

INTRODUCTION

Living With Awareness and Choice

You just don't understand me. You never listen, do you?

How could I make such a stupid mistake again?

It seems like I never learn.

I just don't know what to do. There are too many choices.

He's just a jerk. All he cares about is himself.

When you read these statements, how do you feel? Put yourself in the speakers' shoes. What do you notice in your body? Do you feel tense or tight? Do you feel anxious, sad, angry, or confused? If you do, it's not surprising. While each statement addresses a different issue, they all involve some kind of judgment. Each indicates a level of miscommunication, disconnection, or blame. And no one enjoys being judged—even by themselves. Also, none of these statements addresses the root cause of what's contributing to the tension and misunderstanding that are taking place, so there is no clear path toward resolving the discomfort involved.

Now read the following statements, which address the same issues in the same order as those above. Here, each fully expresses what the speaker is thinking and feeling.

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I'm so frustrated. That's not what I recall saying, and I really value accuracy.

This is the second time this year I've forgotten to pay my Visa bill. I hate getting those late charges, and I really want to attend to my personal matters with care.

Seeing that there are twenty-two different courses that meet the writing requirement, I feel totally overwhelmed. I need to know which to take.

I'm furious. My housemate just spent twenty-five minutes in the shower, and now there's no hot water left. I'd really like some consideration and awareness!

When you read the second set of statements, you may feel a very different kind of response. Do you feel more relaxed, connected, and at ease? Do you notice greater appreciation and understanding—especially when you read what each speaker is wanting (accuracy, care, clarity, and consideration)? Do you find yourself more open to what the speaker desires, and would you be more willing to engage with them?

Now each speaker is taking responsibility for their own experience. Rather than engaging in judgment (which often provides little information), the speaker clearly describes what is bothering them, what they are feeling, and what they're wanting.

These two sets of statements illustrate the practices we'll be exploring in this book: how to move past judgment, and how to name our own experiences in a way that enhances people's ability to listen and care about what is important for each party, including ourselves. These are the practices of Nonviolent Communication™ (NVC), also called Compassionate Communication.* As we

* Some people also like to call NVC authentic or collaborative communication. The name Nonviolent Communication is a translation from the Sanskrit word *ahimsa*, used by Gandhi, which literally means “love in action” or “the force unleashed when the desire to harm is eradicated.” The source of these definitions is <http://www.mettacenter.org/definitions/ahimsa>, where you can find further context for these concepts.

introduce you to these practices, we will also offer a view of the world and of human relations that contributes to interpersonal and intergroup harmony in profound ways. The communication tools presented here and the worldview underlying them support and enhance each other. Together they foster an empathic mind-set and consciousness, and support a compassionate way of seeing and being in the world.

Different—Together

In taking the NVC approach, we examine the commonalities among people. As living organisms, we all have numerous physical needs, including for food, air, water, and rest. We need clothing and shelter for comfort and protection from the elements. We need confidence that we can be safe from illness and other physical harm. And we have needs for warmth, touch, and intimacy, as well as tenderness, care, and sexual expression.

Beyond physical needs, there are numerous other qualities and values that we humans like to experience and express. These include honesty, authenticity, and integrity; community and connection; and spaciousness, autonomy, and choice. Most of us value, at least in some situations, efficiency, effectiveness, movement, and ease. There are many other needs that, when met, contribute to our well-being, such as needs for order, beauty, and meaning. There are dozens of other qualities, such as mutuality, companionship, and consideration, that could be considered primal and basic human needs.

In your own life, what do you value and try to live by, especially in relating to others? Perhaps you value kindness, care, consideration, and autonomy, and the freedom to decide how you want to live. Perhaps you also value self-expression, empowerment, and responsibility. You may also care about dignity, understanding, honesty, and trust. There are probably dozens of other values that

you care about. If you reflect on it, going through life without ever experiencing these qualities as fulfilled would be very hard—like crossing a parched desert. These qualities help us to live life fully and be fully alive.

Now stop and think for a moment. Think about your family, friends, colleagues, and people you simply pass on the street. Is there anyone among them who would not enjoy experiencing the qualities we've mentioned? Is there anyone in the world who would not enjoy food and drink, warmth and shelter, consideration, care, support, ease, and respect? All of these are appreciated and desired by humans everywhere, regardless of where they live or what culture they are a part of. While people address these basic, universal needs in diverse ways and experience them at different times and in different circumstances, there is little doubt that we all share them. This is a theme we explore throughout this book.

