

HUMANIZING HEALTH CARE

Preface

Why I wrote this book

I wrote this book because I have seen such suffering among both patients and staff in every health care facility where I have worked. When my own personal journey of healing brought me in touch with Nonviolent Communication (NVC), I knew I had found a set of tools with tremendous potential to put an end to that suffering. As a health care professional, I continue to feel moved by the possibilities of healing the organizations we count on to heal us.

In our current systems, patients suffer because when they are the most vulnerable, the care they receive in hospitals is often mechanical and less than compassionate. All the focus is on a patient's illness and none is on their emotional needs. And more troubling yet is the way our hospitals are organized around the utterly false premise that our physical and emotional selves are two completely separate systems. When we act as if we can treat one without acknowledging the other, the results are damaging and sometimes even catastrophic.

Staff suffer, too, because they work in environments where the lighting is artificial, the noise level is constant, the work hours long, the staffing short, and emergencies involving people's lives are routine. In the midst of such fundamentally stressful environments, staff-to-staff interactions are often hostile and defensive. In settings where teamwork is necessary to deliver quality care and save lives, interpersonal conflicts and closed communication are more often the rule. Most of all, staff suffer because their highest purpose and most compassionate impulses to care and heal are diminished and corrupted by organizations that reinforce artificial power hierarchies and systematically devalue the emotional lives of everyone involved.

I hope that by sharing the tools that were instrumental to me in my own healing journey I can contribute to a more peaceful world and a more compassionate health care system. I am confident that these tools can create systems that serve humanity better by fostering connections rather than violence.

I believe this book will be useful to administrators committed to better patient outcomes, less staff burnout, and better staff relationships. I hope it will also serve the wonderful health care professionals who need to feel understood for their experiences. And, I believe this book will also be healing for patients who have utilized health care and haven't been able to articulate why and how their needs were not met.

Throughout this book, I share stories of specific challenges and solutions I've encountered in my work as a nurse on an involuntary psychiatric unit, and I use these to illustrate how important NVC could be to the health care industry. My belief is that if NVC can create harmony and peace in the emotionally charged environment of a psych unit, there are no limits to how effective it can be in all areas of the hospital.

There are simply no known physical or mental illnesses that cannot be better treated with compassion than without. And, when hospital staff are supported in expressing their natural compassion, speaking the truth, and articulating feelings and needs, the quality of care will—and does—skyrocket. We have it in our power to end the suffering that is so endemic to our health care organizations. What are we waiting for?