

Connecting Compassionately With Ourselves

Let us become the change we seek in the world.

—Mahatma Gandhi

We have seen how NVC contributes to relationships with friends and family, at work and in the political arena. Its most crucial application, however, may be in the way we treat ourselves. When we are internally violent toward ourselves, it is difficult to be genuinely compassionate toward others.

NVC's most important use may be in developing self-compassion.

Remembering the Specialness of What We Are

In the play *A Thousand Clowns* by Herb Gardner, the protagonist refuses to release his twelve-year-old nephew to child-welfare authorities, declaring, “I want him to get to know exactly the special thing he is or else he won’t notice it when it starts to go. I want him to stay awake . . . I want to be sure he sees all the wild possibilities. I want him to know it’s worth all the trouble just to give the world a little goosing when you get the chance. And I want him to know the subtle, sneaky, important reason why he was born a human being and not a chair.”

I am gravely concerned that many of us have lost awareness of “the special thing” we are; we have forgotten the “subtle, sneaky,

important reason” the uncle so passionately wanted his nephew to know. When critical self-concepts prevent us from seeing the beauty in ourselves, we lose connection with the divine energy that is our source. Conditioned to view ourselves as objects—objects full of shortcomings—is it any wonder that many of us end up relating violently to ourselves?

We use NVC to evaluate ourselves in ways that engender growth rather than self-hatred.

An important area where this violence can be replaced with compassion is in our moment-to-moment evaluation of ourselves. Since we want whatever we do to lead to the enrichment of life, it is critical to know how to evaluate events and conditions in ways that help us learn and make ongoing choices that serve us. Unfortunately, the way we’ve been trained to evaluate ourselves often promotes more self-hatred than learning.

Evaluating Ourselves When We’ve Been Less Than Perfect

In a routine workshop activity, I ask participants to recall a recent occasion when they did something they wish they hadn’t. We then look at how they spoke to themselves immediately after having made what is referred in common language as a “mistake” or “error.” Typical statements were: “That was dumb!” “How could you do such a stupid thing?” “What’s wrong with you?” “You’re always messing up!” “That’s selfish!”

These speakers had been taught to judge themselves in ways that imply that what they did was wrong or bad; their self-admonishment implicitly assumes that they deserve to suffer for what they’ve done. It is tragic that so many of us get enmeshed in self-hatred rather than benefit from our mistakes, which show us our limitations and guide us towards growth.

Even when we sometimes do “learn a lesson” from mistakes for which we judge ourselves harshly, I worry about the nature of the energy behind that kind of change and learning. I’d like change

to be stimulated by a clear desire to enrich life for ourselves or for others rather than by destructive energies such as shame or guilt.

If the way we evaluate ourselves leads us to feel shame, and we consequently change our behavior, we are allowing our growing and learning to be guided by self-hatred. Shame is a form of self-hatred, and actions taken in reaction to shame are not free and joyful acts. Even if our intention is to behave with more kindness and sensitivity, if people sense shame or guilt behind our actions, they are less likely to appreciate what we do than if we are motivated purely by the human desire to contribute to life.

In our language there is a word with enormous power to create shame and guilt. This violent word, which we commonly use to evaluate ourselves, is so deeply ingrained in our consciousness that many of us would have trouble imagining how to live without it. It is the word *should*, as in “I should have known better” or “I shouldn’t have done that.” Most of the time when we use this word with ourselves, we resist learning, because *should* implies that there is no choice. Human beings, when hearing any kind of demand, tend to resist because it threatens our autonomy—our strong need for choice. We have this reaction to tyranny even when it’s internal tyranny in the form of a *should*.

Avoid shoulding yourself!

A similar expression of internal demand occurs in the following self-evaluation: “What I’m doing is just terrible. I really must do something about it!” Think for a moment of all the people you’ve heard say, “I really should give up smoking,” or, “I really have to do something about exercising more.” They keep saying what they “must” do and they keep resisting doing it, because human beings were not meant to be slaves. We were not meant to succumb to the dictates of *should* and *have to*, whether they come from outside or inside of ourselves. And if we do yield and submit to these demands, our actions arise from an energy that is devoid of life-giving joy.

Translating Self-Judgments and Inner Demands

When we communicate with ourselves on a regular basis through inner judgment, blame, and demand, it's not surprising that our self-concept gives in to feeling more like a chair than a human being. A basic premise of NVC is that whenever we imply that someone is wrong or bad, what we are really saying is that he or she is not acting in harmony with our needs. If the person we are judging happens to be ourselves, what we are saying is, "I myself am not behaving in harmony with my own needs." I am convinced that if we learn to evaluate ourselves in terms of

Self-judgments, like all judgments, are tragic expressions of unmet needs.

whether and how well our needs are being fulfilled, we are much more likely to learn from the evaluation.

