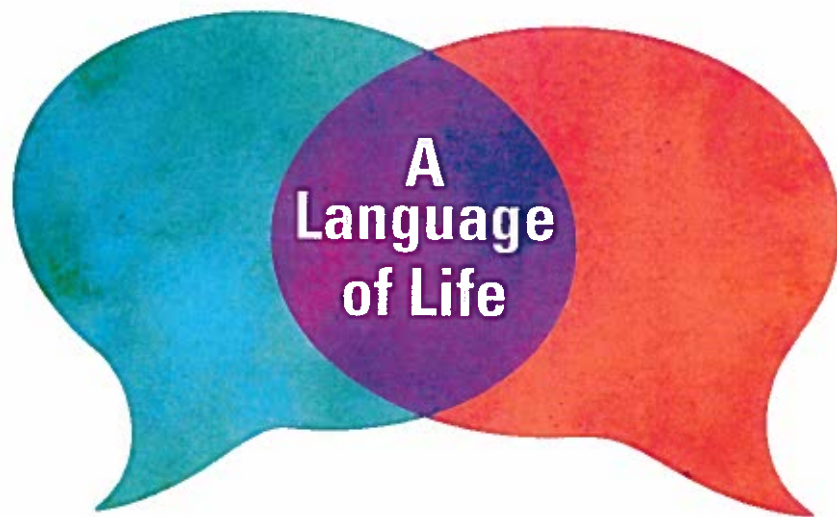


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Nonviolent **COMMUNICATION**

2nd Edition



"This is one of the most useful books you'll ever read."

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MARSHALL B. ROSENBERG, PhD

Endorsed by Arun Gandhi, Deepak Chopra,
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Foreword

Arun Gandhi

Founder and President, M.K. Gandhi
Institute for Nonviolence

As a person of color, growing up in apartheid South Africa in the 1940s was not something anyone relished. Especially not if you were brutally reminded of your skin color every moment of every day. To be beaten up at the age of ten by white youths because they consider you too black and then by black youths because they consider you too white is a humiliating experience that would drive anyone to vengeful violence.

I was so outraged that my parents decided to take me to India and leave me for some time with Grandfather, the legendary M.K. Gandhi, so that I could learn from him how to deal with the anger, the frustration, the discrimination, and the humiliation that violent color prejudice can evoke in you. In the eighteen months I learned more than I anticipated. My only regret now is that I was just thirteen years old and a mediocre student at that. If only I had been older, a bit wiser, and a bit more thoughtful, I could have learned so much more. But, one must be happy with what one has received and not be greedy, a fundamental lesson in nonviolent living. How can I forget this?

One of the many things I learned from Grandfather is to understand the depth and breadth of nonviolence and to acknowledge that one is violent and that one needs to bring about a qualitative change in one's attitude. We often don't acknowledge our violence because we are ignorant about it; we assume we are not violent because our vision of violence is one

of fighting, killing, beating, and wars—the types of things that average individuals don't do.

To bring this home to me, Grandfather made me draw a family tree of violence using the same principles as for a genealogical tree. His argument was that I would have a better appreciation of nonviolence if I understood and acknowledged the violence that exists in the world. He assisted me every evening to analyze the day's happenings—everything that I experienced, read about, saw, or did to others—and put them down on the tree either under “physical,” if it was violence where physical force was used, or under “passive,” if it was the type of violence where the hurt was more emotional.

Within a few months I covered one wall in my room with acts of “passive” violence which Grandfather described as being more insidious than “physical” violence. He then explained that passive violence ultimately generated anger in the victim who, as an individual or as a member of a collective, responded violently. In other words, it is passive violence that fuels the fire of physical violence. It is because we don't understand or appreciate this that either all our efforts to work for peace have not fructified or that each peace has been temporary. How can we extinguish a fire if we don't first cut off the fuel that ignites the inferno?

Grandfather always vociferously stressed the need for nonviolence in communications—something that Marshall Rosenberg has been doing admirably for several years through his writings and his seminars. I read with considerable interest Mr. Rosenberg's book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* and am impressed by the depth of his work and the simplicity of the solutions.

As Grandfather would say, unless “we become the change we wish to see in the world,” no change will ever take place. We are all, unfortunately, waiting for the other person to change first.

