

Where Am I?

Peggy Smith, certified NVC trainer

Whether my Nonviolent Communication (NVC) experience is based on having attended a 1- hour presentation, a 12-hour introductory workshop, or years of intensives, in each moment the starting point of nonviolent consciousness is the same:

Am I aware in THIS moment how I am receiving the messages around me?

NVC brings me awareness that I have choice about how I receive the messages life delivers. Often my reactions happen so quickly that I am not aware that I am making choices. Slowing down—pausing—accepting with loving-kindness how I'm viewing each moment is the way to increase my range of choices.



When something happens I have four ways (exemplified by each of the four chairs) I can react.

The first two ways are cultivated in our culture based in right/wrong thinking: there is a problem and the most important thing is to find out who is at fault.

Chair #1:

Whatever is happening is definitely YOUR fault. When I sit in this chair my mind is busy telling myself YOU are the problem.

Thinking from this chair may sound something like:

"It's because you did _____ that I feel _____."

Or "If only you weren't so _____ (passive-aggressive/mean/bullying/over bearing/wimpy) things would be better around here."

Chair #2:

Whatever is happening is definitely MY fault. When I sit in this chair my mind is busy telling myself that I am the problem.

Thinking from this chair may sound something like:

“Oh, if only I could be _____ (more organized – efficient – smarter – kinder – tougher – compassionate – assertive – creative, etc.).

“I’ll never get this right! If only I could change things would be better.”

The third and fourth ways to respond are based in the options NVC offers... connecting feelings to needs. The most important thing in each moment is self-awareness and loving self-connection.

Chair #3:

Moment to moment I sense what emotional reaction I experience, either as sensations in the body or with descriptive terms, (happy, sad, annoyed, joyful,) AND I connect those feelings to the needs within me that are stimulating them. The focus when I am sitting in Chair #3 is self-empathy, connecting my feelings to the needs that generated them.

Thinking from this chair may sound something like:

“When I see the backyard with old furniture scattered around, I feel annoyance arising from needs of ease and beauty.”

Chair #4:

Moment to moment I am curious about what emotional reaction you are experiencing and what needs are stimulating those emotions. The focus here is empathic guessing about YOU, wondering what feelings YOU may be experiencing and what needs may have generated them.

Thinking from this chair may sound something like:

“Oh, their check didn’t come when they hoped. I wonder if they are feeling anxious arising from the needs of honoring agreements, ease, and support?”

It is important to remember, it’s not the words we speak on the outside, but the thoughts we have on the inside, that determines which chair we are operating from. I might be saying the perfect NVC dialogue phrases but inwardly thinking judgments of myself or the other person.

To develop this compassionate consciousness, the first step is to pause long enough to check inside and see which chair is supporting my thinking. If I find myself operating out of Chairs #1 or #2 and I grasp that this way of thinking is unlikely to

get the connection I am yearning for—connection with myself and the other person—I can use the NVC process to shift to either Chair #3 or #4.

The key to the shift is EMPATHY. Taking the time to accompany the parts of me that use judging and interpretation to call out for my attention. Empathy is a fundamental need that is often not well nourished in modern culture. Working with skilled trainers who can help us develop our empathy skills is of great value to developing peace within ourselves and the world.

Further Practice:

Idea # 1

Have a deck of Feelings and Needs cards* and for 21 days use them to connect feelings to needs.

- Try taking 10 minutes to remember something that happened in the past 24 hours.

- Make an observation.

- Ask yourself, “Thinking about this observation NOW, what feelings are stimulated in me?” Lay out those cards.

- Slowly go through the needs deck and lay down the cards that connect to each feeling.

- Take time to connect to each Need card you lay down with the thought, “I have the beautiful need of _____ flowing within me.”

Be sure to do this exercise for neutral and joyful experiences as well as upsetting ones. Only doing this for upsetting events may make associations within you that NVC is connected to painful things... the process is equally important to utilize for all events.

* Feelings & Needs cards can be downloaded free of charge from www.opencommunication.org/resources.html

Idea #2 For one week, 6 – 8 times during the day, pause and ask yourself with loving curiosity – “Which chair am I thinking from in this moment?”

Idea #3 Take an NVC course.

Article by Peggy Smith, certified NVC trainer

See www.opencommunication.org for workshops with Peggy Smith.

See www.cnvc.org for workshops around the world.