

NVC: Is it Effective in the Treatment of Sex Offenders?

By Tim Buckley

Nick was a model prisoner in his last decade at Oregon's maximum security prison. In for armed robbery, Nick had begun to turn around his life of drugs and violent crime before joining NVC as a student in the yearlong program. Over a period of five years, mentoring under a Certified NVC trainer, he mastered NVC and became an instructor in Oregon Prison Project's Peer Training program. In his final year at the penitentiary, he appeared to me as confident yet humble in his leadership role. While working full time as a mechanic in the auto shop, Nick had also volunteered as a mentor to mentally unstable inmates, assisting staff counselors with the teaching and practice of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). The state Parole Board let him out of his final years in prison because he presented a compelling case for accountability, honesty and emotional stability.

Less than a year after he was released, he walked into the southbound lane of Interstate 5 in the middle of the night and was killed after being struck by one car and run over by another. His mother said Nick had become hopeless and depressed, turning to drugs again to kill his pain. His loss still haunts, saddens and perplexes me.

Nick told me a number of times that NVC had saved his life while in prison. At 6 foot 6 and about 325 pounds, he was an impressive man. Because of the fact that he had a rape conviction in his past, he spent many years using his size, his booming voice and his fists to get his needs for respect and safety met. (Sex offenders are at the bottom of the pecking order in prisons everywhere.) Making a shift from bully to peacemaker wasn't without considerable challenges, but admiration for him grew as he continued to make choices in favor of harmony and empathy.

What were the NVC tools that gave Nick a chance to reset his life? And perhaps less obvious, what happened to erode that confidence and peace so quickly?

As those familiar with NVC will understand, learning skills of self reflection, emotional intelligence, empathy and honest communication help support “life affirming” choices, as Marshall Rosenberg would remind us. I believe the combination of things available through a study of NVC can help anyone, even those convicted of serious crimes, including sexual crimes.

As part of building awareness and a “consciousness” of NVC, we can recognize when we’ve gone from “life affirming” to “life alienating”, in Rosenberg’s words. From another perspective, NVC helps us quickly identify when we’ve slipped into what Stephen Karpman calls the “Drama Triangle”, where we take on the role of victim, perpetrator or rescuer. NVC helps build awareness of those “roles” and stories, and gives us tools to flip from drama into empowerment, where the victim can be a collaborator; a perpetrator becomes a challenger, and the rescuer a coach. The drama triangle relies on a power inequity: power over or power under. The empowerment triangle relies on “power with,” a win-win scenario in Rosenberg’s terms.

In the 48 week NVC curriculum, the third 12-week installment (weeks 25 – 36) entails an intensive sharing through the lens of restorative justice and NVC principles. Each student, in turn, talks about a “life changing event” (often their crime or crimes) while the rest of the class witnesses the often-emotional, sharing. The person describing the events is asked to avoid a rehash of familiar details, but rather to use their acquired skill of self empathy, for example, “What need was I trying to meet when I committed the crime? What strategy might I use today to meet those same needs?” The person also offers empathy aloud for those who were victims in their crime, including the offender’s family and friends, the victim’s family and the community.

By then, the class of 18 – 20 men has developed deep trust and respect for each other and the NVC process. Those witnessing have opportunity to ask questions, to challenge the thinking, to coach the person into a deeper understanding of their underlying needs, and to call the person out if there’s a sense the person sharing is hiding, rationalizing or minimizing. It’s called “the hot seat” for good reason, and knowing about

it ahead of time gives each student ample time to prepare psychologically and emotionally.

It takes additional courage for someone convicted of a sexual offense to own up to that in the NVC sharing context. Nick was prepared to get the crap kicked out of him once the news he had shared his rape event with the class. Despite a pledge of confidentiality in each class, news like this is often leaked anyway, and some who shared their sex-related crime were threatened or severely beaten. In my eight years in a variety of classes, two such inmates requested transfers to another prison for fear of their lives.

In prison, Nick's life was somewhat predictable. Whatever emotional upsets occurred could be balanced with his reliable empathy network, his NVC teaching and practice group activities, his mindfulness practice and DBT mentoring. He rejoiced in relating instances where his NVC skills made a difference in the outcomes of upsetting events, whether in his cell block, at work or at the hands of unkind treatment by corrections staff. He even shared how he handled himself peacefully when confronted in the yard by those who objected to his having talked about his rape in class. He did it by guessing the feelings and needs of his accuser, and though the man had no NVC experience, he went away without violence, probably because his feelings were acknowledged, and maybe because Nick was a helluva lot bigger than him.

After Nick was released to rural Timberville, a tiny town in a county with few reentry services, he found himself in an environment where his stress rose quickly and old habits (defensiveness, aggression, drugs) returned. He was living with his parents, and for a short time, living under the same roof as his drug-addicted daughter and her infant. In other words, it was not an ideal situation, but the law requires released felons to return to the county where they "fell."

His parole officer made a decision to require Nick back into sexual offender treatment, even though his rape offense had taken place more than 30 year before and he had hadn't had a sexual offenses since. It didn't help that the closest thing to a sex offender treatment provider in Grants Pass was a person who teaches anger management for a living.

