

Laughter, IPNB and Empathy

With Sarah Peyton

“Alicia, do you have a needs guess for Jonathan,” I asked in an empathy circle last week.

Instead of a needs guess, Alicia said, “I’m guessing that if he gets his daughter a tutor, she’ll do better.”

For everyone who loves NVC, these are the cringe-worthy moments, when we are so longing for the relief and understanding that come with resonance, and instead someone offers strategy. These people are bringing their best intentions to support and contribute, but instead of the resonance that forges connection and trust, something else happens.

I looked over at Jonathan, who was drawing his eyebrows together and slumping back in his chair.

Luckily for the empathy circle, Alicia was familiar with depth empathy processes. So I asked her, “When you think about wanting Jonathan to get his daughter a tutor, what happens in your body?”

“My chest is tight and I’ve stopped breathing,” she answered.

“If that tightness were an emotion, what would it be?” I asked.

“A mixture of anger and hopelessness,” she said.

The circle was silent, absorbing the understanding that we were in the presence of unexpected emotion.

Alicia took in a breath. “I know why I feel this way,” she said. “My son was dyslexic, but we didn’t know. He suffered so much in school, and then we finally found out, he had been shamed instead of supported almost all the way through school.”

The circle offered needs guesses: “Is there a longing for every child to be supported?” “Do you want every parent to have all the information they need so that they can make the best decisions possible for their children?” “Are you mourning the years of shame that your son endured?” “Do you need acknowledgement for the depth of rage and grief?”

After the guesses, Alicia’s chest was free and she was breathing again.

“Okay,” I said. “Now when you think about Jonathan and his daughter, what happens?”

Alicia turned toward Jonathan. “I wonder if you are so worried, and if you need hope?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Jonathan. He straightened up and his face relaxed. “I need to have faith in our connection, and that I will know when it’s right to intervene, and when I need to let go.”

One of the most important skills in NVC is telling needs from strategies, but no matter how experienced we are, when a spike of emotional pain blindsides us, we can hear strategies coming out of our mouths instead of needs guesses. In those moments, the resonant parts of our brain (the right insula and prefrontal cortex, ref. Daniel Siegel) have gone off line, and all we have access to is our ever-helpful left hemisphere (ref. Ian McGilchrist), and its best idea of relationship is to make things better with action.

It is most supportive of learning to treat ourselves and our empathy buddies with gentleness in these moments, inviting the body of the strategist back to the level of sensation and offering needs guesses, rather than making anyone wrong. The left-hemisphere hijack strikes us all in the unexpected moments when our own pain intrudes. It is only once that spasm relaxes that we find our way back to empathy. With repeated experiences and practice, our left hemisphere starts to learn that the best possible strategy is usually empathy.