counseling
- diplomatic and business negotiations
- disputes and conflicts of any nature

Some people use NVC to create greater depth and caring in their intimate relationships. Others use it to build more effective relationships at work. Still others use this process in the political arena.

Worldwide, NVC now serves as a valuable resource for communities facing violent conflicts and severe ethnic, religious, or political tensions. The spread of NVC training and its use in mediation by people in conflict in Israel, the Palestinian Authority, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere have been a source of particular gratification for me. I feel blessed to be able to travel throughout the world teaching people a process of communication that gives them power and joy. Now, I am pleased and excited to be able to share the richness of Nonviolent Communication with you.

In summary, NVC helps us connect with each other and ourselves in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish. It guides us to reframe the way we express ourselves and listen to others by focusing our consciousness on four areas: what we are observing, feeling, and needing, and what we are requesting to enrich our lives. NVC fosters deep listening,

respect, and empathy and engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart. Some people use NVC to respond compassionately to themselves, some to create greater depth in their personal relationships, and still others to build effective relationships at work or in the political arena. Worldwide, NVC is used to mediate disputes and conflicts at all levels.

## THE FOUR D'S

Think of the forms of life-alienating communication as the “Four D’s of Disconnection”:

1. Diagnosis, judgment, analysis, criticism, comparison
2. Denial of responsibility
3. Demand
4. “Deserve”-oriented language

1. Over the course of this week identify an instance of each category of the four D’s in your own speech, or if you wish, look back into your past. Choose an instance where you were communicating with someone else. Or, if you prefer, focus on your self-talk. Rather than describing the situation, write down the exact words you used.
2. Write down a dialogue (of about 6-8 lines) between two people that isn’t going well. It could be a dialogue between you and another person in your own life. After you have completed writing down the lines, re-read them and determine if either person has communicated using one of the Four D’s.
3. Choose one day this week as Four D-Alert Day. During this day, listen with heightened awareness to the way people around you are communicating. Whenever you hear a D, note and jot it down on paper. Do not forget to include what people are saying on TV, radio, and ads. You can include instances of both written and spoken words.

## COMMUNICATION THAT BLOCKS COMPASSION

*“Do not judge, and you will not be judged.  
For as you judge others, so you will  
yourselves be judged ... ”*

—HOLY BIBLE, MATTHEW 7:1

In studying the question of what alienates us from our natural state of compassion, I have identified specific forms of language and communication that I believe contribute to our behaving violently toward each other and ourselves. I use the term “life-alienating communication” to refer to these forms of communication.

### Moralistic Judgments

One kind of life-alienating communication is the use of moralistic judgments that imply wrongness or badness on the part of people who don’t act in harmony with our values. Such judgments are reflected in language such as, “The problem with you is that you’re too selfish.” “She’s lazy.” “They’re prejudiced.” “It’s inappropriate.” Blame, insults, put-downs, labels, criticism, comparisons, and diagnoses are all forms of judgment.

It is important here not to confuse value judgments and moralistic judgments. All of us make value judgments as to the qualities we value in life; for example, we might value honesty, freedom, or peace. Value judgments reflect our beliefs of how life can best be served. We make moralistic judgments of people and behaviors that fail to support our value judgments, e.g. “Violence is bad.” “People who kill others are evil.” Had we

been raised speaking a language that facilitated the expression of compassion, we would have learned to articulate our needs and values directly, rather than to insinuate wrongness when they have not been met. For example, instead of “Violence is bad,” we might say instead, “I am fearful of the use of violence to resolve conflicts; I value the resolution of human conflicts through other means.”

### Denial of Responsibility

Another kind of life-alienating communication is the denial of responsibility. Life-alienating communication clouds our awareness that we are each responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, and actions. The use of the common expression “have to” as in “There are some things you have to do, whether you like it or not” illustrates how personal responsibility for our actions is obscured in such speech. The phrase “makes one feel” as in “You make me feel guilty” is another example of how language facilitates the denial of personal responsibility for our own feelings and thoughts.

We deny responsibility for our actions when we attribute their cause to:

- Vague, impersonal forces: “I cleaned my room because I had to.”
- Our condition, diagnosis, personal or psychological history: “I drink because I am an alcoholic.”
- The actions of others: “I hit my child because he ran into the street.”
- The dictates of authority: “I lied to the client because the boss told me to.”
- Group pressure: “I started smoking because all my friends did.”