Nonviolence is not a strategy that can be used today and discarded tomorrow; nonviolence is not something that makes you meek or a pushover. Nonviolence is about inculcating

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positive attitudes to replace the negative attitudes that dominate us. Everything that we do is conditioned by selfish motives—what's in it for me. More so in an overwhelmingly materialistic society that thrives on rugged individualism. None of these negative concepts are conducive to building a homogeneous family, community, society, or nation.

It is not important that we come together in a moment of crisis and show our patriotism by flying the flag; it is not enough that we become a superpower by building an arsenal that can destroy this earth several times over; it is not enough that we subjugate the rest of the world through our military might—because peace cannot be built on the foundations of fear.

Nonviolence means allowing the positive within you to emerge. Be dominated by love, respect, understanding, appreciation, compassion, and concern for others rather than the self-centered and selfish, greedy, hateful, prejudiced, suspicious, and aggressive attitudes that dominate our thinking. We often hear people say: This world is ruthless, and if you want to survive you must become ruthless too. I humbly disagree with this contention.

This world is what we have made of it. If it is ruthless today it is because we have made it ruthless by our attitudes. If we change ourselves we can change the world, and changing ourselves begins with changing our language and methods of communication. I highly recommend reading this book and applying the Nonviolent Communication process it teaches. It is a significant first step toward changing our communication and creating a compassionate world.

—Arun Gandhi



Receiving Empathically

The last four chapters described the four components of NVC: what we are observing, feeling, and needing, and what we would like to request to enrich our lives. Now we turn from self-expression to apply these same four components to hearing what others are observing, feeling, needing, and requesting. We refer to this part of the communication process as *receiving empathically*.

The two parts of NVC:
1. expressing honestly
2. receiving empathically

Presence: Don't Just Do Something, Stand There

Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. The Chinese philosopher Chuang-Tzu stated that true empathy requires listening with the whole being: "The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of the understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear, or to the mind. Hence it demands the emptiness of all the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind."

Empathy: emptying our mind and listening with our whole being

Empathy with others occurs only when we have successfully shed all preconceived ideas and judgments about them. The Austrian-born Israeli philosopher Martin Buber describes this quality of presence that life demands of us: "In spite of all similarities, every

living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction that cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you."

The presence that empathy requires is not easy to maintain. "The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle," asserts French philosopher Simone Weil. "Nearly all those who think they have the capacity do not possess it." Instead of offering empathy, we tend

**Ask before offering
advice or reassurance.**

instead to give advice or reassurance and to explain our own position or feeling. Empathy, on the other hand, requires us to focus full attention on the other person's message. We give to others the time and space they need to express themselves fully and to feel understood. There is a Buddhist saying that aptly describes this ability: "Don't just do something, stand there."

It is often frustrating for someone needing empathy to have us assume that they want reassurance or "fix-it" advice. I received a lesson from my daughter that taught me to check whether advice or reassurance is wanted before offering any. She was looking in the mirror one day and said, "I'm as ugly as a pig."

"You're the most gorgeous creature God ever put on the face of the earth," I declared. She shot me a look of exasperation, exclaimed, "Oh, Daddy!" and slammed the door as she left the room. I later found out that she had wanted some empathy. Instead of my ill-timed reassurance, I could have asked, "Are you feeling disappointed with your appearance today?"

My friend Holley Humphrey identified some common behaviors that prevent us from being sufficiently present to connect empathically with others. The following are examples:

- Advising: "I think you should . . ." "How come you didn't . . .?"
- One-upping: "That's nothing; wait'll you hear what happened to me."
- Educating: "This could turn into a very positive experience for you if you just . . ."

- Consoling: "It wasn't your fault; you did the best you could."
- Story-telling: "That reminds me of the time . . ."
- Shutting down: "Cheer up. Don't feel so bad."
- Sympathizing: "Oh, you poor thing . . ."
- Interrogating: "When did this begin?"
- Explaining: "I would have called but . . ."
- Correcting: "That's not how it happened."

In his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, Rabbi Harold Kushner describes how painful it was for him, when his son was dying, to hear the words people offered that were intended to make him feel better. Even more painful was his recognition that for twenty years he had been saying the same things to other people in similar situations!

