

Nonviolent Communication

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1. What is Nonviolent Communication?

What we communicate, and how, largely determines the quality of our relationships and our lives. When we blame someone, accuse them of something, or put them on a pedestal, it can lead to division, confusion, or resistance. Communicating in a way that connects calls for a different approach. The American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg developed Nonviolent Communication for exactly this purpose, placing questions like 'what's alive in you?' and 'what do you need?' at its center.



Nonviolent Communication was developed to help us speak and listen from the heart. In this way, our natural compassion can flourish, both in relationship with ourselves and with others. NVC makes it easier to stay human, even in difficult circumstances. Instead of reacting automatically without thinking, you can formulate a conscious response, grounded in a deep awareness of what you observe, feel, and need. NVC enables you to express yourself clearly and with integrity, while at the same time meeting the other person with respect and understanding. The principle is simple, but putting it into practice takes some effort — yet the effort pays off. Nonviolent Communication can lead to profound transformation. It allows you to listen to what is alive deep within yourself and within the other person, so that respect, attention, and compassion can arise.

The aim of Nonviolent Communication:

- to build awareness of our thinking, feeling, and acting;
- to contribute to understanding, cooperation, and respect in relationships;
- to contribute to (inner) peace.

The underlying principles of Nonviolent Communication:

- every being strives for happiness; no one wants to suffer;
- people genuinely want to contribute and to matter;
- all people share the same universal needs;
- everything we do, or don't do, springs from a wish to meet our needs.

The intention of Nonviolent Communication is to create a connection that leads to recognition and understanding of everyone's needs and longings.

2. Jackal and giraffe

To illustrate the differences in how we think and communicate, we use two symbolic animals: the jackal and the giraffe. The jackal represents a mentality of scarcity, which evokes fear, division, and violence. The jackal holds others responsible for the quality of his or her life. The giraffe represents trust in human goodness, which evokes connection and compassion.

2.1 Jackal language: communication that fuels division and conflict

1. Judgment and criticism based on what is 'good' and what is 'bad'. For example: "You're just too selfish (lazy, insensitive, tactless, etc.)"

2. Denying responsibility for our own thoughts, feelings, and needs. One example of this denial in our language is the use of the word 'have to' in a sentence like 'There are just things you have to do, whether you like it or not.' We deny responsibility for our behavior whenever we place the cause outside ourselves.

Examples of denying responsibility:

- Vague, impersonal forces – "I cleaned it up because it needed to be done"
- Our psychological history – "I drink because I'm an alcoholic"
- The orders of an authority – "I lied to the customer because my boss told me to"
- Group pressure – "I started smoking because everyone in the group smoked"
- Institutional policy – "I give grades because that's school policy"
- Gender, age, or social roles – "I do it because I want to be a good husband"

3. Demands. When there is no room to choose, and refusal is met with punishment, or we imply shame, guilt, or penalty. For example: "You'll just do it, or else...!"

4. Using punishment or reward. When we decide (according to some all-powerful principle) which behavior deserves reward and which deserves punishment. For example: "He deserves to be punished for what he did."

A summary of communication that leads to division and conflict

- Judging: good/bad, right/wrong, appropriate/inappropriate
- Labeling: he is..., she is..., they are...
- No choice: you must..., I had to..., they should...
- Blame: your fault / my fault
- Deserving: reward / punishment
- Analysis: attributing motives, offering findings
- Denying personal responsibility for our feelings, thoughts, and actions.

2.2 Giraffe language (Nonviolent Communication)

This dynamic way of communicating avoids static generalizations in our language and focuses on what is alive in each of us right NOW. To do this, we direct our attention to:

- an observation: the facts — what do I/you observe?
- a feeling: what does that stir in me/you?
- a need: what do I/you need?
- a request: what concrete action do I/you want to propose?

The process of Nonviolent Communication

When we say to someone, 'Just clean up your mess already!' this tends to provoke resistance rather than cooperation. When we use the NVC model with a pure intention, we're more likely to evoke understanding and cooperation. We might instead say, for example:

'When I see your things lying here on the floor' (observation)
'I feel uneasy' (expressing my feeling),
'because I'd like to keep this space safe and organized' (naming my need).
'Would you be willing to put your things away?' (request for action)

Of course, there's no guarantee the other person will do what we ask — it is, after all, a request and not a demand. We don't want to force the other person. Precisely when the other person says 'no,' and we keep listening openly for the need underneath that 'no,' trust in the relationship grows. After all, the goal of Nonviolent Communication is to create a relationship that leads to recognition and understanding of everyone's needs and longings.

Nonviolent Communication: a process for dialogue

The dialogue of NVC is like a dance — a dance in which we follow, lead, and stay engaged.

- Connecting with myself (self-empathy): discovering what is alive in me and what I want.
- Connecting expression (dialogue with the other): telling the other person what is alive in me and what I want.
- Connecting listening (dialogue with the other): hearing what is alive in you and what you want.

