

Feelings: The Golden Road

In our first Nonviolent Communication workshop we are encouraged to embrace our feelings as valuable information. Whether the feelings I am experiencing are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, they are the “road” pointing me to the universal needs that are alive within me.

To use my feelings as the roadway to my treasured needs, I want to be careful of two detours that take me down the blame and judgment journey instead of the self-connecting journey of needs-based consciousness.

(Caution #1) One detour is confusing thoughts and feelings. Feelings are an energy that exists in my body. Sometimes I have names for my feelings – anger, fatigue, hopelessness, frustration, joy, happiness, delight, playfulness – other times I experience the energy that is present as a sensation. I might feel the energy of constriction somewhere, a tightening of muscles, a sensation of bubbles in my chest, or a vague sensation in my leg reminiscent of smoke.

Learning to quiet the mind and open awareness to this moment-to-moment energy flow can be challenging for many of us who took on in childhood a belief that experiencing or expressing feelings could be dangerous. We were affected not only by our family but by a culture with gender and social norms about feelings.

We don’t want to be judged as right/wrong or good/bad. One way we try to protect ourselves from judgment is by labeling our thoughts as feelings. This habit may have arisen to protect us from judgments. Now this common sentence pattern inhibits our ability to use feelings as sign posts directing us to find what needs are expressing themselves.

I have found that one useful practice for distinguishing thoughts from feelings is to self-monitor my sentence patterns with an awareness question: Am I using any of the following sentence frames?

I feel *that*

I feel *as if*

I feel *you (I, she, he, they)*

I feel *like*

If any of these phrases is used preceding what we hope is a feeling word, it is unlikely that an authentic feeling will follow. Instead, using these sentence patterns disguises thoughts as feelings.

If I can use the word “think” instead of “feel” in any sentence and it still makes sense, then I am confident I’m expressing a thought. I make it a habit to restate my sentence to contribute to clarity for myself and others.

I think that

I believe that

I think you (I, she, he, they)

(Caution #2) The second detour that keeps me from authentically experiencing my feelings is taken when I use words that assign judgments of myself or someone else and then call the judgment a feeling. This group of judging words is sometimes called “false-feelings” or “faux feelings”.

This group includes words such as: manipulated, abused, over-powered, rejected, ignored, misunderstood, taken-for-granted, stupid, appreciated, unappreciated, accepted, unaccepted. (fuller list below)

These are important labels because they signal that I am having a strong and unpleasant reaction. Recognizing this is one step toward my connection to an authentic feeling.

To promote needs-based consciousness, I want to uncover the vulnerable experience underneath these labels. I do this most effectively by inviting myself to explore this question:

“Peggy, when you tell yourself that you are _____, how do you feel?”

I ask this question of myself with a gentle, kind inquiring mind. If I ask myself with a stern “teacher” attitude, my inner experience will usually hide even deeper and become less available to me.

For example, let’s imagine I find myself thinking, “In this friendship I feel taken for granted.”

My internal monitor alerts me I am using a judgment and calling it a feeling. So I invite myself to sit quietly. I take a few quiet breaths to calm myself. I make an intention to be open to whatever awareness comes out of my inquiry.

Then I ask myself with a kind loving tone, “Peggy, when you tell yourself you are taken for granted, how do you feel?”

My attention is focused on my body. I scan for sensations. When I become aware of whatever is happening (one sensation or several) I continue to sit quietly for a few moments, letting the sensations happen. I am not trying to sooth the sensation; I want to experience it fully. Then I ask the sensation, “If you had words to describe yourself, what would it be?”

I might answer myself “sad and frightened.”

Sometimes I find I substitute a different judgmental word for the original one. In this example, I might tell myself “I am feeling ignored.” When that happens, I keep accompanying myself by asking the same question with the new word in it. I keep asking until I find the authentic feeling underneath.

Being present to our authentic feelings is what Marshall Rosenberg calls sweet pain. While it is painful to touch sadness and fear within me, I also experience a release because I am experiencing myself authentically without judgment. Finding the authentic feeling is the key to reading the roadmap of my needs.

Practice Ideas:

1) Take several weeks to monitor yourself for these sentence frames:

“I feel that”

“I feel like”

“I feel you/I/she/he/they”

When you find yourself thinking or saying any of these, rephrase the sentence with the word “think” in place of the word “feel.”

2) If you find yourself using one of the judgmental words (see text box) in your thoughts or speech, commit to spending a few minutes of self-exploration time. Use the exercise outlined in the feature article to connect to the authentic feeling(s) alive in you at the moment.

3) Use the feelings and needs cards several times a week to help connect authentic feelings to needs from a variety of daily experiences.

Judgmental words sometimes called feelings (partial list):

Accepted	appreciated/unappreciated	attacked
Betrayed	bullied	criticized
Disliked	distrusted/trusted	harassed
Ignored	intimidated	left out
Manipulated	misunderstood	neglected
Overpowered	pressured	put down
Rejected	stupid	trapped
Tricked	Unwanted	

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