



Cultivating CONNECTION

The ability to effectively resolve differences is an invaluable asset. When tensions arise at home or in the workplace, Nonviolent Communication can help all parties connect properly so they can work calmly towards resolution.

WORDS / ROSAMUND BURTON

Often the people we love the most are the ones with whom we find ourselves constantly arguing. In the workplace there are frequent communication issues with colleagues or the boss and it's easy to fluctuate between judgements of other people and feeling undervalued yourself.

Nonviolent Communication, also known as Compassionate Communication, offers an alternative way to resolve differences. It has been developed by US psychologist Dr Marshall Rosenberg and is a simple but powerful way of communicating that aims to meet all parties' needs. Nonviolent Communication (NVC) has not only helped unhappy marriages and dysfunctional family situations but it has also been used successfully by people in prisons and by school teachers, as well as in mediation talks between countries such as Israel and Palestine, Nigeria and Rwanda.

It was the racially motivated violence that Rosenberg saw when he was growing up in Detroit that propelled him to develop this system of conflict resolution. In 1984, he established the Center for Nonviolent Communication, and NVC is now being practised in more than 65 countries.

Kate Raffin is an NVC practitioner and teacher in Sydney, Australia. She first came across NVC in 2005. "I was involved with a group of people in a conflict and I couldn't see a way forward," she says. "I was sitting in meetings, very distressed about what I was hearing my colleagues say about the other parties. I was watching all the parties build up their ammunition against the others — their judgements and evaluations of each other.

"I watched the anatomy of war show up and thought, 'This is how it happens. We're no longer communicating with each other clearly. We're all just fighting to get what we can.' So I went off to a one-hour introduction to NVC and immediately I was hooked. It was a breakthrough moment for me because I could now see how we could go forward."

OBSERVING
Kate Raffin explains that Marshall Rosenberg makes four distinctions with Nonviolent Communication between what he calls life-enriching behaviour and life-alienating behaviour. The first

of the four distinctions is to make very clear observations about what we see and what we remember, or what we imagine in the future, as opposed to all the evaluations we can easily make by labelling other people or criticising and analysing. So step one is to make clear observations as opposed to evaluations or observations mixed with evaluations.

FEELING
Step two is using feelings to describe your experience and taking responsibility for what's going on within you. Is it tension in your shoulder, is it tightness in your chest or are you experiencing joy? It is connecting to what you feel as opposed to what you think, so not analysing the situation but just listening for what you're feeling. That is the second distinction: expressing feelings as opposed to thoughts or judgements.

NEEDING
The third step is distinguishing needs: the things that motivate us, that we're trying to bring about, which are behind every one of our actions or words. It's important to distinguish between needs and the strategies to meet needs. It's looking at the actual needs as opposed to how we are going to get them met. That, Raffin emphasises, is where conflict happens. It never happens at the needs levels; it happens at the strategies-to-meet-needs level. It's a very important distinction.

REQUESTING
The fourth step is making very clear requests. For example, when you ask, "Would you be able to tell me why you did what you did?" you are making a very specific request. The other person knows what you are asking and what you are looking for and they can connect to that. The distinction here is between making requests and making demands. Instead of saying this is how it has to be done, you ask if this will work for the other person.

By making a request in this way, Raffin explains, you are saying, "I've got both of our interests in my heart here. If it doesn't work for you, then it won't work for me. I want you to be motivated with the joy of giving to me, rather than by fear, or obligation, or fear of punishment, or the hope of a reward."

When explaining the importance of making requests rather than demands,

Nonviolent Communication has also been used successfully by people in prisons and by school teachers, as well as in mediation talks between countries.

Marshall Rosenberg says, "Please do what I have requested only if you can do so with the joy of a little child feeding hungry ducks. Please do not do as I request if there is the slightest bit of fear, resentment, guilt or shame motivating you — that would be too costly for us both."

WORKING WITH OTHERS
As well as looking at what you are observing, feeling, needing and requesting, you can do the same for another person. What are you hearing them observe? How are they feeling? What needs are they trying to meet? You are guessing with another person, so you might keep reflecting back to them what you are hearing them saying. However angry the other person might be, you can still listen for these four very human elements underneath any judgements they might be making.

In the introduction to his book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*, Rosenberg describes going to a mosque at Deheisheh Refugee Camp in Bethlehem to talk to 170 Palestinian Muslim men about Nonviolent Communication. As he was talking, a man in the audience shouted "murderer" and then others joined in, calling him "an assassin" and "child killer". On his way to the talk, Rosenberg had seen several empty teargas canisters labelled "Made in America". Rosenberg rightly guessed that teargas has recently been used on these men's community.

