

THE BIG IDEAS

NVC

What is it?

The Four Components

Observations + Feelings + Needs + Requests.

What Gets in the Way?

Life-alienating stuff.

Taking Responsibility

Is key.

What Do You Want?

Always a powerful question.

Connecting w/Ourselves

Compassionately.

"What I want in my life is compassion, a flow between myself and others based on a mutual giving from the heart."

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

Nonviolent Communication

A Language of Life

BY MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PH.D. · PUDDLEDANCER PRESS © 2003 · 222 PAGES

"Believing that it is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate manner, I have been preoccupied most of my life with two questions: What happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature, leading us to behave violently and exploitatively? And conversely, what allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature under even the most trying circumstances? ...

While studying the factors that affect our ability to stay compassionate, I was struck by the crucial role of language and our use of words. I have since identified a specific approach to communicating—both speaking and listening—that leads us to give from the heart, connecting us with ourselves and with each other in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish. I call this approach Nonviolent Communication, using the term *nonviolence* as Gandhi used it—to refer to our natural state of compassion when violence has subsided from the heart."

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg from *Nonviolent Communication*

Based on Gandhi's ideal of nonviolence, Nonviolent Communication (or NVC for short) is also known as "Compassionate Communication."

I think it could also be appropriately described simply as "Effective Communication." As the cover of the book declares: *"More than 1,000,000 copies sold for one simple reason: it works!"*

I've been planning to read this book for quite some time and, after seeing both Brené Brown (see Notes on [Daring Greatly](#) + [The Gifts of Imperfection](#)) and Kristin Neff (see Notes on [Self-Compassion](#)) rave about it, I decided now was the time. I was blown away by the goodness.

I'm inspired by not only the theory and practices laid out in the book but by Marshall B. Rosenberg's lifetime commitment to mastering communication and helping us, as he would say, create a compassionate flow btwn ourselves and others based on mutual giving from the heart.

You can get the book [here](#). Learn more about Marshall and NVC [here](#). For now, let's jump in and take a quick high-level look at NVC along with a few of my favorite Big Ideas!

WHAT IS NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION?

"Nonviolent Communication (NVC) guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling, and wanting. We are led to express ourselves with honesty and clarity, while simultaneously paying others a respectful and empathic attention. In any exchange, we come to hear our own deeper needs and those of others. NVC trains us to observe carefully, and to be able to specify which behaviors and conditions are affecting us. We learn to identify and clearly articulate what we are concretely wanting in any given situation. The form is simple, yet powerfully transformative."

That's Nonviolent Communication in a nutshell.

We want to move from our habitual, automatic reactions to a more conscious approach of what we are perceiving, feeling and wanting.

Let's take a quick peek at how we can do that!

THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF THE NVC PROCESS

"Two parts of NVC:

- 1. Expressing honestly
through the four
components*
- 2. Receiving empathically
through the four
components"*

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

"To arrive at a mutual desire to give from the heart, we focus the light of consciousness on four areas—referred to as the four components of the NVC model.

First, we observe what is actually happening in a situation: what are we observing others saying or doing that is either enriching or not enriching our life? The trick is to be able to articulate this observation without introducing any judgment or evaluation—to simply say what people are doing that we either like or don't like. Next, we state how we feel when we observe the action: are we hurt, scared, joyful, amused, irritated? And thirdly, we say what needs of ours are connected to the feelings we have identified. An awareness of these three components is present when we use NVC to clearly and honestly express how we are.

For example, a mother might express these three pieces to her teenage son by saying, "Felix, when I see two balls of soiled socks under the coffee table and another three next to the TV, I feel irritated because I am needing more order in the rooms we share in common."

She would follow immediately with the fourth component—a very specific request: "Would you be willing to put your socks in your room or in the washing machine?" This fourth component addresses what we are wanting from the other person that would enrich our lives or make life more wonderful for us."

The four components of the NVC process: Observations + Feelings + Needs + Requests.

Let's unpack them a bit more:

1. We **OBSERVE** behaviors that affect our well-being. The key (and trick!) here is to simply *observe*—not judge.

Note that the mom in the example above didn't say, "*Felix, you're incredibly lazy and unthoughtful. I've asked you 973 times to not leave your socks laying around. I can't believe you can't do something so simple.*"

That wouldn't be too effective. We stick to the specific observable facts—leaving evaluation out of it!

2. We state how we **FEEL** about our observations. Marshall spends a considerable amount of time coaching us on how to actually get in touch with our feelings.

Most of us are *not* in touch with our feelings. Bringing more awareness to how we feel, learning how to articulate those feelings and then having the courage to be vulnerable as we do so is very much a learned skill!

3. We state the **NEEDS** that create our feelings. Underlying all of our feelings are unmet needs. We want to shine the spotlight of our awareness here! Rather than complain, criticize, blame and otherwise throw ick sauce on others, we want to slow down and identify what we NEED in any given situation.

