

2.1 □ Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a compassionate approach to relating to yourself and others based on feelings and needs.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), created by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, is an approach to relationships that views feelings and needs as the basic drivers of all human behavior. It encourages us to move away from automatic patterns of behavior to get what we want and instead connect first on the level of feelings and needs. Connecting in this way can open us up to new options and enable us to act in ways that will better meet everyone's needs, as well as build more harmonious relationships.

The core assumption of NVC is that all humans are driven by the same basic feelings and needs, which come alive within us at different times in our lives. With NVC, needs are universal, often described by a single word—for example, sustenance, freedom, safety, sexual expression, love, rest, space, quiet, and many more. When our needs are fulfilled, we are satisfied and experience pleasant feelings like calm, inspiration, appreciation, confidence, or relief. When a need is unmet, however, we experience unpleasant feelings such as fear, sadness, anger, anxiety, or exhaustion. Instead of suppressing these negative emotions, we can explore them and discover the needs behind them, which allows us to attempt to meet them.

Our needs drive our feelings, which in turn drive our behavior. Our feelings push us to choose strategies that we hope will meet our needs and thus stop unhappy feelings and bring about pleasant feelings. Usually, this happens at an unconscious level, and we are unaware of both the needs and feelings that drive us. When we get in touch with our feelings and needs, we open up to new strategies that can better meet everyone's needs or to existing strategies that previously seemed unworkable.

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When people feel disconnected from themselves or others—at work, within personal relationships, etc.—they often feel emotional pain and emptiness. They may want to live more authentically, express themselves more deeply, or experience more love, freedom, and safety in their lives. NVC helps us achieve deeper and more fulfilling connections with ourselves and others and transform conflicts into win-win scenarios.

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- NVC allows people to forge deeper connections by encouraging them to connect via universal feelings and needs.
- By focusing on underlying needs instead of arguing over specific ways of action (strategies), fresh, creative solutions naturally arise.
- You can use NVC to connect with yourself and identify and fully experience your feelings and needs, which can have therapeutic value.
- NVC helps you replace fear, shame, and judgment with acceptance, compassion, and an open heart.

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- NVC differs so much from the ways many have been taught to relate to the world that it can feel alien or utopic. It can take a while to feel comfortable using NVC.
- Beginners to NVC often sound mechanical, and it can take a while for practitioners to integrate its essence while retaining a pattern of speech that sounds natural.
- Newcomers to NVC often try to force it down people's throats, which can be very off-putting and counterproductive.

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NVC is a broad approach with many different applications. It can help people live more fulfilling, connected lives, as well as connect them to themselves and other people.

According to NVC, every person is always trying to meet their needs. Conflict arises when one or more people believe that one of their needs is threatened by the needs or actions of another. In fact, people are usually unaware of their needs and instead insist on implementing a particular strategy without understanding what deeper needs that strategy serves for them. In these situations, people often miss strategies that would better meet everyone's needs and instead have tunnel vision on one or two readily available strategies.

NVC suggests that we practice awareness of our interpretations and judgments and try to base our communication with others on concrete observations. One way to do this is to find something objective in the physical world that both parties can agree on. When we stop focusing on judgments and who is at fault and instead focus on how we can agree on facts, we can move the conversation toward empathy. When we're not attached to specific strategies, we can move from making demands to true requests that respect the other's autonomy, accepting the possibility that the other person may refuse our requests.

With practice, we can learn to see and empathize with one another's needs, which helps us connect. From a connected place, it's easier to look for a peaceful solution together. Below is an example of how to use NVC for conflict resolution, but it can be useful in a wide variety of situations.

Let's say a woman comes home late from work and is disappointed to find a sink full of dirty dishes. Her husband has been caring for their kids all day and is glad she's home because he wants her to wash the dishes. She's tired from working all day and doesn't want to do the dishes right away. Her husband is stressed from family obligations, and he doesn't have the energy to do the dishes himself.

One strategy they could take to solve the problem of who will wash the dishes is to allow their fatigue and frustration to rule their behavior and argue over who should do them. But that approach could turn ugly quickly, sparking more difficult feelings and behavior.

If the woman wants to approach the situation from an NVC perspective, she could begin with an unarguable fact: there are dirty dishes in the sink and neither she nor her husband wants to wash them. She might think it's unfair that he expects her to wash them, and he might have similar thoughts about her. Normally, they would argue about this. But tonight, she has a moment of insight. She realizes that they're caught in the same loop again and that their interpretations of the situation (e.g., that it's unfair of him to expect her to wash them, and vice versa) are not objective truths.

Seeking both a connection with her husband and a quick resolution to the dishes situation, she pauses for a second. She recognizes that she's just tired and cranky from a long day, and her husband is also exhausted. She reminds herself that it's important to both of them to have a clean home. Maybe her husband wouldn't mind too much if she did the dishes first thing in the morning. She acknowledges that both of them are tired, and asks if he would mind if she did the dishes first thing the following day. He nods in agreement, and they snuggle on the couch to watch some TV.

NVC is not a surefire way to avoid arguments, but it can be an effective strategy to defuse them and reach mutually agreeable conclusions. The point is that it's often more efficient and fulfilling to first reach a connection regarding feelings and needs before pursuing a solution. Often, simply feeling seen by the other person—or by yourself—is sufficient, and you find yourself content, even if your original ask is not met.

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1. NVC animation: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=V-UIj01jZBE>.
 2. NVC Marshall Rosenberg: San Francisco Workshop, The Basics of Nonviolent Communication, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=l7TONauJGfc>.
 3. <https://cnvc.org/>.
 4. Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, <https://amazon.com/Nonviolent-Communication-Language-Life-Changing-Relationships/dp/189200528X>.
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