Other stresses included being on a short leash with community corrections, having to report frequently and subject to random urinalysis tests, having to wear a GPS ankle bracelet at all times, being prohibited from being in areas where minors and having his name shared publically as a sex offender. With a job, he might have tried to find an apartment on his own, although few landlords will rent to those with a felony sex conviction. With a job, he would have been able to buy a car and to visit others in the NVC community whose support and empathy would be helpful.

Had Nick found effective sex offender treatment available, he would have found himself in some familiar territory, simply because a lot of treatment covers areas that overlap with NVC principles.

Marshall Rosenberg would probably say that, "*Sex offender* is a diagnosis, an evaluation, a label". In restorative justice fashion, he would then ask the criminal, as well as the survivors of crime, how the crime has impacted them, how they feel about it and what needs were not met. This is a strategy commonly used in effective sex offender treatment. Quickly disappearing are the old strategies of more punishment and heaps of shame.

Criminologists refer to "thinking errors" and treatment providers teach their clients how to gain awareness of their thinking errors, their "triggers," and how to create strategies to avoid them. The "evidence based" model here is called CBT, or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Therapists use CBT to help clients be more discerning, to consider "wrong" and "right" before acting, developing more "impulse control."

It's clear we all have thinking errors, just as we all find ourselves in the drama triangle occasionally. NVC helps us identify our thinking habits and how to reframe our behavior around different, life-affirming strategies to meet needs. In this respect, NVC includes elements used in sex offender treatment.

Sex offenders, as NVC has taught us, are trying to meet needs when they act out in violent ways. Rape, or child molestation, is not a life-affirming

way to meet one's need for sexual expression, intimacy, connection, or belonging.

A recent adaptation of CBT is Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). While calling attention to thinking errors, it also asks the client to see the world in less stark terms. Instead of right and wrong, black and white, DBT paints the world as one filled with paradox, uncertainty and apparent contradictions.

NVC has a bit of DBT ingrained. Instead of good and bad, it asks clients to review their behavior and the outcomes, then to see if those needs could be met in life-affirming ways, creating win-win strategies without any victim. Even in situations where we have competing needs in play, NVC gives us ways to feel our way into each, peel them apart and discern which need is more "alive."

Perhaps at the core of the practice and the consciousness of NVC is empathy. When empathy is truly alive, it is less likely that there will be perpetrators and victims. Many sex offender treatment providers agree with this principle. Thus, in treatment, the provider offers and teaches empathy as a way to meet needs for trust, connection, growth and learning.

As part of the yearlong NVC prison curriculum, the advanced "core beliefs" process is also taught, along the lines that NVC trainers Robert Gonzales, Susan Skye and others have pioneered. Once in touch with a core belief - a thinking error that would have us conclude that "I'm unlovable", or "The world is out to get me." - we can begin to empathize with our attempts to meet important needs. We can also see our victims as people, dear people, not as objects meant for our gratification. Effective sex offender treatment, often lasting for more than 3 years (individual weekly counseling and frequent group meetings), also delves into the motivations beneath our life-alienating behavior.

In the end, NVC also helps us to build more capacity for creating choices, rather than acting on impulse. We have more resilience when stress and conflict arise, and have more skills with which to move in the direction of life-affirming choices to meet needs. And because in NVC we stress that

everyone's needs have merit, having equal value, it gives us pause before using our will, our anger, our strength and our urges to exert our demands (for sex, for money, for respect, etc.) upon others.

While NVC offers a range of opportunities for personal growth, it doesn't guarantee success, as Nick found out. As his life spiraled out of control, his connection to the NVC community absent, he retreated to a dark corner in the drama triangle and began self medicating. He had needs for belonging, for support, for empathy, for connection, for understanding and for being heard. Apparently, he was unable to meet those needs on his own. It appears too that those needs went unmet in Timberville, after years in prison where those same needs were (ironically, perhaps) being met.

The director of youth corrections in Oregon told me that "the growth people make while incarcerated is commendable, but if the community into which they return is not willing or able to accept the person, then it becomes even worse than prison...they have been declared free but are restricted, even shunned by those who once accepted them. Without connection, without a sense of belonging, it's very difficult to make a successful transition." This is more the case for those who've been convicted of sexual crimes, regardless of the seriousness of the crime.

For this reason, part of the Oregon Prison Project's strategy is to teach NVC in every county, in every community. In order to create life-affirming opportunities in our towns and cities, citizens and the organizations they occupy may wish to learn that their need for safety can be met in ways besides incarcerating everyone who is suspect and shunning everyone who has had incarceration in their past.

Author bio.

Tim Buckley has been teaching NVC in Salem, Oregon, since 2003. In 2010, he was asked to join the teaching team of the Oregon Prison Project and has since taught in two state prisons and a county jail reentry center. The volunteer prison work led to contract work with the Oregon Department of Corrections, working with staff on emotional intelligence, resiliency and self care. Likewise, other social service organizations have

employed Tim to teach NVC as part of a larger “trauma informed care” curriculum.

A career freelance writer, Tim co-authored a book released in 2018 called SO, The New Scarlet Letters. It is a book about sex offenses, their treatment and our challenges. His NVC work in prison is cited as being complimentary with the work of his co-author Marilyn Callahan, who pioneered sex offender treatment beginning in the 1950s. For those interested in contacting him: 2tbucktoo@gmail.com. For those interested in the book, you can find sample chapters and reviews on Amazon, <https://www.amazon.com/New-Scarlet-Letters-Offenders-Treatment-ebook/dp/B079CPWB2R#customerReviews>