Believing we have to "fix" situations and make others feel better prevents us from being present. Those of us in the role of counselor or psychotherapist are particularly susceptible to this belief. Once, when I was working with twenty-three mental health professionals, I asked them to write, word for word, how they would respond to a client who says, "I'm feeling very depressed. I just don't see any reason to go on." I collected the answers they had written down and announced, "I am now going to read out loud what each of you wrote. Imagine yourself in the role of the person who expressed the feeling of depression, and raise your hand after each statement you hear that gives you a sense that you've been understood." Hands were raised to only three of the twenty-three responses. Questions such as, "When did this begin?" constituted the most frequent response; they give the appearance that the professional is obtaining the information necessary to diagnose and then treat the problem. In fact, such intellectual understanding of a problem blocks the kind of presence that empathy requires. When we are thinking about people's words and listening to how they connect to our theories, we are looking at people—we are not with them.

Intellectual understanding blocks empathy.

The key ingredient of empathy is presence: we are wholly present with the other party and what they are experiencing. This quality of presence distinguishes empathy from either mental understanding or sympathy. While we may choose at times to sympathize with others by feeling their feelings, it's helpful to be aware that during the moment we are offering sympathy, we are not empathizing.

Listening for Feelings and Needs

In NVC, no matter what words people use to express themselves, we listen for their observations, feelings, needs, and requests. Imagine you've loaned your car to a new neighbor who had a

No matter what others say, we only hear what they are (1) observing, (2) feeling, (3) needing, and (4) requesting.

personal emergency, and when your family finds out, they react with intensity: "You are a fool for having trusted a total stranger!" You can use the components of NVC to tune in to the feelings and needs of those family members in contrast to either (1) blaming yourself by taking the

message personally, or (2) blaming and judging them.

In this situation, it's obvious what the family is observing and reacting to: the lending of the car to a relative stranger. In other situations, it may not be so clear. If a colleague tells us, "You're not a good team player," we may not know what he or she is observing, although we can usually guess at the behavior that might have triggered such a statement.

The following exchange, from a workshop, demonstrates the difficulty of focusing on other people's feelings and needs when we are accustomed to assuming responsibility for their feelings and taking messages personally. The woman in this dialogue wanted to learn to hear the feelings and needs behind certain of her husband's statements. I suggested that she guess at his feelings and needs and then check it out with him.

Husband's statement: What good does talking to you do? You never listen.

Woman: Are you feeling unhappy with me?

MBR: When you say "with me," you imply that his feelings are the result of what you did. I would prefer for you to say, "Are you unhappy because you were needing . . . ?" and not "Are you unhappy with me?" It would put your attention on what's going on within him and decrease the likelihood of your taking the message personally.

Woman: But what would I say? "Are you unhappy because you . . . ? Because you what?"

MBR: Get your clue from the content of your husband's message, "What good does talking to you do? You never listen." What is he needing that he's not getting when he says that?

Woman: (*trying to empathize with the needs expressed through her husband's message*) Are you feeling unhappy because you feel like I don't understand you?

MBR: Notice that you are focusing on what he's thinking, and not on what he's needing. I think you'll find people to be less threatening if you hear what they're needing rather than what they're thinking about you. Instead of hearing that he's unhappy because he thinks you don't listen, focus on what he's needing by saying, "Are you unhappy because you are needing . . ."

Woman: (*trying again*) Are you feeling unhappy because you are needing to be heard?

MBR: That's what I had in mind. Does it make a difference for you to hear him this way?

Woman: Definitely—a big difference. I see what's going on for him without hearing that I had done anything wrong.

Listen to what people are needing rather than what they are thinking.

Paraphrasing

After we focus our attention and hear what others are observing, feeling, and needing and what they are requesting to enrich their lives, we may wish to reflect back by paraphrasing what we have understood. In our previous discussion on requests (Chapter 6), we discussed how to ask for a reflection; now we will look at how to offer it to others.

If we have accurately received the other party's message, our paraphrasing will confirm this for them. If, on the other hand, our paraphrase is incorrect, we give the speaker an opportunity to correct us. Another advantage of choosing to reflect a message back to the other party is that it offers them time to reflect on what they've said and an opportunity to delve deeper into themselves.

NVC suggests that our paraphrasing take the form of questions that reveal our understanding while eliciting any necessary corrections from the speaker. Questions may focus on these components:

1. what others are observing: "Are you reacting to how many evenings I was gone last week?"
2. how others are feeling and the needs generating their feelings: "Are you feeling hurt because you would have liked more appreciation of your efforts than you received?"
3. what others are requesting: "Are you wanting me to tell you my reasons for saying what I did?"