- Institutional policies, rules, and regulations: “I have to suspend you for this infraction because it’s the school policy.”
- Gender roles, social roles, or age roles: “I hate going to work, but I do it because I am a husband and a father.”
- Uncontrollable impulses: “I was overcome by my urge to eat the candy bar.”

### **Other Forms of Life— Alienating Communication**

Communicating our desires as demands is another form of language that blocks compassion. A demand explicitly or implicitly threatens listeners with blame or punishment if they fail to comply. It is a common form of communication in our culture, especially among those who hold positions of authority.

Life-alienating communication is also associated with the concept that certain actions merit reward while others merit punishment. This thinking is expressed by the word “deserve” as in “He deserves to be punished for what he did.” It assumes “badness” on the part of people who behave in certain ways and calls for punishment to make them repent and change their behavior. I believe it is in everyone’s interest that people change, not in order to avoid punishment, but because they see the change as benefiting themselves.

It is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving compassionately. We have, however, learned many forms of “life-alienating communication” that lead us to speak and behave in ways that injure others and ourselves. One form of life-alienating communication is the use of moralistic judgments that imply wrongness or

badness on the part of those who don’t act in harmony with our values. Another form of such communication is the use of comparisons, which can block compassion both for others and ourselves. Life-alienating communication also obscures our awareness that we are each responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Communicating our desires in the form of demands is yet another characteristic of language that blocks compassion.

### **THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF NVC Observation: The First Component of NVC**

The first component of NVC entails the separation of observation from evaluation. We need to clearly observe what it is that we are seeing, hearing, or touching, which is affecting our sense of well-being, without mixing in any evaluation.

Observations are an important element in NVC, where we wish to clearly and honestly express how we are to another person. When we combine observation with evaluation, however, we decrease the likelihood that others will hear our intended message. Instead, they are apt to hear criticism and thus resist what we are saying.

NVC does not mandate that we remain completely objective and refrain from evaluating. It only requires that we maintain a separation between our observations and our evaluations. NVC is a process language that discourages static generalizations; instead, evaluations are to be based on observations specific to time and context.



### ***Distinguishing Observations from Evaluations***

The following table distinguishes observations that are separate from evaluation from those that have evaluation mixed in.

COMMUNICATION	EXAMPLE OF OBSERVATION WITH EVALUATION MIXED IN	EXAMPLE OF OBSERVATION SEPARATE FROM EVALUATION
Use of the verb “to be” without indication that the evaluator is responsible for the comment	You are too generous.	When I see you give all your lunch money to others, I think you are being too generous.
Use of verbs with evaluative connotations	Doug procrastinates.	Doug only studies for exams the night before.
Implications that one infers about another person’s thoughts	She won’t get her work in.	I don’t think she’ll get her work in, or she said, “I won’t get my work in.”
Confusion of prediction with certainty	If you don’t eat balanced meals, your health will be impaired.	If you don’t eat balanced meals, I fear that your health will be impaired.
Failure to be specific about referents	Minorities don’t take care of their property.	I have not seen the minority family living across the street shovel the snow on their walk.
Use of words denoting ability without indicating that an evaluation is being made	Hank Smith is a poor soccer player.	Hank Smith has not scored a goal in 20 games.
Use of adverbs and adjectives in ways that do not signify that an evaluation is being made	Jim is ugly.	Jim’s looks don’t appeal to me.

Note: The words “always,” “never,” “ever,” “whenever,” etc., express observations when used in the following ways:

- Whenever I have observed Jack on the phone, he has spoken for at least thirty minutes.
- I cannot recall your ever writing to me.

Sometimes such words are used as exaggerations, in which case observations and evaluations are being mixed:

- You are always busy.
- She is never there when she’s needed.

When these words are used as exaggerations, they often provoke defensiveness rather than compassion.

Words like frequently and seldom can also contribute to confusing observation with evaluation.

EVALUATIONS	OBSERVATIONS
You seldom do what I want.	The last three times I initiated an activity, you said you didn’t want to do it.
He frequently comes over.	He comes over at least three times a week.

**Observation or Evaluation?**

To determine your proficiency at discerning between observations and evaluations, complete the following exercise. Circle the number in front of any statement that is an observation only, with no evaluation mixed in.

