

The Three Most Common Pitfalls of Nonviolent Communication

With Oren Jay Sofer

When I first learned about the concept of needs at a local communication workshop in my early 20s, I was astounded. I remember thinking, “Oh my gosh -- I have needs!” However, my ensuing attempts to use Nonviolent Communication (NVC) with family and friends didn’t always go so well.

Today, all around our country and the globe we see an increase in polarization and a lack of real dialogue. The need to have some facility with communication has never been more important. And for many, learning new concepts and tools of NVC (or any other communication technique) can be a powerful revelation. We may sense an inherent alignment with the values of compassion, collaboration, and empathy that shine through this beautiful practice. The possibility of listening and speaking in ways that lead to mutual giving from the heart can be truly life-changing.

Yet so often our hopes and aspirations for finding new and meaningful ways of connecting are dashed. We take our new words out for a spin and end up in a spectacular crash!

I still recall a backpacking trip I took with a good friend in the Catskill Mountains of NY State. We’d been close in college, spending many hours together pondering religion, philosophy and the utter mystery of being alive. Since graduating, I’d wanted to keep in touch more than he had.

On this trip, armed with my new NVC perspectives, I tried expressing my desire for more connection and closeness. I felt hurt and angry; I asked him why he hadn’t been in touch, and made vague requests for him to open up with me and share more. He was a quieter guy than I was, but I kept pushing each day, bringing up the same topics.

Needless to say, it didn’t go well. After that trip, we drifted even farther apart. It caused me great pain to lose him as a friend. And in spite of many attempts on my part to reach out, we’ve never reconnected.

Removing the Obstacles

There were many reasons those conversations didn’t turn out the way I’d hoped. Looking back, I can see that I wasn’t actually seeing my friend for who he was, or coming from a clear and helpful intention. The tools and practices of Nonviolent Communication are a powerful outward

form of a profound inner transformation. When we use the form without the proper substance or alignment inside, it can backfire.

There are three common obstacles to implementing any new communication practice, and particularly with Nonviolent Communication. In the early stages of learning, we often go through an “Obnoxious Phase,” in which we focus on meeting our own needs without attending to the needs of others. Excited and empowered by our newfound tools, we use them to speak up and advocate for ourselves.

Often this comes without the recognition that with power comes responsibility—the responsibility to include others' needs. Without the skills to identify and speak up for their own needs, others may perceive us as self-centered, controlling or manipulative: longing for more balance, care and inclusion in the way we express ourselves. If we don't take care to inquire and draw out other people's true feelings and desires, we risk meeting our own needs at the expense of others. And this always comes at a cost in the quality of the relationship.

Next, we often try out “Robot NVC,” an awkward period where we use the form so rigidly that it becomes difficult for others to connect with us authentically. This holds true for any communication practice. We lose the essence or the heart of it and begin to sound formulaic. When we use any communication technique automatically rather than genuinely, we risk losing connection with the other person.

The last obstacle is using a communication technique without examining or transforming our underlying intentions. In its grossest form, this occurs as a kind of self-deception about our motivation, in which we use the language of NVC to advance habitual patterns of manipulation, blame, or coercion. The practice of any communication method (as with any contemplative practice), involves instead an ongoing refinement of our intentions. It takes training and work to learn to shed habitual perceptions of blame on increasingly more subtle levels.

This experience, and others like it, led me to emphasize two essential foundations in my work developing the principles and practices of [Mindful Communication](#). The first is presence: our capacity to be embodied, present in a way that is open-minded, real and mutual. The second is our intention: coming from a clear and helpful place inside. Usually that means being grounded in the intention to understand one another.

Finding Strength in Integrity

Yet even after we get beyond the most common obstacles, we can still find our conversations falling short, sometimes with heartbreaking results. Our mind and heart may be aligned with the intentions of true care and mutuality; we may have developed great skill in expression and understanding. And still, there are times when we are unable to work things out or arrive at mutual understanding.

This is the truth of our human condition: things are beyond our control. There are too many variables and factors to predict or engineer a specific outcome. In these instances, when we try

our hardest and find no satisfying external result, we can encounter the possibility of developing a deeper flexibility and strength of heart.

Here, we learn how to rely on our own values and integrity as a source of strength. Ultimately, it is how we walk through this life that we have the most choice and control over. When we can bring awareness, kindness and a spirit of humble investigation to our experiences, the outcome starts to matter less. We learn how to inquire more and more deeply into our motivations and actions with radical honesty, and how to rely on the wholeness of our intentions. And, when necessary, we find ways to mourn our losses and hold the beauty of a broken heart with tenderness.

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