

# Compassionate Communication

prepared by Root Cuthbertson

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“As we learn to speak from the heart we are changing the habits of a lifetime.” - Marshall Rosenberg

“Nonviolent Communication (NVC), as a body of work, can contribute to our collective ability to face and transform social conditions and systems.” - Miki Kashtan

Learning new ways of communicating can be part of transitioning toward greater conflict resilience. For people with a background where negative communication was normalised, this may involve learning to use compassionate or nonviolent communication techniques. Such a transition may involve being willing to adjust one's habits and stretch out of one's 'comfort zone' into one's 'learning zone.'

Like any new habit, this can feel awkward or uncomfortable at first. Compassionate communication can feel artificial or scripted. Conversations may feel less organic, natural, or free-flowing. People may pause to consider and choose their words more carefully; or they may interrupt themselves to re-phrase their words to express themselves more accurately.

Compassionate communication can include pausing to imagine how the words an individual speaks might be received by and affect those who hear them. This aims to increase empathy and compassion for others, and ideally to adjust or re-phrase potentially harmful words before they are spoken. As in other forms of conflict resilience, the focus is on prevention rather than treatment; considering words before they have caused any harm, rather than addressing their harm after the fact (see [Empathy and Compassion](#), see [Re-Framing Conflict](#)).

This aims to bring more conscious awareness to communication habits and patterns. For those who have been less aware of their communication patterns, it can help to slow things down. This can grow awareness of how people habitually use their words, and contribute to a group's consciousness around language. At the same time, 'policing' each other's language with shame and blame, is typically less helpful than 'failing forward' together (see [Sharing and Celebrating Failings](#)).

Ideally, developing a more collaborative and conflict resilient group culture aims to reduce and reframe negative and violent communication. Language is powerful. Words affect reality. For instance, the word 'should' can transform into the word 'could' or 'might'. Post-modern dancer and journalist Nancy Stark Smith recommends 'replacing ambition with curiosity.' Often the word 'but' can be upgraded to 'and.'

Compassionate communication is a large topic with many available resources. The following resources are intended as an introduction. They draw from contemporary teachers who have suggested various practices for western audiences. This guide signposts a few recommendations for beginners. Start with these, and if you'd like to continue learning, there are plenty more resources to discover.

## Kinds of Negative Communication (Dana Sparks – Nick Wignall)

Some of the many kinds of negative communication ([see Negative Self-Talk](#)) commonly used include:

	Negative script:	Re-framed script:
Personalizing	It's all about me.	I am one of many factors.
Filtering	I magnify the bad and minimize the good.	I am honest about the bad and the good.
Polarizing	Win-lose, either-or thinking.	Win-win, both-and thinking.
Catastrophizing	I predict the worst will happen.	I am curious and prepared for anything that happens.
Limiting	Someone can't, or doesn't deserve to.	Someone could, might, or deserves to.
Victimizing	Nobody values or cares.	I value, and I care.
Criticizing	It's not enough; it's not perfect.	It is enough; it will do.
Demanding	Supply what I want to conditionally secure future transactions.	I have a request; please help me unconditionally.
Commanding	Do as I say because of my rank. Power-over.	I have a need; please help me. Power-with.
Coercing	Violence will result from non-compliance. Power-over.	Empathy will result from lack of consent. Power-with.
Manipulating	I use deception to achieve my own agenda.	I transparently aim to benefit everyone, including myself.
Using 'Should'	They say I ought to. I am obligated. I should.	I'd like to. It would be a pleasure.
Labelling	This is in a category I already know.	I'm curious how this relates to what I already know.

	Negative script:	Re-framed script:
Overgeneralizing	It's always like this everywhere for everyone.	It's sometimes like this in some places for some people.
Assuming	I predict what will happen, what others will say, think, or feel.	I'm curious what may happen, what others may say, think, or feel.
Emotional Reasoning	My irrational emotions tell me it's true.	My rational consideration tells me it's true.

“People have been trained to criticize, insult, and otherwise communicate in ways that create distance among people.” - Marshall Rosenberg

“Focusing on caring for everyone’s needs challenges the fundamental isolation and separation that are so endemic in modern capitalist cultures. I imagine that having identified separation, scarcity, and powerlessness as the core elements of a mindset that perpetuates the destruction I see happening all around us, I would naturally be drawn to finding ways of sharing NVC that specifically challenge those deeply held premises.”