These questions require us to sense what's going on within other people, while inviting their corrections should we have sensed incorrectly. Notice the difference between these questions and the ones below:

1. "What did I do that you are referring to?"
2. "How are you feeling?" "Why are you feeling that way?"
3. "What are you wanting me to do about it?"

This second set of questions asks for information without first sensing the speaker's reality. Though they may appear to be the most direct way to connect with what's going on within the other person, I've found that questions like these are not the safest route to obtain the information we seek. Many such questions may give speakers the impression that we're a schoolteacher examining them or a psychotherapist working on a case. If we do decide to ask for information in this way, however, I've found that people feel safer if we first reveal the feelings and needs within ourselves that are generating the question. Thus, instead of asking someone, "What did I do?" we might say, "I'm frustrated because I'd like to be clearer about what you are referring to. Would you be willing to tell me what I've done that leads you to see me in this way?" While this step may not be necessary—or even helpful—in situations where our feelings and needs are clearly conveyed by the context or tone of voice, I would recommend it particularly during moments when the questions we ask are accompanied by strong emotions.

When asking for information, first express our own feelings and needs.

How do we determine if an occasion calls for us to reflect people's messages back to them? Certainly if we are unsure that we have accurately understood the message, we might use paraphrasing to elicit a correction to our guess. But even if we are confident that we've understood them, we may sense the other party wanting confirmation that their message has been accurately received. They may even express this desire overtly by asking, "Is that clear?" or "Do you understand what I mean?" At such moments, hearing a clear paraphrase will often be more reassuring to the speaker than hearing simply, "Yes, I understand."

For example, shortly after participating in an NVC training, a volunteer at a hospital was requested by some nurses to talk to an elderly patient: "We've told this woman she isn't that sick and that she'd get better if she took her medicine, but all she does is sit in her room all day long repeating, 'I want to die. I want to die.'" The volunteer approached the elderly woman, and as the nurses had

predicted, found her sitting alone, whispering over and over, "I want to die."

"So you would like to die," the volunteer empathized. Surprised, the woman broke off her chant and appeared relieved. She began to talk about how no one understood how terrible she was feeling. The volunteer continued to reflect back the woman's feelings; before long such warmth had entered their dialogue that they were sitting with their arms locked around each other. Later that day, the nurse questioned the volunteer about her magic formula: the elderly woman had started to eat and take her medicine, and was appearing in better spirits. Although the nurses had tried to help her with advice and reassurance, it wasn't until her interaction with the volunteer that this woman received what she was truly needing: connection with another human being who could hear her profound despair.

There are no infallible guidelines regarding when to paraphrase, but as a rule of thumb, it is safe to assume that speakers express

Reflect back messages that are emotionally charged.

intensely emotional messages and we appreciate our reflecting these back to them. When we ourselves are talking, we can make it easier for the listener

to clearly signify when we want or don't want our words to be reflected back to us.

There are occasions when we may choose not to verbally reflect someone's statements out of respect for certain cultural norms. For example, a Chinese man once attended a workshop to learn how to hear the feelings and needs behind his father's remarks. Because he could not bear the criticism and attack he continually heard in his father's words, this man dreaded visiting his father and avoided him for months at a time. He came to me ten years later and reported

Paraphrase only when it contributes to greater compassion and understanding.

his ability to hear feelings and needs had radically transformed his relationship with his father to the point where they now enjoy a close and loving connection. Although he listens for his father's feelings and needs, however, he does not paraphrase.

what he hears. "I never say it out loud," he explained. "In our culture, to direct-talk to a person about their feelings is something they're not used to. But thanks to the fact that I no longer hear what he says as an attack, but as his own feelings and needs, our relationship has become enormously wonderful."

"So you're never going to talk directly to him about feelings, but it helps to be able to hear them?" I asked.

"No, now I think I'm probably ready," he answered. "Now that we have such a solid relationship, if I were to say to him, 'Dad, I'd like to be able to talk directly to you about what we are feeling,' I think he just might be ready to do it."

When we paraphrase, the tone of voice we use is highly important. When hearing themselves reflected back, people are likely to be sensitive to the slightest hint of criticism or sarcasm. They are likewise negatively affected by a declarative tone that implies that we are telling them what is going on inside of them. If we are consciously listening for other people's feelings and needs, however, our tone communicates that we're asking whether we have understood—not claiming that we have understood.