3. The four elements of Nonviolent Communication

observation = naming a factual event, without judgment

feeling = naming and expressing a feeling, without judgment

need = naming a need, longing, or value

request = asking for something that meets our needs (a request for action or connection)

The Process of Nonviolent Communication



3.1 Observation

With our five senses we can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. We can also perceive thoughts and feelings with our 'sixth' sense. An observation can give rise to thinking. If, for example, I see a blue envelope lying on the doormat, I might think: "That's from the tax office." That thought can lead to another thought: "Ugh, that's the last thing I need, I already pay enough!" In this way, the blue envelope becomes the trigger for inner drama, while the envelope itself just lies there quietly, being blue. So before we start interpreting, we're wise to first check whether our observation is even accurate — doing so can save us a lot of drama.

Formulating an observation

The function of naming the observation is to describe the situation factually. It takes practice to leave out all interpretation. Is the observation based on facts, or is it an interpretation (a judgment, analysis, label, etc.)? When you interpret, it can come across as a judgment or evaluation, which may provoke resistance in the listener instead of understanding.



Use 'I' statements, and avoid arguments about right and wrong — because that's relative.

3.2 Feelings

Feelings are like signals

Just as a dashboard light in a car indicates, say, that fuel is needed, our feelings signal that we have (un)met needs. We experience pleasant feelings when our needs are met, and unpleasant feelings when our needs remain unmet. Joy, for example, can point to a met need for company; sadness can point to a need for comfort or intimacy.



Pseudo-feelings

In everyday language, we're used to using the word 'feel' in sentences like: 'I feel unappreciated' or 'I feel ignored.' We call these quasi- or pseudo-feelings, because they are actually a judgment. A statement like 'I feel ignored' implicitly judges someone else's behavior. By placing the blame on the other person, we shut ourselves off from our own feelings. We usually do this unconsciously, and it's understandable — we don't want to feel pain. Unfortunately, in doing so we also break the connection with our authentic self. That's why the process of self-empathy is so essential for restoring the relationship with ourselves. By accepting our feelings and the needs connected to them, we take responsibility for the quality of our lives.

Pseudo-feelings are usually past participles: attacked, ignored, pressured, manipulated, not taken seriously, unseen, rejected, abandoned, exploited, etc.

Taking responsibility for our feelings

An important step in the process of Nonviolent Communication is the moment we realize that our feelings are caused by (un)met needs, not by the behavior of others.

Some feelings, listed

happy

grateful
enthusiastic
touched
moved
lively
relaxed
relieved
cheerful
content
surprised
joyful

afraid

anxious
worried
nervous
insecure
restless
panicked
doubtful
jittery

angry

irritated
annoyed
frustrated
mad
hurt
gloomy
disappointed

sad

listless
tired
discouraged
dissatisfied
pained
sorrowful

Anything we observe can be a trigger for our feelings, but never the cause. The cause lies in our (un)met needs.

3.3 Needs

Universal needs are the same for all people. They are the driving force behind everything we do. We have physical and psychological needs such as: nourishment, safety, freedom of choice, autonomy, cooperation, celebration, affection, etc.

Meeting needs through strategy

We meet a need through a strategy. There are infinitely many strategies for meeting any given need. For example, we can meet a need for warmth by putting on a sweater, but also by turning up the heat.

Confusing needs and strategy in our language

Because a need and a strategy are two different things, we want to keep them separate. Separating a need from a strategy brings clarity and helps us take responsibility for our own needs. In the following sentence, we confuse a need with a strategy: "I need you to be with me tonight." This implies that only 'you' can meet my need, which makes the other person responsible for meeting it. When we do separate the need from the strategy, it sounds more like this: "I need company — would you be willing to stay with me tonight?"

Some needs, listed. (This list of needs is not exhaustive or definitive)

Connection	Cooperation	Harmony	Quality of life
Touch	Reliability	Attunement	Ease
Acceptance	Reciprocity	Balance	Humor
Involvement	Congruence	Mourning	Inspiration
Integrity	Sharing	Calm	Perspective
Contact	Clarity	Beauty	Fun
Empathy	Honesty	Structure/Order	Meaning
Belonging	Equality	Safety	Play
Acknowledgment	Lucidity	Celebration	Spontaneity
Nurturing	Support	Purity	Challenge
Being heard	Openness	Self-worth	Variety
Affection	Transparency	Autonomy	Certainty
Being seen	Trust	Freedom of choice	Peace

3.4 Request

Through the first three steps of Nonviolent Communication, we become aware of what we observe, feel, and need. The fourth element, the request, addresses the question of what strategy or action is needed to meet a need.

Connecting Expression with a Request

my OBSERVATION

I say what I observe,
without judgment.

my FEELING

I express, without
judgment, what I feel
about this.

my NEEDS

I say, without judgment,
what need I have.