1. “John was angry with me yesterday for no reason.”
2. “Yesterday evening Nancy bit her fingernails while watching television.”
3. “Sam didn’t ask for my opinion during the meeting.”
4. “My father is a good man.”
5. “Janice works too much.”
6. “Henry is aggressive.”
7. “Pam was first in line every day this week.”
8. “My son often doesn’t brush his teeth.”
9. “Luke told me I didn’t look good in yellow.”
10. “My aunt complains when I talk with her.”

Here are my responses for this exercise.

1. If you circled this number, we’re not in agreement. I consider “for no reason” to be an evaluation. Furthermore, I consider it an evaluation to infer that John was angry. He might have been feeling hurt, scared, sad, or something else. Examples of observations without evaluation might be: “John told me he was angry,” or “John pounded his fist on the table.”
2. If you circled this number, we’re in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.

3. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
4. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "good man" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "For the last twenty-five years my father has given one tenth of his salary to charity."
5. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "too much" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be, "Janice spent over sixty hours at the office this week."
6. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "aggressive" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Henry hit his sister when she switched the television channel."
7. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "often" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "Twice this week my son didn't brush his teeth before going to bed."
9. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that an observation was expressed without being mixed together with an evaluation.
10. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I consider "complains" to be an evaluation. An observation without evaluation might be: "My aunt called me

three times this week, and each time talked about people who treated her in ways she didn't like."

### **Identifying and Expressing Feelings: The Second Component of NVC**

The first component of NVC is to observe without evaluating; the second component is to express how we are feeling. Psychoanalyst Rollo May suggests that "the mature person becomes able to differentiate feelings into as many nuances, strong and passionate experiences, or delicate and sensitive ones as in the different passages of music in a symphony." For many of us, however, our feelings are, as May would describe it, "limited like notes in a bugle call."

The benefits of strengthening our feelings vocabulary are evident not only in intimate relationships, but also in the professional world.

### ***Feelings versus Non-Feelings***

A common confusion generated by the English language is our use of the word "feel" without actually expressing a feeling. For example, in the sentence, "I feel I didn't get a fair deal," the words "I feel" could be more accurately replaced with "I think." In general, feelings are not being clearly expressed when the word "feel" is followed by:

1. Words such as "that," "like," and "as if:"  
 "I feel that you should know better."  
 "I feel like a failure."  
 "I feel as if I'm living with a wall."
2. The pronouns "I," "you," "he," "she," "they," and "it:"

“I feel I am constantly on call.”

“I feel it is useless.”

3. Names or nouns referring to people:

“I feel Amy has been pretty responsible.”

“I feel my boss is being manipulative.”

Conversely, in the English language, it is not necessary at all to use the word “feel” when we are actually expressing a feeling: we can say “I’m feeling irritated,” or simply, “I’m irritated.”

In NVC, we distinguish between words that express actual feelings and those that describe what we think we are.

1. Description of what we think we are:

“I feel inadequate as a guitar player.”

In this statement, I am assessing my ability as a guitar player, rather than clearly expressing my feelings.

2. Expressions of actual feelings:

“I feel disappointed in myself as a guitar player.”

“I feel impatient with myself as a guitar player.”

“I feel frustrated with myself as a guitar player.”

The actual feeling behind my assessment of myself as “inadequate” could therefore be disappointment, impatience, frustration, or some other emotion.

Likewise, it is helpful to differentiate between words that describe what we think others are doing around us, and words that describe actual feelings. The following are examples of statements that are easily mistaken as expressions of feelings (in fact they reveal more how we think others are behaving than what we are actually feeling ourselves):

1. “I feel unimportant to the people with whom I work.”

The word “unimportant” describes how I think others are evaluating me, rather than an actual feeling, which in this situation might be “I feel sad” or “I feel discouraged.”

2. “I feel misunderstood.”

Here the word “misunderstood” indicates my assessment of the other person’s level of understanding rather than an actual feeling. In this situation, I may be feeling anxious or annoyed or some other emotion.

3. “I feel ignored.”

Again, this is more of an interpretation of the actions of others rather than a clear statement of how we are feeling. No doubt there have been times we thought we were being ignored and our feeling was relief, because we wanted to be left to ourselves. No doubt there were other times, however, when we felt hurt when we thought we were being ignored, because we had wanted to be involved.

Words like “ignored” express how we interpret others, rather than how we feel. Here is a sampling of such words:

abandoned	abused
attacked	betrayed
boxed-in	bullied
cheated	coerced
co-opted	cornered
diminished	distrusted (continued ...)