Our challenge then, when we are doing something that is not enriching life, is to evaluate ourselves moment by moment in a way that inspires change both (1) in the direction of where we would like to go, and (2) out of respect and compassion for ourselves, rather than out of self-hatred, guilt or shame.

NVC Mourning

After a lifetime of schooling and socialization, it is probably too late for most of us to train our minds to think purely in terms of what we need and value from moment to moment. However, just as we have learned to translate judgments when conversing with others, we can train ourselves to recognize judgmental self-talk and to immediately focus our attention on the underlying needs.

For example, if we find ourselves reacting reproachfully to something we did ("Look, you just messed up again!"), we can quickly stop and ask ourselves, "What unmet need of mine is being expressed through this moralistic judgment?" When we do connect to the need—and there may be several layers of needs—we will notice a remarkable shift in our bodies. Instead of the shame, guilt, or depression we likely feel when criticizing ourselves for having "messed up again," we will experience any number of

other feelings. Whether it's sadness, frustration, disappointment, fear, grief, or some other feeling, we have been endowed by nature with these feelings for a purpose: they mobilize us to pursue and fulfill what we need or value. The impact of these feelings on our spirit and bodies is substantially different from the disconnection that is brought on by guilt, shame, and depression.

Mourning in NVC is the process of fully connecting with the unmet needs and the feelings that are generated when we have been less than perfect. It is an experience of regret, but regret that helps us learn from what we have done without blaming or hating ourselves. We see how our behavior ran counter to our own needs and values, and we open ourselves to feelings that arise out of that awareness. When our consciousness is focused on what we need, we are naturally stimulated toward creative possibilities for how to get that need met. In contrast, the moralistic judgments we use when blaming ourselves tend to obscure such possibilities and to perpetuate a state of self-punishment.

NVC mourning: connecting with the feelings and unmet needs stimulated by past actions we now regret.

Self-Forgiveness

We follow up on the process of mourning with self-forgiveness. Turning our attention to the part of the self which chose to act in the way that led to the present situation, we ask ourselves, "When I behaved in the way which I now regret, what need of mine was I trying to meet?" I believe that human beings are always acting in the service of needs and values. This is true whether the action does or does not meet the need, or whether it's one we end up celebrating or regretting.

When we listen empathically to ourselves, we will be able to hear the underlying need. Self-forgiveness occurs the moment this empathic connection is made. Then we are able to recognize how our choice was an attempt to serve life, even as the mourning process teaches us how it fell short of fulfilling our needs.

**NVC self-forgiveness:
connecting with the need
we were trying to meet
when we took the action
that we now regret.**

An important aspect of self-compassion is to be able to empathically hold both parts of ourselves—the self that regrets a past action and the self that took the action in the first place. The process of mourning and self-forgiveness frees us in the direction

of learning and growing. In connecting moment by moment to our needs, we increase our creative capacity to act in harmony with them.

The Lesson of the Polka-Dotted Suit

I would like to illustrate the process of mourning and self-forgiveness by recalling a personal event. The day before an important workshop, I had bought a light gray summer suit to wear. At the end of the well-attended workshop, I was swarmed by participants asking for my signature, address, and other information. With time closing in on another appointment, I hastened to attend to the requests of the participants, signing and scribbling on the many bits of paper thrust in front of me. As I rushed out the door, I stuck my pen—uncapped—in the pocket of my new suit. Once outside, I discovered to my horror that instead of the nice light gray suit, I now had a polka-dotted suit!

For twenty minutes I was brutal with myself: “How could you be so careless? What a stupid thing to do!” I had just ruined a brand-new suit: if ever I needed compassion and understanding, this was the time, yet there I was responding to myself in a way that left me feeling worse than ever.

Fortunately—after only twenty minutes—I noticed what I was doing. I stopped, looked for the need of mine that was unmet by having left the pen uncapped, and asked myself, “What need lies behind my judging myself as ‘careless’ and ‘stupid?’”

Immediately I saw that it was to take better care of myself: to have given more attention to my own needs while I was rushing

to address everyone else's needs. As soon as I touched that part of myself and connected to the deep longing to be more aware and caring of my own needs, my feelings shifted. There was a release of tension in my body as the anger, shame, and guilt I was harboring toward myself dissipated. I fully mourned the ruined suit and uncapped pen as I opened to feelings of sadness arising along with the yearning to take better care of myself.