We also need to be prepared for the possibility that the intention behind our paraphrasing will be misinterpreted. "Don't pull any of that psychology crap on me!" we may be told. Should this occur, we continue our effort to sense the speaker's feelings and needs; perhaps we see in this case that the speaker doesn't trust our motives and needs more understanding of our intentions before he can appreciate hearing our paraphrases. As we've seen, all criticism, attack, insults, and judgments vanish when we focus attention on hearing the feelings and needs behind a message. The more we practice in this way, the more we realize a simple truth: behind all those messages we've allowed ourselves to be intimidated by are just individuals with unmet needs appealing to us to contribute to their well-being. When we receive messages with this awareness, we never feel dehumanized by what others

Behind intimidating messages are merely people appealing to us to meet their needs.

A difficult message becomes an opportunity to enrich someone's life.

have to say to us. We only feel dehumanized when we get trapped in derogatory images of other people or thoughts of wrongness about ourselves.

As author and mythologist Joseph Campbell suggested, "What will they think of me?" must be put aside for bliss." We begin to feel this bliss when messages previously experienced as critical or blaming begin to be seen for the gifts they are: opportunities to give to people who are in pain.

If it happens regularly that people distrust our motives and sincerity when we paraphrase their words, we may need to examine our own intentions more closely. Perhaps we are paraphrasing and engaging the components of NVC in a mechanistic way without maintaining clear consciousness of purpose. We might ask ourselves, for example, whether we are more intent on applying the process "correctly" than on connecting with the human being in front of us. Or perhaps, even though we are using the form of NVC, our only interest is in changing the other person's behavior.

Some people resist paraphrasing as a waste of time. One city administrator explained during a practice session, "I'm paid to give facts and solutions, not to sit around doing psychotherapy with everyone who comes into my office." This same administrator, however, was being confronted by angry citizens who would come to him with their passionate concerns and leave dissatisfied for not having been heard. Some of these citizens later confided to me, "When you go to his office, he gives you a bunch of facts, but you never know whether he's heard you first.

Paraphrasing saves time.

When that happens, you start to distrust his facts." Paraphrasing tends to save, rather than waste, time. Studies in labor-management negotiations demonstrate that the time required to reach conflict resolution is cut in half when each negotiator agrees, before responding, to accurately repeat what the previous speaker had said.

I recall a man who was initially skeptical about the value of paraphrasing. He and his wife were attending an NVC workshop

during a time when their marriage was beset by serious problems. During the workshop, his wife said to him, "You never listen to me."

"I do too," he replied.

"No, you don't," she countered.

I addressed the husband: "I'm afraid you just proved her point. You didn't respond in a way that lets her know that you were listening to her."

He was puzzled by the point I was making, so I asked for permission to play his role—which he gladly gave since he wasn't having too much success with it. His wife and I then had the following exchange:

Wife: "You never listen to me."

MBR in role of husband: "It sounds like you're terribly frustrated because you would like to feel more connection when we speak."

The wife was moved to tears when she finally received this confirmation that she had been understood. I turned to the husband and explained, "I believe this is what she is telling you she needs—a reflection of her feelings and needs as a confirmation that she'd been heard." The husband seemed dumbfounded. "Is that all she wanted?" he asked, incredulous that such a simple act could have had such a strong impact on his wife.

A short time later, he enjoyed the satisfaction firsthand when his wife reflected back to him a statement that he had made with great emotional intensity. Savoring her paraphrase, he looked at me and declared, "It's valid." It is a poignant experience to receive concrete evidence that someone is empathically connected to us.

Sustaining Empathy

I recommend allowing others the opportunity to fully express themselves before turning our attention to solutions or requests for relief. When we proceed too quickly to what people might be requesting, we may not convey our genuine interest in their feelings and needs; instead, they may get the impression that we're in a hurry to either be free of them or to fix their problem. Furthermore, an initial message is often like the tip of an iceberg;

it may be followed by as yet unexpressed, but related—and often more powerful—feelings. By maintaining our attention on what's going on within others, we offer them a chance to fully explore and express their interior selves. We would stem this flow if we were to shift attention too quickly either to their request or to our own desire to express ourselves.

When we stay with empathy, we allow speakers to touch deeper levels of themselves.

