

My Journey Into Empathy and Self-Connection

In NVC we use the term empathy to describe the energy of presence, creating inner calm and focus so that we can hold non-judgmental awareness. I have come to think of myself as having an internal empathy battery. Here is an example of discovering my empathy battery in 'negative charge' and my journey of re-charging it.

At my second NVC workshop I experienced empathy, NVC style. Marshall Rosenberg, the creator of the Nonviolent Communication (sm) process, taught a session on empathy. Then we arranged ourselves in groups to practice empathy in the form of listening, then guessing feelings and needs (reformulation).

After I spoke, the people in my group made several guesses at my feelings and needs and I felt growing frustration. Then certified NVC trainer Gina Cenciose joined our group, and within a few moments offered up a reformulation that brought me deep relief. I knew in that moment that NVC was for me.

Things that **Block Empathy**: *Handout from NVC Level 1*

Advising: "I think you should ____"

Educating: "This could turn into a positive experience if you just ____"

One-Upping: "That's nothing, wait till you hear what happened to me."

Consoling: "It wasn't your fault: you did the best you could."

Sympathizing: "Oh you poor thing."

Story-telling: "That reminds me of something I heard on the news"

Shutting down: "Cheer up. Don't feel so bad."
"Come on, let's go (for an ice-cream) (to the gym)."

Interrogating: "When did this begin?"

Correcting: "That's not how it happened."

Reassuring: "It will all be OK."

Denial of Feelings: "Don't worry. It's silly to worry."

Minimizing: "This isn't so important."

Diagnosing: "Your problem is you're a compulsive worrier."

Analyzing: "I think you are reacting like this because of your personality type."

However, for several years empathy remained a mystery to me. I couldn't seem to connect the dots of my various experiences. Working with the Empathy Blocks, (see textbox) and with growing patience, I could see that my habit of wanting to help by advising kept interfering. When I tried to listen I found that my mind wanted to offer suggestions - strategies intended to help reduce pain. It often involved suggesting a book to read or sharing an insight from some workshop I had attended. I thought these ideas would help reduce the person's suffering. Then I began to experience that thinking of solutions kept me from being **with** the person.

My next step was to look with gentleness at my habit of offering suggestions as a way of helping. Since I had been a teacher for over 30 years, educating was a very strong habit. I decided that when my mind wanted to educate, I would simply notice.

Just notice.

Not try to change my habit, but

instead become more aware of its many flavors and its deep roots in my behavior. What I discovered was a bit shocking to me - - strong resistance to giving it up.

Ahhhh! I noticed a part of me was telling myself I *ought* to give up educating. After all, educating is on the Empathy Blocker list. When we tell ourselves that we 'ought to do something', we can call that should-energy. I noticed that I was holding a lot of should-energy in those moments.

I remembered Carl Rogers quote: "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

This led me to a two-pronged approach to working with this habit.

- 1) When I noticed that my mind wanted to offer suggestions, I would silently thank it for its ideas and ask myself if I was willing to bracket the ideas and come back to the person I was holding empathy for. Sometimes I accepted that request, which led to my being able to be in stronger presence with the other. Sometimes I didn't accept the request, and I offered education.
- 2) That led to the second aspect of my practice. When I did offer education, I watched the result. It was often not the connection I really wanted. So I began to ask myself with openness and loving kindness, why was the urge to educate so strong?

I told myself internally that I was not trying to get rid of educating. I wanted to understand its motivation.

I noticed that often, just before my thoughts of education arose, I felt fear. I began to look at my relationship to fear. I didn't like it at all. In addition to the usual aversion to fear, I have a spiritual practice that promotes fearlessness. So when I experienced fear, I told myself that my spiritual practice was weak. Not an enjoyable thought.

When I realized that my suggestions were an attempt to relieve or cover up my fear, my attention shifted to my relationship to fear. I decided to try the practice of *accepting* my fear, by turning toward it and holding it in the arms of my loving attention, as I would a very frightened young child. I would say, "Fear, I see you. I accept that you are here. I welcome you as an old friend. Please sit here with me in my loving awareness."

I held it in my awareness. Not trying to soothe it. Not trying to shift it. Not trying to even understand it. I practiced being with it. I noticed how long I could sit with it without being swallowed up in its power. I noticed that the more I followed this practice, the longer I could usually be with it.

After several weeks I came to a realization that is currently working for me. Fearlessness is not being without fear; it is being willing to be **with** my fear, with curiosity and acceptance.

As I use this self-empathy practice to turn toward the emotions I fear, I become better able to be completely present with another person without falling into my habit of educating. I experience richer connections with myself and those around me.

Peggy Smith www.opencommunication.org

Certified trainer with the Center For Nonviolent Communication, www.cnvc.org