Next I shifted my attention to the need I was meeting when I slipped the uncapped pen into my pocket. I recognized how much I valued care and consideration for other people's needs. Of course, in taking such good care of other people's needs, I had not taken the time to do the same for myself. But instead of blame, I felt a wave of compassion for myself as I realized that even my rushing and putting the pen away unthinkingly had come out of serving my own need to respond to others in a caring way!

In that compassionate place, I am able to hold both needs: in one hand, to respond in a caring way to others' needs, and in the other, to be aware of and take better care of my own needs. On becoming conscious of both needs, I can imagine ways of behaving differently in similar situations and arriving at solutions more resourcefully than if I lose that consciousness in a sea of self-judgment.

We are compassionate with ourselves when we are able to embrace all parts of ourselves and recognize the needs and values expressed by each part.

Don't Do Anything That Isn't Play!

In addition to the process of mourning and self-forgiveness, another aspect of self-compassion I emphasize is in the energy that's behind whatever action we take. When I advise, "Don't do anything that isn't play!" some take me to be radical, even insane. I earnestly believe, however, that an important form of self-compassion is to make choices motivated purely by our desire to contribute to life rather than out of fear, guilt, shame, duty, or obligation. When we are conscious of the life-enriching purpose

We want to take action out of the desire to contribute to life rather than out of fear, guilt, shame, or obligation.

behind an action we take, when the sole energy that motivates us is simply to make life wonderful for others and ourselves, then even hard work has an element of play in it. Correspondingly, an otherwise joyful activity performed out of obligation, duty, fear, guilt, or shame will lose its joy

and eventually engender resistance.

In Chapter 2, we considered replacing language that implies lack of choice with language that acknowledges choice. Many years ago I began to engage in an activity which significantly enlarged the pool of joy and happiness available to my life, while diminishing depression, guilt, and shame. I offer it here as a possible way to deepen our compassion for ourselves, to help us live our lives out of joyous play by staying grounded in a clear awareness of the life-enriching need behind everything we do.

Translating “Have to” to “Choose to”

Step 1

What do you do in your life that you don’t experience as playful? List on a piece of paper all those things that you tell yourself you have to do. List any activity you dread but do anyway because you perceive yourself to have no choice.

When I first reviewed my own list, just seeing how long it was gave me insight as to why so much of my time was spent not enjoying life. I noticed how many ordinary, daily things I was doing by tricking myself into believing that I had to do them.

The first item on my list was “write clinical reports.” I hated writing these reports, yet I was spending at least an hour of agony over them every day. My second item was “drive the children’s car pool to school.”

Step 2

After completing your list, clearly acknowledge to yourself that you are doing these things because you choose to do them, not

because you have to. Insert the words “*I choose to . . .*” in front of each item you listed.

I recall my own resistance to this step. “Writing clinical reports,” I insisted to myself, “is not something I choose to do! I have to do it. I’m a clinical psychologist. I have to write these reports.”

Step 3

After having acknowledged that you choose to do a particular activity, get in touch with the intention behind your choice by completing the statement, *I choose to . . . because I want . . .*

At first I fumbled to identify what I wanted from writing clinical reports. I had already determined, several months earlier, that the reports did not serve my clients enough to justify the time they were taking, so why was I continuing to invest so much energy in their preparation? Finally I realized that I was choosing to write the reports solely because I wanted the income they provided. As soon as I recognized this, I never wrote another clinical report. I can’t tell you how joyful I feel just thinking of how many clinical reports I haven’t written since that moment thirty-five years ago! When I realized that money was my primary motivation, I immediately saw that I could find other ways to take care of myself financially, and that in fact, I’d rather scavenge in garbage cans for food than write another clinical report.

The next item on my list of unjoyful tasks was driving the children to school. When I examined the reason behind that chore, however, I felt appreciation for the benefits my children received from attending their school. They could easily walk to the neighborhood school, but their own school was far more in harmony with my educational values. I continued to drive, but with a different energy; instead of “Oh, darn, I have to drive the car pool today,” I was conscious of my purpose, which was for my children to have a quality of education that was very dear to me. Of course I sometimes needed to remind myself two or three times during the drive to refocus my mind on what purpose my action was serving.

With every choice you make, be conscious of what need it serves.

Cultivating Awareness of the Energy Behind Our Actions

As you explore the statement, “I choose to . . . because I want . . .,” you may discover—as I did with the children’s car pool—the important values behind the choices you’ve made. I am convinced that after we gain clarity regarding the need being served by our actions, we can experience those actions as play even when they involve hard work, challenge, or frustration.