Needs—Understanding and Acting on Them

So we are agreed: we all have needs. That's the simple part. Applying this knowledge and using it to create a more compassionate world is more complex. How do we meet our needs in ways that we enjoy, in ways that are consistent with our values and with how we want to live? How can we be confident that everyone's needs—including our own—can be addressed? And then there is this riddle to solve: if we have so much in common, how is it that we so often experience difference, misunderstanding, and conflict?

These are the questions we take up in this book, and we do so by exploring two basic principles. The first is that when we have disagreements or experience disconnection from others, it is because we are disagreeing over *strategies* to meet needs, over what we want to *do* in a given situation. If we are to reconnect with others and resolve the conflict, the needs driving the strategies must first be

discovered. The key to doing this is to truly hear and understand one another on the level of shared values, while holding everyone's needs with care. Once this is accomplished—and this is what the practices in this book are designed to achieve—we are free to discover new strategies that will be far more satisfying, enriching, and unifying. In fact, once all parties have an experience of being heard and knowing that their needs matter, strategies usually organically evolve that are win-wins for all involved.

The second principle is that connecting with and contributing to the well-being of others are instinctive human behaviors that are intrinsically rewarding. If we believe this second principle—that contributing to others is satisfying in itself—finding ways to meet everyone's needs becomes much easier to do. Win-win solutions become the ultimate prize.

The Contribution Test

Do you doubt the second principle? If so, we invite you to try it out in the laboratory of your own life. Take a moment now and think about when you last contributed to another's well-being. Perhaps you gave directions to someone who was lost, helped a child with a task, did something kind for your pet, or ran an errand for a friend. Perhaps you listened with care to a person who wanted your companionship. Or maybe you told a joke, adding some humor, fun, and creativity to the day. Perhaps you expressed gratitude, love, or appreciation to another person.

Now think about how you felt when you contributed to another in this way. As you recall the event, what sensations do you notice in your body? How do you feel? You may feel warm and openhearted, with an expansiveness in your throat, chest, or limbs. You may feel happy, calm, satisfied, or at ease. You may enjoy a sense of fullness, peace, and completion. There is a very important

insight to be gained from this exercise: these are the feelings we typically experience *when our needs are being met*. And this is one way we know that contributing to others is one of the most basic and compelling of human needs: we feel happy when we do so. We all have a desire to contribute to life, to enrich and enhance it for the benefit of all.

Now imagine that all the people you know are enjoying the sensations you just experienced. What would the world look like and how might our daily lives be transformed if people everywhere increased their experience of meeting human needs? What if it were a given that everyone's needs mattered? How would communication and decision making change? What would be the prevailing response to difference and misunderstanding? How might our jobs be structured differently? Our neighborhoods, communities, and schools?

Given the number of people whose needs are not being met in the world today and, further, who believe their needs don't matter, how do we imagine this new world, what it would look like, and how it would function? How is it possible to assure that everyone's needs are held with consideration and care?

Creating Abundance Through Nonviolent Communication

The Nonviolent Communication model offers a blueprint—one that has been tested and proven internationally for decades—for creating such abundance, in our own lives and the world around us.

The approach was developed by Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D., who was fascinated by a basic question: what is it that contributes to human beings enjoying moments of profound connection and compassion for one another at some times and, at other times, experiencing a lack of compassion, even antipathy and contempt? At a young age, Marshall observed both firsthand. He witnessed race riots in Detroit in the 1940s, in which people were killed, and acts of

immense compassion, including the care his uncle joyfully gave his elderly mother.

Desiring to understand compassion and how to foster it, he studied psychology, learning from the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, among others. Then, after completing his studies, he put his insights to work in a wide array of settings—many of them fraught with conflict and violence, both physical and institutional. As he worked with gangs and prisoners, corporations and other organizations, he created and honed the model that is now being used to increase understanding and cooperation and to resolve conflict among diverse groups of people around the world.

You will find that Nonviolent Communication has limitless applications. As well as fostering self-awareness and connection with others, NVC skills can contribute to decision making, mediation, and needs assessment. NVC works in facilitating meetings in which everyone feels included and involved. The practices you will learn in this book—the fruit of Marshall Rosenberg’s countless journeys to the very heart of conflict—have the power to transform your experience. They can help you live in your own skin and find mutuality with others—in the home, at school and work, and in your most intimate relationships.

