

How to Disagree Without Being Disagreeable

Non Violent Communication and NLP

Also known as Compassionate Communication, Non Violent Communication (NVC) has been used in war torn areas across the world as well as in individual relationships. NVC has a lot in common with NLP. It's about being responsive to what another person is saying without necessarily agreeing. By Eve Menezes Cunningham

It's creator, Marshall Rosenberg has travelled around the world mediating in hot spots from Northern Ireland and Sierra Leone to the Middle East, Columbia, Bosnia and Serbia.

Have you ever worried that a row with someone you love could erupt into World War Three? Even if you generally have good relationships with your partner, friends, family and colleagues, you can use these techniques to make things even better. Because it's about getting to the needs behind words and behaviours, it can feel very risky to begin with.

Most of us have been brought up to believe that having needs is selfish and so we learn to suppress our own and dismiss others'. I did a basic NVC course a few years ago with NVC trainers and couple Anna Finlayson and Daren DeWitt. They credit the techniques with saving their relationship of several years.

Daren says, "If it weren't for NVC, we

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wouldn't still be in a relationship. Because we've had a way of connecting around things, we've worked through them. Loads of couples who just don't need to, split up."

Anna and Daren offer training in London, Germany, Amsterdam and Dublin, but say that



being a couple is their most "fertile practice ground to practice".

Daren said that one frequent argument was caused by his need to be accepted. By "just going along with whatever she said and then every few days, I would explode about

something insignificant. Now I check in with myself and Anna does too. We've been trained to believe that it's good to deny ourselves. NVC adds to what you already know about connection."

Anna says, "We've been alienated from our

needs and we are conditioned to feel shame around our them. When we start to express them and say what we want directly, it can feel manipulative because we're not supposed to want things."

Daren says, "We've been trained from birth to judge good and bad. If I'm in an argument with you, I'm the right person and you're wrong. We can get more understanding without labels."

They give an example of someone pushing through with no apology. We may quickly interpret this with a judgment ("So rude!") or diagnose it by inventing a longer story (maybe she had an argument with her colleague and that's why she's being so rude).

Marshall remembers a train where several children were running wild while the man who appeared to be their father sat seemingly oblivious. Other passengers tutted their disapproval and eventually someone asked him if he was OK. The father answered that he'd just left the hospital where he'd been told his wife wouldn't make it. He didn't know how to break the news to their children.

This extreme example reminds us that we never know what's behind other people's behaviour unless we take the time to connect with them. Daren says, "We get more connection with people if we focus on feelings and needs."

Sometimes, conflict arises from the best intentions. We might insist on helping someone even when we don't actually want to. Or we might assume we know what kind of help they need without checking if that would actually be helpful. Anna says, "This leads to resentment. If you don't genuinely want to help, ask yourself if someone else wants to help at that time."

NVC uses giraffes and jackals to illustrate different styles of communication. Giraffes have the largest heart of all mammals and their height gives them an overview. Because honesty about needs can be so scary, they also show us how to stick our necks out.

Jackals appear to be more aggressive and defensive so we aim to be like giraffes and to listen with empathy. If someone yells abuse, we can choose to yell back and escalate things. Or we can take a deep breath and find out what is behind their anger without taking responsibility for it.

Marshall Rosenberg remembers a time in the Middle East when his American accent provoked hostility. Instead of getting defensive about the foreign policies which were impacting his audience, he listened with empathy and they were able to move forward. Most of us aren't in

Giraffe and Jackal ears

4 ways to hear a message:

THEY SAY: "You look ridiculous in that!"
HOW DO YOU REACT?

- 1) [Jackal Out] – "Well I like it! Have you seen yourself?" (blaming back)
- 2) [Jackal In] – "I do look ridiculous! I always do this. Why do I dress so badly?" (internalising judgement, blame and shame leading to depression)
- 3) [Giraffe In] – "Oh, I feel really vulnerable when people say anything about my looks because it's important to me to have respect. I'll talk to this person and see what prompted them to say that." (self empathy)
- 4) [Giraffe Out] – "Do you feel frustrated because you'd like me to look a different way?" (empathy with them)



Basic needs

NVC is about connecting with your needs, expressing them and receiving other people's needs. There are no negative emotions. If you feel sad, depressed, anxious, or in pain, look for the message behind it. Some basic needs are: the need for acceptance, to contribute to life, security, recognition, belonging, sustenance, purpose, respect, understanding, and acknowledgment.

such highly charged situations but any kind of conflict – especially with people we love – can feel like a matter of life or death.

Next time you find yourself blaming yourself or someone else, for example, if you are feeling disrespected by a friend who is late "yet again", don't have a go at them or pretend to be fine with it.

Honour your feelings and theirs by expressing yourself. You could say, "I'm really upset that you are late because my time is precious to me." However they react, take another deep breath and show empathy. You might ask, "Are you angry with me for mentioning it because you really tried to be on time?"

As well as expressing our own needs, we need to meet the needs of others. It's often hard enough to know what's going on for ourselves. Daren said, "I was brought up to believe I was the cause of other people's feelings but I don't have that power! I have a responsibility but I can't cause feelings. Maybe for the first time in my life I'm learning to express myself directly. It's one thing to express myself to myself and work out how I'm feeling. It's another thing to actually

make a request of another person and I'm still working on this."

With other people we have to guess and then check that we've got it right. If it's inappropriate to express a feeling with the person who has triggered it, make sure you empathise with yourself. Resolve to deal with it later (with your diary, a trusted friend or some other safe outlet) and then you can release it.

When we compare ourselves to other people, we are letting our jackal run wild. No one wins when we compare ourselves to Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama or the imagined achievements of an ex or someone you went to school with. ●

Evaluations and observations:

Similar to the Meta Model in NLP, NVC can help you get clear on the real issue. Instead of escalating with an evaluation, try an observation. The more extreme the conflict, the more important the observation. If you don't check that out you might be on the wrong track. If someone's banging the table and you say, "You're angry", they might respond "No I'm not!". Try asking, "When you bang the table, are you angry?"

Evaluation: "You're going to make us late!"
Observation: "When I see you on the internet, still in your dressing gown, at 6.30, I think you won't be ready to leave at 7."

Evaluation: "We never do what I want."
Observation: "The last three times I suggested we do something, you said 'No'."

See www.CNVC.org and www.nvc-resolutions.co.uk for more information.