REQUEST

I ask the other for
something in line with
my needs.

The REQUEST

'Do you want clarity about something? Do you want to make an arrangement? Do you want to know what the other person feels, thinks, or needs? Do you want feedback? Do you need help? Do you want to be heard or seen?'

Whatever it is you want: **ASK FOR IT!** Don't keep hoping or waiting for the other person to do something for you.

With a request, you ask for something that fits your need. A request can be the beginning of a dialogue or a negotiation.

Keep in mind:

- A request is specific and concrete, not general.
- A request is realistic and attuned to what the other person is able to do.
- Use positive action language.
- Make your intention to connect clear.
- Phrase your request as a question, and allow the freedom to choose.
- Stay open to whatever response the other person gives, and show empathy.
- Try to hear what the other person needs in order to be able to say yes to your request.

Two kinds of REQUESTS

Connection request

Aimed at creating more connection, understanding, and empathy.

A. I give my attention to you

- How is it for you to hear this?
- Does that resonate with you?
- Where do you stand with this?

B. I ask for attention for myself:

- Do you understand how this is for me?
- Would you be willing to tell me what you're hearing me try to say?

Action request

An action request asks the other person for something in order to achieve a desired goal.

- Are you willing to ...?
- Do you agree with...?
- Can you tell me what it would take to...?
- Would it be possible if you...?
- Can you all tell me how I...?

Suggestions for effective requests

1. Describe as concretely as possible what you expect from the other person, rather than staying vague and abstract. "I want you to understand me" becomes more concrete as: "Can you tell me what you understood from what I said?" "I want you to respect me" becomes clearer as: "I'd like you to say good morning before you head off to work. Would you be willing to do that?"
2. Use positive action language. If you say, "I don't want you to work overtime so often," the other person doesn't know what you do want them to do instead. It becomes clearer if you say: "Could you work until six o'clock at most, at least twice a week, so we have the evening for ourselves and the kids?"
3. No is okay too. Give the other person the freedom to choose whether or not to act on the request. This means we accept it if the other person doesn't want to play a part in meeting our need.

Characteristics of a request

- Concrete – not vague, but specific
- Doable – something the other person can actually do
- Positive – say what you do want, not what you don't want
- Actionable here and now – no vague promises for the future
- Inviting – can be declined without penalty

Two kinds of requests

Connection request

Aimed at strengthening the connection and checking whether the other person has understood you.
Example: "How is this to hear for you?" or "Would you like to hear how this is for me?"

Action request

Aimed at a concrete action that contributes to meeting your need.
Example: "Are you willing to...?" or "Do you agree that you'll...?"

The Process of Nonviolent Communication

internal dialogue

Connecting with myself

OBSERVATION

What's triggering me?

FEELING

How do I feel about this?

NEEDS

What (un)met needs are alive in me?

REQUEST

What can I do to meet this need?

becoming aware of my JUDGMENTS/THOUGHTS

What am I telling myself?
What do I think about it?



dialogue with another

Connecting listening

your OBSERVATION

I check what you have observed.

your FEELING

I sense into your feelings.

your NEEDS

I sense into the needs underneath.

REQUEST

I sense what YOU want, in line with your needs.



Connecting expression

my OBSERVATION

I say what I observe, without judgment.

my FEELING

I express, without judgment, what I feel.

my NEEDS

I say, without judgment, what need I have.

REQUEST

I ask the other for something in line with my needs.

Books about Nonviolent Communication

- Marshall Rosenberg – *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*
- Marshall Rosenberg – *Life-Enriching Education*
- Marshall Rosenberg – *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict*
- Marshall Rosenberg / Gabriele Seils – *Gelijk hebben of gelukkig zijn?* (Dutch/German; “Being Right or Being Happy?”)
- Lucy Leu – *Nonviolent Communication Companion Workbook*
- Justine Mol – *Geweldig communiceren met jongeren* (Dutch; “Great Communication with Young People”)
- Justine Mol – *Geweldig communiceren voor jongeren* (Dutch; “Great Communication for Young People”)
- Corry Laura Van Bladel – *SOS-conflict* (Dutch)
- Thomas d’Ansembourg – *Being Genuine: Stop Being Nice, Start Being Real*
- Jan van Koert – *Wat je vindt mag je houden* (Dutch; “You’re Allowed to Keep What You Feel”)
- Ellie van der Est – *De kracht van verbinding* (Dutch; “The Power of Connection”)
- Justine Mol – *De giraf en de jakhals in ons* (Dutch; “The Giraffe and the Jackal Within Us”)
- Justine Mol – *Opgroeien in vertrouwen* (Dutch; “Growing Up in Trust”)
- Regine Herbig – *Constructief omgaan met irritatie en boosheid* (Dutch; “Constructively Dealing with Irritation and Anger”)

— END OF SUMMARY —