- Miki Kashtan

## Benefits of Compassionate Communication

Re-framing negative communication and transitioning toward compassionate communication has many benefits including:

- greater authenticity in communication
- increased empathy and understanding
- stronger, deeper relational connections
- greater interpersonal harmony
- enhancing future cooperation and collaboration
- increased conflict resilience
- more effective conflict resolution.

“A difficult message to hear is an opportunity to enrich someone’s life.” - Marshall Rosenberg

## Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, is based on the principles of nonviolence - the natural state of compassion when no violence is present in the heart. NVC assumes that people are all compassionate by nature, and that violent strategies—whether verbal or physical—are learned behaviors taught and supported by the prevailing culture. NVC assumes that people share many of the same, basic, human needs; and that most people act to meet these needs. NVC focuses on effective strategies for meeting the fundamental needs of all parties involved.

Notable concepts include:

- reframing coercive forms of communication
- gathering facts through observing without evaluating
- genuinely and concretely expressing feelings and needs
- formulating effective and empathetic requests.

NVC holds that most conflicts between individuals or groups arise from miscommunication about human needs, due to coercive or manipulative language relying on fear, guilt, shame, etc. These "violent" modes of communication can perpetuate conflicts by preventing the clarification of needs, feelings, perceptions, and requests.

In its initial development, the NVC model emphasised collaboration, giving students greater responsibility for, and decision-making related to, their own learning. The NVC model has evolved to address both institutional and informal social power relationships (like police-citizen, boss-employee, rich-poor, adult-youth). NVC aims to develop societal relationships based on mutual respect and a restorative, "partnership" approach, rather than a retributive, fear-based, "domination" approach.

Since 2000, NVC has shifted its emphasis to focus less on the "steps" and more on the practitioner's intentions and the quality of connection experienced with others.

- In speaking: "Is the intent to get others to do what one wants, or to foster more meaningful relationships and mutual satisfaction?"
- In listening: "Is the intent to prepare for what one has to say, or to extend heartfelt, respectful attentiveness to another?"

"NVC is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions." - Marshall Rosenberg

"NVC, with its direct and insistent focus on needs, can provide a blueprint for creating economies that nurture life. Active communities of commitment, such as the Nonviolent Global Liberation community, often go beyond individual transformation, restoring a community's capacity to find collective and collaborative ways to sustain itself." - Miki Kashtan

## Problems with NVC

NVC has a paradoxical potential for violence if it is misused or used unskillfully. People can misuse NVC by hiding their true feelings while empathizing with another, subverting the ideals of NVC. In real life, many people cannot express their feelings skillfully and get their needs met using NVC, since it would require too much time, patience, and discipline.

Because of the large investment of time and effort to learn it, those who develop skills in using NVC can become prejudiced against those who have not. NVC can attract well-educated people with more awareness of grammar, word choice, and syntax. This can lead to problems of exclusivity, accessibility for the underprivileged, and favoring a higher social class. NVC may give those in positions of social power an extra tool - words that appear loving and kind, belied by actions that maintain situations of social dominance.

Chapman Flack notes a distinction between two uses of NVC. With a "strong sense" of it, NVC can be used skillfully and virtuously, with care and attention, offering a language to examine one's thinking and actions. This supports understanding, bringing one's best to the community, and honoring one's emotions. A "weak sense" of NVC is typically a mimicry of this, based on ego and haste. Someone might unskillfully use NVC as a set of 'rules' for scoring debating points, to label others for political gain, or to insist that others express themselves in this way. Flack advises guarding against the "metamorphosis of NVC into subtle violence done in its name."

## Re-Framing Negative Communication & Learning NVC (Miki Kashtan)

Social change advocate Miki Kashtan was a student of Marshall Rosenberg, and has developed many educational resources based on NVC. She describes the goals of her online course "[Making Life Work](#)" as:

- creating a world that truly works for everyone
- honoring and seeking to meet the needs of everyone, welcoming each person's truth
- finding faith that solutions can be found to the most challenging problems facing us, individually and collectively
- seeing the full humanity of each person, regardless of their actions
- holding with care our own actions even when we are unhappy with the results
- staying in dialogue until a solution is found that works for all
- embracing the uncertainty of life without the absolutes of "right" and "wrong," "good" and "bad."

Her online course "[Making Life Work](#)" is divided into several segments.

