

What is Nonviolent Communication?

By Myra Walden

Nonviolent Communication is based on the principle of ahimsa — the natural state of compassion when no violence is present in the heart.

MARSHALL ROSENBERG

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a way of being in the world. Its purpose is to serve life and to create connection in such a way that everyone's needs can be met through natural care. When living in — and relating from — NVC consciousness, we embody the following attitudes.

Self-Connection

We relate to ourselves and the world from a still place within — a place of compassion, truth, clarity, and peace. To maintain self-connection, NVC proposes a daily process known as “Remembering.” Examples of Remembering practices include meditation, prayer, inspirational readings, poetry, inspirational music, and quiet time in nature.

Honest Expression

We express ourselves vulnerably and without criticism or blame. We reveal our feelings and needs and ask for what we want, without making demands.

Empathic Presence

We listen to others with a silent mind and an open heart. Our sole purpose in such listening is to connect with the speaker by understanding their meaning, feelings, and needs without judgment. We attempt to remain empathically present even when we are being targeted with criticism, blame, and other such forms of communication.

Self-Empathy

When we fail at empathic presence, becoming angry or otherwise unable to listen with an open heart, we give ourselves empathy. We take time out to vent our judgments in the privacy of our minds. We identify and connect with the unmet needs in a given interaction, and we mourn the pain of our unmet needs. This process enables reconnection with our essence — love and compassion. Once we experience an organic shift toward a calmer and clearer mind, we ask ourselves what we can do to fulfill the unmet needs in the situation.

We also use self-empathy to mourn and heal from disappointment or loss, to celebrate needs that have been met, or simply to understand ourselves more clearly and discern the next steps toward meeting our needs.

Means of Influence

We attempt to influence others by revealing our feelings and needs vulnerably and making requests, rather than through coercion. We want others to contribute to us out of natural giving, and never out of fear, guilt, shame, duty, desire for reward, or to buy love. Because we care about the needs of others as we do our own, we are committed to seeking solutions that can meet the needs of all involved.

The Process

Marshall Rosenberg conceived of NVC and developed a process, a roadmap, that enables us to enter that consciousness. When we are first learning NVC, the process teaches us the steps along the path to reach our destination — self-connection and connection with the other. Once there, we no longer need the roadmap to navigate. All we say and do will serve life. And when we step out of NVC consciousness, we can use the roadmap to find our way back.

There are five elements to the process of Nonviolent Communication. When experiencing disconnection from others, we can use this list to see if all the elements are in alignment.

1. Consciousness Am I self-connected? Am I expressing myself honestly and vulnerably? Am I listening empathically? Am I valuing the needs of

others as my own? Am I committed to seeking solutions that can meet everyone's needs?

2. Thought Is there judgment or blame in my awareness? Am I angry or resentful in this moment as I engage with the other?

3. Language Are my words free of criticism and blame?

4. Communication Is my non-verbal communication — tone of voice and body language — congruent with my words?

5. Use of power Do I want to overpower this person to get what I want? Is my request really a demand in disguise? Am I prepared to hear no, listen empathically, and maintain connection? Am I willing to stay in the dialogue until we find a solution that satisfies all involved?

The Fundamental Concepts

The following are some concepts and principles that are fundamental to NVC.

Universal Human Needs

The concept of *needs* is the cornerstone of Nonviolent Communication. Needs are the conditions human beings require in order to thrive. These include physical needs, such as water and air, as well as intangible ones, like respect, empathic understanding, freedom, meaning, and dignity. Because we consider them to be universal, expressing our own needs and acknowledging the needs of others enables us to create common ground by connecting at a deep place of the human experience. We believe that all our actions — anything anyone ever does — are attempts to meet needs. With this realization in mind, we are able to understand others' actions, however baffling, and transform judgment into empathic understanding. In a safe environment, free of judgment and blame, it is easier to find solutions that can meet everyone's needs.

Connection First

When conflict arises, we seek empathic connection before solutions. Connection is psychological contact — two people experiencing what is alive in each other

simultaneously. We trust that in the space of heart connection we have access to a reservoir of creativity where we can find options that meet everyone's needs. In the context of connection, disagreements can be resolved nonviolently.