By communicating from this perspective (rather than criticizing) we're *much* more likely to get those needs met. Hence, we could call Nonviolent Communication simply, "Effective Communication." :)

4. We make a **REQUEST** for concrete actions that will enrich our lives. How can our needs be met? We make that request—in concrete, specific terms.

*"Let's shine the light of
consciousness on places
where we can hope to find
what we are seeking."*

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

One more time thru our four components: **Observations + Feelings + Needs + Requests.**

Note that this process works on the RECEIVING end as well. We want to empathically listen in such a way that we are attuned to the observations, feelings, needs and requests of the individual with whom we're communicating.

All of this is, of course, easier said than done as we have a lifetime of habits that point us in a different communication channel. Marshall brilliantly walks us through each of these four components with a chapter dedicated to each in the book. Once we wrap our minds around the concepts, it's all about practice, practice, and more practice. :)

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY?

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged..."

~ Holy Bible, Matthew 7:1

"It is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving compassionately. We have, however, learned many forms of life-alienating communication that lead us to speak and behave in ways that injure others and ourselves. One form of life-alienating communication is the use of moralistic judgments that imply wrongness or badness on the part of those who don't act in harmony with our values. Another is the use of comparisons, which can block compassion for others and for ourselves. Life-alienating communication also obscures our awareness that we are each responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Communicating our desires in the form of demands is yet another characteristic of language that blocks compassion."

So, what gets in the way of compassionate communication?

Life-alienating communication.

Marshall spends a chapter helping us see the primary obstacles—which include:

- *Moral judgments:* Constantly making something/someone good or bad such as, "He's a bad person!" + "That's just WRONG!"
- *Comparisons:* Marshall tells us comparisons are just another form of judgment and walks us through a hilarious example of how to make ourselves miserable. For example, just compare yourself to the supermodel hot people on the covers of magazines at your local grocery store or to your life vis-a-vis Mozart when he was twelve. Laughing. Not helpful!
- *Denial of responsibility:* This is a big one. Marshall dedicates an entire chapter to the fact that we need to take 100% (!) responsibility for own thoughts, feelings and behaviors. Other people's behaviors may be a *stimulus* for our response but they are never the *cause*. (That's a huge distinction. More on that in a moment!)
- *Making demands rather than requests:* Making a demand is not a compassionate way to communicate. No one likes to feel coerced into behavior and, even if they do comply, they do so out of fear and guilt rather than autonomy and love. It's much more compassionate (and effective!) to walk thru the four steps and clearly state our needs and requests.

"Empathy: emptying our mind and listening with our whole being."

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

The solution to these life-alienating communication tendencies?

Our four steps of NVC: Observations (without evaluation!) + Feelings + Needs + Requests.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OUR FEELINGS

"The third component of NVC entails the acknowledgment of the root of our feelings. NVC heightens our awareness that what others say and do may be the *stimulus*, but never the *cause*, of our feelings. We see that our feelings result from how we *choose* to receive what others say and do, as well as from our particular needs and expectations in that moment. With this third component, we are led to accept responsibility for what we do to generate our own feelings."

This is HUGE.

*"Expressing our vulnerability
can help resolve conflicts."*

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

And such a brilliant application of what we talk about **all.the.time** in these Notes—the fact that nothing outside of us is responsible for how we feel/think/behave.

Marshall kicks off the chapter on "Taking Responsibility for Our Feelings" with this quote from [Epictetus](#): *"People are disturbed not by things, but by the view they take of them."*

He then proceeds to apply that wisdom to our communication. Let's take a moment to chat about it in more detail. I'll also give a personal example from last night to bring the idea home.

The (super!) Big Idea we really want to get? —> What others say may be the STIMULUS to our feelings/responses but it is **never** (!!!) the CAUSE.

That's really, really important to wrap our brains around and bring into our lives. Someone says or does something that annoys us. We almost always think it's what they said that made us upset. But it NEVER is.

What they said (or did) may have *triggered* something within us but it is ALWAYS how we choose to interpret and respond to that stimulus that determines how we feel. Period.

We've talked about this a million (or so) times. What I'm so excited about is that Marshall presents such an amazing application of this truth to our communication patterns. He brilliantly points out that our feelings are always tied to an *unmet need*. Rather than blaming someone else, we simply need to take 100% responsibility, identify + own how we're feeling, and then identify the unmet need that is at the root of the whole situation. Then, of course, make a request that helps us meet that need.

Let's use me as an example.

Alexandra, Emerson and I go on a family walk every night. (Love it!) Last night, we were about a quarter of the way across the street in a crosswalk when someone drove right through the crosswalk ahead of us.