## **Needs: Making Transformation Possible**

- to distinguish between needs and strategies and why that matters
- to identify the core needs that motivate any particular action - yours or others'
- to embrace your needs, regardless of the outcome, as a way to expand choice and freedom
- to move beyond judgments of self and others into a compassionate and courageous way of relating.

## **Choice: From Reaction to Conscious Response**

- to identify your own reactions and how to create more inner space
- to make full contact with your needs and the needs of others in a given situation
- to name clearly what you want to choose, given the known needs.

## **Empathy: Connecting with Others without Losing Yourself**

- to find presence and resources to respond empathically
- to bring together mind, heart, body, and imagination in the service of empathic connection
- to express empathy in both words and actions
- to attend to your own well-being while being available to others

## **Authenticity: Expressing Truth with Care**

- to identify your clear intention for saying what you want to say
- to take full ownership of your experience
- to find the most relevant part of your experience to express that would fit the context and reach the other's heart
- to express your care explicitly even when you directly oppose what another wants

## **Requests: Asking for All We Want**

- how the sense of mattering is related to asking
- to support the freedom for the other to say "no"
- to want fully without attachment
- to tie requests to needs, and why that matters
- to understand and overcome the challenges that block you from making requests
- to ask for what you want with clarity and boldness while remaining open to dialogue

## **Collaboration: Finding Solutions That Work for All**

- to find the way forward from needs to solutions
- to craft solutions by engaging in dialogue and playful search
- to hear and say an authentic "yes" and an open-hearted "no"
- to discover your own obstacles to collaboration
- to open to the core principle of true collaboration (the surfacing and shared holding of everyone's needs)
- to integrate concrete practices to deepen your capacity to collaborate.

Kashtan also offers a community of practice:

- to stir up and disrupt the habitual ways of relating to the world and ourselves
- to engage in community discussions
- to share ideas, enthusiasm, and insights
- to find friends, resonance, and support.

When quoting, always include the following sentence: “This material originates from Miki Kashtan’s online course *Making Life Work*, which can be accessed on <https://thefearlessheart.org/making-life-work/>.” If you are able to contribute financially, and find willingness in your heart, [you can contribute, via gift economy, to the sustainability of the course here](#).

## **Tips for Compassionate Communication (Gary Baran & CNVC)**

Try these NVC practices for internal, interpersonal, and organizational peace; to help you express how you are, or to empathize with how others are.

- Spend some time each day quietly reflecting on how you would like to relate to yourself and others.
- Remember that all human beings have the same fundamental needs.
- Check your intention to see if you are as interested in others getting their needs met as your own.
- When asking someone to do something, check first to see if you are making a request or a demand.
- Instead of saying what you DON'T want someone to do, say what you DO want them to do.
- Instead of saying what you want someone to BE, say what action you'd like the person to take, that you hope will help the person be that way.
- Before agreeing or disagreeing with anyone's opinions, try to tune in to what they are feeling and needing.
- Instead of saying "No," say what need of yours prevents you from saying "Yes."
- If you are feeling upset, think about what need of yours is not being met, and what you could do to meet it, instead of thinking about what's wrong with others or yourself.
- Instead of praising someone who did something you like, express your gratitude by telling the person what need of yours that action met.

2001, revised 2004 Gary Baran & CNVC. The right to freely duplicate this document is hereby granted.

“Our survival as a species depends on our ability to recognize that our well-being and the well-being of others are in fact one and the same.”

- Marshall Rosenberg

“What would a fully needs-based nonviolent civil disobedience campaign look like at this time? Will we find simple enough and robust enough practices that reliably increase our capacity to mourn, celebrate, and act in community? Will NVC, when radicalized again, support us in such necessary endeavors as reclaiming the commons, restoring dignity to work, taking learning out of schools and into the community, radically transforming how we engage with conflicts, and restoring the flow of resources necessary to sustain all life? I don’t know the answer. I know I want companionship in looking for it.”