The Need for Contribution

We believe that contributing to the well-being of others is one of the most powerful forces of human motivation. At times we disconnect from our need for contribution because we have been conditioned to think that our unmet needs are the other person's fault — and blame fosters a desire for punishment. To restore our need for contribution, we can ask someone to listen to us with empathy, or we can engage in self-empathy to help us reconnect with our compassionate nature.

Interdependence

We believe that *the well-being of all* is a fundamental human need. We believe that human beings are interdependent, that we need one another to live and to thrive. What affects one affects all. We need others to build the houses we live in, grow the fruit and vegetables we eat, and sew the clothes we wear. We need carpenters, doctors, janitors, and teachers. Our environmental, health, and economic systems affect the global community in visible and invisible but important ways.

Value Judgments

NVC invites us to judge actions and situations by determining whether or not they are in harmony with our values, rather than making judgments. For instance, rather than saying "violence is wrong," we might say "I value the resolution of conflicts through safe and peaceful means." Nonviolent Communication posits that right/wrong judgments — thoughts and words of criticism and blame — are an important source of violence in families, societies, and the world. Judging people as "bad" or "wrong" leads to anger, and anger often leads to violence. Furthermore, judgments may prompt violence through a sense of justice—we feel justified in lashing out if we tell ourselves that the person deserves it. For instance, we may think "terrorists deserve to die." Or more simply, we might say "I didn't want to hit you, but you asked for it."

The Protective Use of Force

When someone acts in a way that compromises safety, we use force as a means of protection but never as punishment. We do not cause suffering to teach

someone a lesson. Instead of using retribution to reinstate social order, Nonviolent Communication proposes education and restoration.

The Realms

Nonviolent Communication consciousness and the process to achieve it apply to three realms of life.

Personal

We employ the NVC process to liberate ourselves from cultural conditioning, to heal the wounds of life, to transform judgments into understanding of unmet needs, and to transform anger, guilt, shame, depression, and fear into life-serving emotions that increase inner peace and inner freedom. We identify and connect with our needs in order to build more satisfying relationships and more fulfilling lives.

Interpersonal

We relate to others with empathy, honesty, mutuality, and care, thus increasing trust, understanding, and cooperation in relationships. Empathy and vulnerable honesty are the essential elements of intimacy.

Societal

We live NVC principles and implement the process in our efforts to contribute to a better world. Our social justice work is fueled not by anger but by gratitude. Its principles are consistent with nonviolence as taught by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

We believe that these realms are intertwined. Our state of mind and heart influences how we relate to others. How we relate to people can set in motion a chain of actions and reactions that impact society in unforeseen ways — for better or for worse.

NVC is consonant with the highest principles of the major world religions. In this way it embodies a form of universal wisdom.

NVC's Past, Present, and Future

Background

Marshall Rosenberg developed Nonviolent Communication in the 1960s as a tool to implement the desegregation of schools in the United States. He was motivated to help people connect with their own humanity and that of others respectfully, compassionately, peacefully, and with joy. For over fifty years, he traveled indefatigably, sharing NVC across the globe.

Network

The Center for Nonviolent Communication is an international, nonprofit organization based in Texas, dedicated to the dissemination of Nonviolent Communication in the world. For further information visit cnvc.org or contact cnvc@cnvc.org

Currently, over 600 certified trainers share NVC in schools, health care systems, non-profit organizations, prisons, corporations, churches, communities, and in the political arena in over 65 countries. If you are inspired by Nonviolent Communication and would like to be part of a vibrant, international community of peacemakers who share NVC in the world, we invite you to become a certified trainer. For more information, visit cnvc.org

Learning

There are various ways to learn NVC. An effective way is attending an International Intensive Training (IIT) — an immersion workshop where people from multiple countries gather for nine days to learn NVC in a compassionate community. Most people report the experience to be meaningful, inspiring, and transformative. For information about upcoming IITs, visit cnvc.org

*Nonviolent Communication is a revolutionary way of
being in the world that is peaceful and more humane.*

MARGE WITTY