What's Love Got To Do With It?
A Thousand Ways to Say, "I Love You"

With Dian Killan

"I love you."



Ah, that warm and fuzzy feeling! I can see hear birds singing. Little cupids with their bows and arrows, and rainbows! Every song and poem about romantic love floats into my head… as The Beatles croon, "All you need is love!"

Love is a universal need.
We all need it. In fact, some Nonviolent Communication (NVC) trainers say that all needs come down to this one primal need: a desire for love. For most people, experiencing "love" in some form is a crucial human experience. It's literally linked to our survival (children without love, care or attention do not thrive or, in extreme cases, survive). Love is linked to larger desires for meaning, purpose, caring, intimacy, happiness, and belonging.

I personally believe our desire for love goes back to a root, pre-cognitive memory as infants of being held and fed — moments where we experienced warmth, nurturing, tenderness, safety, and mattering in the deepest way. Most of us (if we're lucky)

experience this kind of love deeply and consistently when young, with some caring adult. We then seek to find this experience of love again for the rest of our lives.

Yet while “love” is a primal, universal need, it is not a feeling.

This was surprising and even confusing at first when I was first learning NVC. Aren’t these magic words, “I love you,” some of the most connecting, universal, heart-opening and intimate words we can speak as human beings? And isn’t NVC about vulnerability and connection — and heartfelt communication? Sharing with someone that you love them can be a profound moment of risk and vulnerability—and tenderness.

Yet, the words, “I love you,” can, in fact, be easy to say and sometimes even a throw-away phrase — at times rote, formulaic, automatic. For many, at least where I live in the U.S., “love you” has become interchangeable with “good-bye” when closing a phone call with family or friends. Saying “I love you” in such moments is as devoid of meaningful connection as someone saying by rote “thank you,” or “I’m sorry.” What does it really mean?



And these words can be used to cloak a whole range of other experiences. I’ve noticed that sometimes when someone is unhappy with something they’ve said or done, they can say, “I love you,” as a way of trying to fix things with a verbal band-aid.

It’s a shorthand way of saying, “I’m heavy-hearted about what I’ve said —

so I want to remind you despite my actions, I care about you. And I'd like some trust around that — and reassurance that you believe me and forgive me." We're longing for connection in moments such as these — and restoration, and don't know how to ask for it or to find out if we have it. So we just say, "I love you." It's almost like saying, "I'm sorry." Neither expression tells us much about what the person is feeling or needing. Neither in fact has much authenticity or honesty, or vulnerability, or connection.

Inversely, we can use "I love you" for a treasure trove of riches. It's like saying, "thank you" when we could say so much more about how someone has made a difference for us and contributed to our well being.

So what happens when we take "love" out of the equation—at least as a verb?

What if instead of using a formula or holding place for how we feel, we actually share our authentic feelings and needs? And observations?

This, in my experience, fosters much more intimacy, trust, and connection — and yes, "love" (that warm, glowing, open-hearted, connected, yummy, relaxed feeling). Similar in NVC to sharing authentic gratitude, we can notice what's happening at the moment—what we are seeing or hearing, feeling (and sensing), and the needs met for us. We can then make a connection request if wanting to check, to discover how what we've shared has been heard and received. In this way, "love" becomes a form of gratitude and empathy—a celebration of needs met (and life) — and a true form of intimacy that further deepens trust and connection.

Practicing NVC in this way leads to a thousand ways to say "I love you." For the last year or so, I've been lucky to be experiencing this abundance of love regularly with my sweetheart. And it's greatly contributed to the quality of our connection and yes, our love—sometimes in surprising ways.

One of the first times I shared those sweet words, “I love you,” she asked me, “What does that mean right now?” That jolted me awake. To respond to her in a meaningful way meant I actually needed to check in with myself! What do those words mean to me? And not in general — what do they really mean to me, right now, at this moment?

I was invited to start noticing: her reaching over when still asleep to put her arm around me, a momentary expression on her face, the way she would articulate a thought, talks with my cat, or simply the quality of her presence. So many ways to say, “I love you.” So many ways to receive and take in love! And what a gift to notice how I actually am feeling… be it warm, tickled, relaxed, amused, relaxed, energized, or surprised.

Sharing in this way, I’ve learned much more about what matters to her—-what she sees/notices, what enriches her life, what stirs aliveness in me. And this brings us closer. When she shares how she’s feeling, I also can take in her appreciation differently—really take it in. Each “I love you” becomes a moment of insight and authenticity. This is the “love juice” (of genuine intimacy) that sustains relationships.

Ultimately, I remember through all this that love is not a feeling. It’s about our presence, our actions: Love made manifest. The small details of life. The fleeting moment. It reminds me of those lines in the Bible, that points to love as a need and choice/ action (rather simply a mood or feeling):

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs… It always protects,



always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." *(Corinthians 13:4-7 New International Version (NIV)*

Thinking of love in this way, as a need made manifest, keeps me grounded about choices I make each day in relationships.

The Quakers have a line that speaks directly to this: "What would love do?" If I am wanting to criticize or am feeling impatient, what would love do — right now? And what's getting in the way of my acting on that love? This leads to many opportunities for self-empathy (and sometimes too for honest expression). Again, it acts to deepen awareness, authenticity, and connection… and helps me live in alignment with my own values for care and integrity — and yes, love.

When we are connected to another living being in this way — empathically connected, sometimes the words "I love you" can be enough, or presence, and silence. As with all practices in NVC, there are no "rules." Yet if any moment I hear the words "I love you" and am not sure what those words mean right now, if I am not fully empathically clear or connected, or acting in a way that to me is outside integrity for "love," it's consistently a surprising and abundant gift of deeper insight and connection to ask and empathically listen.