- Miki Kashtan



## References and Resources

### Websites

Beyond Intractability (Guy & Heidi Burgess) <https://www.beyondintractability.org/>  
Center for Building a Culture of Empathy. (Edwin Rutsch) <http://cultureofempathy.com/>  
<http://bit.ly/zpo78Z>  
Center for Nonviolent Communication (Marshall Rosenberg, Robert Gonzales)  
<https://www.cnvc.org/>  
Centro de Transformación del Conflicto Humano (Ana Rhodes Castro)  
[www.transformaciondelconflicto.es](http://www.transformaciondelconflicto.es)  
Coming Down to Earth Conflict Transformation Summit (Nuno da Silva, Eva Schonveld, Ben Roberts)  
<https://www.conflicttransformationsummit.org/>  
Cup of Empathy (Marianne van Dijk) <https://cupofempathy.com/>  
Dare to Lead, Rising Strong, Unlocking Us, Courageworks (Brené Brown) <https://brenebrown.com>  
Emotional Intelligence Network (Joshua Freedman) <https://www.6seconds.org/> <https://eq.org/>  
The Fearless Heart (Miki Kashtan) <https://thefearlessheart.org/>  
Indigenous Peacemaking Initiative (Brett Lee Shelton) <https://peacemaking.narf.org/>  
International Institute for Restorative Practices (Ted Wachtel). <https://www.iirp.edu/>  
Nonviolent Global Liberation Community (Miki Kashtan). <https://nglcommunity.org/>  
Restorative Circles (Dominic Barter) <https://www.restorativecircles.org/>

### NVC websites

Asociación Comunicación NoViolenta (Carmen Sarmiento, Gerardo Sanchez, Amalasisi Murcia, Helen Adamson, Pilar de la Torre) <https://www.asociacioncomunicacionnoviolenta.org/>  
Bay Area NVC (Miki Kashtan) <https://baynvc.org/>  
British Columbia Network for Compassionate Communication (Katrina Kaneda, Mary Ellen McNaughton) <https://www.bcnc.ca/>  
Capital NVC (Barbra Esher, Jane Connor, Mali Parke) <https://www.capitalnvc.org/>  
Center for Collaborative Communication (Dian Killian) <https://workcollaboratively.com/>  
Center for Compassionate Living (Bryn Hazel, Beth Hansen) <https://www.compassionatecenter.org/>  
Centre for Compassionate Communication (Richard & Jill Broadbent)  
<https://www.compassionatecommunication.co.uk/>  
CNV Argentina (Miriam Moreno, Alejandra Bello) <http://www.cnvargentina.com.ar/>  
Compassionate Communication Center of Ohio (Mark Feinknopf, Cynthia Moe, Jerry Saunders)  
<https://www.speakingpeace.org/>  
Hawaii NVC (Christina Morf, Andrea Pro, Christopher Miller, Sharee Anderson)  
<https://hawaiinvc.org/>  
IVK Norge - Norsk Sirkel for Ikkevoldskommunikasjon (Anniken Poulsson Beer) <https://www.ivk.no/>  
Netzwerk Gewaltfreie Kommunikation Austria (Katharina Ossko, Ingrid Bösch, Marianne Boos-Czinglar, Andrea Stadler) <https://www.gewaltfrei.at/>  
New England Nonviolent Communication (Jerry Koch-Gonzalez) <http://www.newenglandnvc.org/>

New York Center for Nonviolent Communication (Thom Bond) <https://www.nycnvc.org/>

Nonviolent Communication Books and Resources (Marshall Rosenberg)

<https://www.nonviolentcommunication.com>

Northwest Compassionate Communication (Doug Dolstad, Laurel Andrews, Barbara Larson)

<http://nwcompass.org/>

NVC Academy (Mary MacKenzie & Mark Schultz) <https://nvctraining.com>

NVC Boston & The Art of Empathy (Gail Carroll, Paul Merrill) <https://www.nvcboston.org/>

NVC For All (Marwa Farouk, Chuck Powers, Birgit Imbild) <http://nvc4all.weebly.com/>

NVC UK (Ray Taylor, Tracy Seed, Therese Bentley) <https://nvc-uk.com/>

Oregon Network for Compassionate Communication (Bryn Hazel, Selene Aitken) <https://orncc.net/>

Rocky Mountain Compassionate Communication Network (David Steele, David Shindoll)

<https://rmccn.org/>

Wisconsin Empathy Guild (Jennifer Warnick, Jean McElhaney)

<http://www.wisconsinempathyguild.org/>

## Audio & Video

Barter, Dominic (Restorative Circles) 16:59 “An Introduction to Restorative Circles” 2010

<https://vimeo.com/6557584>

Brown, Brené (Unlocking Us) 3:25 “On Blame” 2015

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