It wasn't even that close but I immediately had a triggered response and started criticizing the person in my mind. Wonderful things like, *"Didn't you see us? Are you an idiot? Do you not pay attention? Geez. etc., etc., etc."*

Now, having just read this book, I thought to myself, *"Interesting. You're blaming this person for how you're feeling and making moral judgments about their character. Fascinating. Hmm... What would Marshall do? How are you feeling right now? What's the underlying unmet need you're experiencing? Because THAT's what's at the root of this. Let's explore that!"*

It was fun to (roughly!) go thru the four components last night. It goes something like this:

1. **Observe.** What did I observe? Without judgment, what objectively happened? Well, someone drove their car through the crosswalk as we were a quarter of the way through it. OK. Cool.
2. **Feelings.** What feelings did I experience? Hmm... Interesting. I felt unsafe. I felt fear. Ahhh... OK. Good thing to notice.
3. **Needs.** What unmet needs was I experiencing? Aha! This is the source of everything. I have a need to help my family be safe. To protect them from danger. (I get a little misty-eyed as I type that.) That need was not being met as the individual drove thru the crosswalk. Well, that's amazing to see...
4. **Request.** What would my request be to the driver? My request would be that he or she drive under the speed limit while driving through town and exercise more caution when approaching crosswalks.

... What a wonderful process! :)

So, quick re-cap: The unconscious version of me would just take the event and get upset

*"When (a), I feel (b),
because I am needing (c).
Therefore I now would like
(d)."*

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

and blame the driver for “making” me mad. Then, I’d potentially share my frustration with Alexandra, etc. and we’d talk about how unconscious people can be, etc. (Nice projection!) The conscious version of me can see that, although their behavior was a *stimulus*, it was NOT the *cause* of my response.

(The best part of the whole thing was that just a day before *I* had accidentally driven in front of a family about a quarter of the way thru a crosswalk. My heart skipped a beat, I apologized and the dad said, “No worries!” ... Laughing. Ah, life.)

How about *you*?! Any recent experiences that might be good for a quick trip thru the process? Here’s to taking 100% responsibility for our feelings, identifying the unmet needs at the root of the issue and compassionately communicating with ourselves and others!

WHAT DO YOU WANT?

“The most dangerous of all behaviors may consist of doing things “because we’re supposed to.”

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

“The clearer we are about what we want, the more likely it is that we’ll get it.”

This is another *really* Big Idea. Marshall discusses the importance of clearly identifying what we want and learning how to clearly make requests to fulfill those desires as part of the fourth step in the process: Making requests.

Bottom line is simple: We can’t make a clear request if we don’t know what we want. It’s a LOT easier to complain about all the things that are wrong than to slow down, get clear on what we really want, and then make a very clear, positive request.

This makes me think of David Emerald and his wonderful wisdom in *The Power of TED** ([see Notes](#)) where he articulates the difference between what he calls a “Victim” orientation and a “Creator” orientation.

Whereas the Victim is focused on all the things that are wrong, the Creator focuses on what he or she would like. What they want. The primary way we make the shift from Victim to Creator is one very simple question: “*What do I want?*”

That question offers a straight-line path from suffering to empowerment. Any time we’re feeling less than great, we have an unmet need—whether that’s in the context of a specific interaction with another individual or just more broadly speaking in life.

So... Are there any areas in *your* life where *you’re* experiencing challenges?

If so, what are you feeling? And... What do you want?

Remember: “The clearer we are about what we want, the more likely it is that we’ll get it.”

P.S. Feeling anger? Same questions. What’s the unmet need? What do you want? Marshall has a whole chapter on anger. Check out this pearl: “I see all anger as a result of life-alienating, violence-provoking thinking. At the core of all anger is a need that is not being fulfilled. Thus anger can be valuable if we use it as an alarm clock to wake us up—to realize we have a need that isn’t being met and that we are thinking in a way that makes it unlikely to be met.”

“The intention behind the protective use of force is to prevent injury or injustice. The intention behind the punitive use of force is to cause individuals to suffer for their perceived misdeeds.”

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

CONNECTING COMPASSIONATELY WITH OURSELVES

“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...”

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

~ Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD

Marshall has a chapter dedicated to communicating compassionately with the person with whom we interact the most: ourselves! As he says, we're going to have a tough time communicating compassionately with others if we fail to do so with ourselves. He has a bunch of great ideas to help us cultivate self-compassion.

His first recommendation? To *"Avoid shoulding on ourselves!"*

Marshall describes the fact that, although commonly used by most of us, the word "should" is violent because it implies a lack of choice and disempowers us. So, let's quit shoulding on ourselves!

(Funny story: As I was preparing to create this Note, I noticed that I said to myself, *"You should really include a section on not shoulding on yourself."* Laughing. It's true.)

Here's one final gem: "... 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 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 behind the 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."

Here's to taking action out of the desire to contribute to life as we embrace the four components of NVC and joyfully participate in the flow of mutual giving from the heart!

B

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.