For some items on your list, however, you might uncover one or several of the following motivations:

(1) FOR MONEY

Money is a major form of extrinsic reward in our society. Choices prompted by a desire for reward are costly: they deprive us of the joy in life that comes with actions grounded in the clear intention to contribute to a human need. Money is not a “need” as we define it in NVC; it is one of countless strategies that may be selected to address a need.

(2) FOR APPROVAL

Like money, approval from others is a form of extrinsic reward. Our culture has educated us to hunger for reward. We attended schools that used extrinsic means to motivate us to study; we grew up in homes where we were rewarded for being good little boys and girls, and were punished when our caretakers judged us to be otherwise. Thus, as adults, we easily trick ourselves into believing that life consists of doing things for reward; we are addicted to getting a smile, a pat on the back, and people’s verbal judgments that we are a “good person,” “good parent,” “good citizen,” “good worker,” “good friend,” and so forth. We do things to get people to like us and avoid things that may lead people to dislike or punish us.

I find it tragic that we work so hard to buy love and assume that we must deny ourselves and do for others in order to be liked. In fact, when we do things solely in the spirit of enhancing life, we will find others appreciating us. Their appreciation, however, is only a feedback mechanism confirming that our efforts had the

intended effect. The recognition that we have chosen to use our power to serve life and have done so successfully brings us the genuine joy of celebrating ourselves in a way that approval from others can never offer.

(3) TO ESCAPE PUNISHMENT

Some of us pay income tax primarily to avoid punishment. As a consequence, we are likely to approach that yearly ritual with a degree of resentment. I recall, however, from my childhood how differently my father and grandfather felt about paying taxes. They had immigrated to the United States from Russia and were desirous of supporting a government they believed was protecting people in a way that the czar had not. Imagining the many people whose welfare was being served by their tax money, they felt earnest pleasure as they sent their checks to the U.S. government.

(4) TO AVOID SHAME

There may be some tasks we choose to do just to avoid shame. We know that if we don't do them, we'll end up suffering severe self-judgment, hearing our own voice telling us there is something wrong or stupid about us. If we do something stimulated solely by the urge to avoid shame, we will generally end up detesting it.

(5) TO AVOID GUILT

In other instances, we may think, "If I don't do this, people will be disappointed in me." We are afraid we'll end up feeling guilty for failing to fulfill other people's expectations of us. There is a world of difference between doing something for others in order to avoid guilt and doing it out of a clear awareness of our own need to contribute to the happiness of other human beings. The first is a world filled with misery; the second is a world filled with play.

Be conscious of actions motivated by the desire for money or approval, and by fear, shame, or guilt. Know the price you pay for them.

(6) TO SATISFY A SENSE OF DUTY

When we use language which denies choice (for example, words such as *should*, *have to*, *ought*, *must*, *can't*, *supposed to*, etc.), our behaviors arise out of a vague sense of guilt, duty, or obligation.

I consider this to be the most socially dangerous and personally unfortunate of all the ways we act when we're cut off from our needs.

In Chapter 2 we saw how the concept of *Amtssprache* allowed Adolf Eichmann and his colleagues to send tens of thousands of people to their deaths without feeling emotionally affected or personally responsible. When we speak a language that denies choice, we forfeit the life in ourselves for a robotlike mentality that disconnects us from our own core.

The most dangerous of all behaviors may consist of doing things "because we're supposed to."

After examining the list of items you have generated, you may decide to stop doing certain things in the same spirit that I chose to forego writing clinical reports. As radical as it may seem, it is possible to do things only out of play. I believe that to the degree that we engage moment by moment in the playfulness of enriching life—motivated solely by the desire for enriching life—to that degree are we being compassionate with ourselves.

Summary

The most crucial application of NVC may be in the way we treat ourselves. When we make mistakes, instead of getting caught up in moralistic self-judgments, we can use the process of NVC mourning and self-forgiveness to show us where we can grow. By assessing our behaviors in terms of our own unmet needs, the impetus for change comes not out of shame, guilt, anger, or depression, but out of the genuine desire to contribute to our own and others' well-being.

We also cultivate self-compassion by consciously choosing in daily life to act only in service to our own needs and values rather than out of duty, for extrinsic rewards, or to avoid guilt, shame, and punishment. If we review the joyless acts to which we currently subject ourselves and make the translation from "have to" to "choose to," we will discover more play and integrity in our lives.