Rosenberg immediately focused on the feelings and needs of the man who had called him a "murderer". What followed was a 20-minute dialogue in which the Palestinian expressed his anger and pain and Rosenberg expressed what he heard as the feeling and need behind each of the statements the man made.

"I didn't agree, or disagree," Rosenberg explains. "I received his

Photography Getty Images



words, not as attacks, but as gifts from a fellow human willing to share his soul and deep vulnerabilities with me ... An hour later, the same man who had called me a murderer was inviting me to his home for a Ramadan dinner."

NCV is about shifting away from being defensive when judged or criticised, which causes us to either withdraw or attack, to being present and in the moment and being honest. It is about honest expression and also about very attentive listening so that you hear the real feelings and needs of the other person.

"NVC is four parts listening and one part talking. It's very much about how we're hearing both ourselves and other people in the world," says Kate Raffin.

NCV FOR COUPLES & FAMILIES

Linda Rysenbry is a Sydney-based counsellor and teacher of Nonviolent Communication and has also trained in Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy.

She works with couples, sometimes a parent and an older child, and sometimes two people from a work environment. She believes what makes NVC really work for people is the concept that we all have common human needs, which are beautiful and precious and important to acknowledge to ourselves and to value in other people.

Rysenbry finds that NVC speeds up any work she does with people because it gives them a greater understanding of and respect for each other and a way of taking care of their relationship by creating a very deep sense of connection. However, she emphasises it can take time and practice for a person to be able to incorporate the NVC process when facing a challenging moment with a family member or intimate partner.

She gives an example of one couple, both of whom were working and had a young family. There would be a lot of tension in the morning to get everyone ready and out of the house; and at the weekends, even when they would both be longing to have some fun and relax, there would be many irritations or a sense of resentment towards each other. After working with Rysenbry using NVC, they have come to have a really deep appreciation and understanding of what the needs are underneath the different sorts of behaviours showing up that were so irritating and frustrating.

For example, when the wife was calling out from the other room what she wanted her husband to put in the children's lunches, or suggested what he should make for the children's breakfast on the weekend, it made him very irritated. Now he understands that she really values harmony and peace and she really wants her children to experience a very deep sense of safety and peace in the household and between their parents. So she was offering those pointers thinking it was helpful and it would help things to run smoothly in the house.

There has been a shift in the husband's thinking now he understands where his wife's coming from. Now she also understands that he just wants to be free to create his own relationship with the children and be trusted by her in his choice of food for them. The couple's weekends and their way of organising are quite different now. She is far more relaxed and hands-off and has more time to take care of herself, so she usually goes for a run or a walk in the morning, instead of feeling resentful due to lack of time. And he feels a far greater sense of trust and partnership.

Before working with Rysenbry using the NVC process, they both expressed the fear of what would happen to their relationship if they couldn't get past the tension, resentment and anger they were both feeling towards each other and the fear of what that would mean for their children as well as themselves.

"These are people who had done personal development work in the past," Rysenbry explains. "But there is something about our intimate relationships that seems to bring us through the eye of the needle to where it is that we are just not fully aware of

ourselves and not aware of how we are in a relationship."

A participant attending one of Kate Raffin's NVC workshops said, "If I had known of NVC earlier in my life I don't think my marriage would have had to end." Marshall Rosenberg tells a story of working one-on-one over a period of time with a prison inmate. One day the man said to him, "If I had known of this back then, I would never have had to kill my best friend."

HOW TO GET STARTED

There are many ways to learn NVC. These include books, courses, telecourses and webinars, not to mention one-day or weekend training sessions and small groups meeting all over the world.

"But it's not just about learning it — it's very much about living it and applying it in the world," Raffin emphasises. When asked how using the NVC process has had an effect in her life, she replies, "It's the honesty that I am able to bring to every conversation that I have with people ... It has created a lot more safety for people because they know that I will be honest with them and I'm really interested in hearing them and what's important to them. And I keep getting feedback that people really get a sense that they matter when I am talking to them."

Nonviolent communication is a balance of empathy and honesty. It is about saying "yes" when you mean yes and "no" when you mean no, and enabling other people to say "yes" when they mean yes and "no" when they mean no. It's about hearing what's really going on for the other person no matter how they express it and listening for their feelings and needs and also your own. It's a simple process but one that is having a positive effect on thousands of relationships across the world. 🍌



RESOURCES

- **The Center for Nonviolent Communication**, wcnvc.org
- **Kate Raffin**, nvcaustralia.com/?action=trainer&id=40
- **Linda Rysenbry**, nvcaustralia.com/?action=trainer&id=21
- **Now Relate** (Linda Rysenbry), nowrelate.com

Rosamund Burton is a freelance writer specialising in mind-body-spirit issues. She is author of Castles, Follies and Four-Leaf Clovers: Adventures Along Ireland's St Declan's Way. W: rosamundburton.com