Sounds Great. How Hard Is It to Learn?

The principles of NVC are not hard to understand. As you will see, the model involves four basic steps that can be expressed in shorthand as “OFNR”: making clear *observations*, identifying *feelings* in relation to what you’re observing, identifying *needs* in relation to what you’re feeling, and making a *request* that might contribute to meeting your needs. Learning this new way of communicating, however, requires a willingness to step outside your comfort zone and be a beginner. At first, it involves a certain amount of risk taking, learning about yourself, and trusting that the “real you” (with all

your feelings and needs) has something worthwhile to contribute and communicate to others.

To learn NVC, it is essential that you practice. Learning a communication skill is not like learning history or math. It's not just about principles or theory; it needs to be *lived* every day. Only by applying NVC to your life will you see how it works, and from there you will gain confidence. Because practice is so essential, you will find many exercises in this book to support your practice. All of them are designed to be done more than once. When you revisit them, just think of a different situation that you would like to improve or better understand.

You may also wish to keep a journal while reading this book and learning to practice Nonviolent Communication. In it, you can take notes, record your own insights and reflections, and respond to exercises that ask you to observe and comment on your interactions. You can work on choices you're making or behavior you're interested in understanding and perhaps changing. You can also rewrite and rework situations from the past where you didn't communicate with the connection, awareness, or effectiveness you would have liked.

When you travel to another country, knowing even a few words of its language is helpful. Similarly, even though it takes time to integrate NVC into the fabric of your life, you will benefit as soon as you start. Simply learning to identify feelings and needs, the topics of the first two chapters, is powerful. Over time, as your confidence grows, you will find that you are able to respond effectively to the most challenging people and situations.

A Note About This Book and Language, Choice, and Inclusion

Because we want to include both genders, and for ease and simplicity, in this book, we do not use "he" to refer to an individual

person. Consistent with trends in English toward gender neutrality, we use the third person plural, “they.”

Also, while there are two authors of this book, when one of us speaks about our own experience, we use the first person singular pronoun, “I.” If you are curious about which author is speaking, Jane Marantz Connor lives near Washington, D.C., and includes stories in this book describing how NVC informs her interactions with her daughter and ex-husband, and at the university where she used to teach. Dian Killian lives in Brooklyn, New York, and gives examples of practicing NVC while riding her bicycle, from her teaching NVC and mediating with couples, and when dialoguing with her mother.

Another note on language usage: You may notice that we will frequently say, “I’m wanting,” not “I want,” or “You’re feeling” instead of “You feel.” This is because our feelings and needs are not static; they are always occurring in this specific moment. If we say, for example, “Do you feel happy?” this could suggest that you feel happy all the time. We know this is literally not the case, and by using the continuous tense, “Are you feeling happy?” we highlight this fact. This is a common practice among those who practice NVC; as you will see, the classic model follows this convention.

Your Journey Begins

Now it is time to begin your journey toward bringing greater understanding, compassion, and fulfillment into your life and the lives of those around you. The ten chapters that follow will give you a thorough orientation to the principles and practices of Nonviolent Communication that will guide you on this journey.

In chapter 1, we introduce you to a new way of looking at the world and begin to explore the full range of human feeling. Chapter 2 gets to the root of life: the needs that are our constant companions. In chapter 3, we introduce you to the power of empathy, which

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integrates the awareness of feelings and needs. Chapter 4 explores the differences between judgment and observation and the importance of seeing and describing, clearly and objectively, our experiences and the experiences of others.

Chapter 5 discusses the power of making requests that will best serve the cause of ensuring that needs are met. In chapter 6, a very important tool, self-empathy, is discussed. In chapter 7, we explore the fiery emotion of anger. Chapter 8 describes the protective use of force in situations where dialogue is not possible. In chapter 9, we learn to express compliments and gratitude without judgment. Finally, in chapter 10, we explore how to integrate NVC in your everyday life, including a colloquial (nonclassical) practice of the model.



It is our intention and wish that this book will inspire you to embrace and foster the qualities you most want to see in your life, and that through learning the techniques of NVC, you will enjoy ever-deepening connection: with yourself, your colleagues and friends, your loved ones, your community, and the world.