Suppose a mother comes to us, saying, "My child is impossible. No matter what I tell him to do, he doesn't listen." We might reflect her feelings and needs by saying, "It

sounds like you're feeling desperate and would like to find some way of connecting with your son." Such a paraphrase often encourages a person to look within. If we have accurately reflected her statement, the mother might touch upon other feelings: "Maybe it's my fault. I'm always yelling at him." As the listener, we would continue to stay with the feelings and needs being expressed and say, for example, "Are you feeling guilty because you would have liked to have been more understanding of him than you have been at times?" If the mother continues to sense understanding in our reflection, she might move further into her feelings and declare, "I'm just a failure as a mother." We continue to remain with the feelings and needs being expressed: "So you're feeling discouraged and want to relate differently to him?" We persist in this manner until the person has exhausted all her feelings surrounding this issue.

We know a speaker has received adequate empathy when (1) we sense a release of tension, or (2) the flow of words comes to a halt.

What evidence is there that we've adequately empathized with the other person? First, when an individual realizes that everything going on within has received full empathic understanding, they will experience a sense of relief. We can become aware of

this phenomenon by noticing a corresponding release of tension in our own body. A second, even more obvious sign is that the person

will stop talking. If we are uncertain as to whether we have stayed long enough in the process, we can always ask, "Is there more that you wanted to say?"

When Pain Blocks Our Ability to Empathize

It is impossible for us to give something to another if we don't have it ourselves. Likewise, if we find ourselves unable or unwilling to empathize despite our efforts, it is usually a sign that we are too starved for empathy to be able to offer it to others. Sometimes, if we openly acknowledge that our own distress is preventing us from responding empathically, the other person may come through with the empathy we need.

We need empathy
to give empathy.

At other times, it may be necessary to provide ourselves with some "emergency first aid" empathy by listening to what's going on in ourselves with the same quality of presence and attention that we offer to others. Former United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld once said, "The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is happening outside." If we become skilled at giving ourselves empathy, we often experience in just a few seconds a natural release of energy that then enables us to be present with the other person. If this fails to happen, however, we have a couple of other choices.

We can scream—nonviolently. I recall spending three days mediating between two gangs that had been killing each other off. One gang called themselves Black Egyptians; the other, the East St. Louis Police Department. The score was two to one—a total of three dead within a month. After three tense days trying to bring these groups together to hear each other and resolve their differences, I was driving home and thinking how I never wanted to be in the middle of a conflict again for the rest of my life.

The first thing I saw when I walked through the back door was my children entangled in a fight. I had no energy to empathize with them so I screamed nonviolently: "Hey, I'm in a lot of pain! Right now I really do *not* want to deal with your fighting! I just

want some peace and quiet!" My older son, then nine, stopped short, looked at me, and asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

If we are able to speak our pain nakedly without blame, I find that even people in distress are sometimes able to hear our need. Of course I wouldn't want to scream, "What's the matter with you? Don't you know how to behave any better? I just got home after a rough day!" or insinuate in any way that their behavior was at fault. I scream nonviolently by calling attention to my own desperate needs and pain in the moment.

If, however, the other party is also experiencing such intensity of feelings that they can neither hear us nor leave us alone, and neither emergency empathy nor nonviolent screaming has served us well, our third recourse is to physically remove ourselves from the situation. We give ourselves time out and the opportunity to acquire the empathy we need to return in a different frame of mind.

Summary

Empathy is a respectful understanding of what others are experiencing. We often have a strong urge to give advice or reassurance and to explain our own position or feeling. Empathy, however, calls upon us to empty our mind and listen to others with our whole being.

In NVC, no matter what words others may use to express themselves, we simply listen for their observations, feelings, needs, and requests. Then we may wish to reflect back, paraphrasing what we have understood. We stay with empathy and allow others the opportunity to fully express themselves before we turn our attention to solutions or requests for relief.

We need empathy to give empathy. When we sense ourselves being defensive or unable to empathize, we need to (1) stop, breathe, give ourselves empathy; (2) scream nonviolently; or (3) take time out.

NVC in Action

A Wife Connects With Her Dying Husband

A patient had just been diagnosed with an advanced stage of lung cancer. The following scene at his home, involving the patient, his wife, and a visiting nurse, represents a last opportunity for him to connect emotionally with his wife and discuss his dying before being admitted to the hospital. The wife began the conversation with the nurse by complaining about the physical therapist who was part of the home health care team assigned to her husband's care.

Wife: She's a bad therapist.

Nurse: *(listening empathically to what the wife is feeling and wanting)* Are you feeling annoyed and wanting to see a different quality of care?

Wife: She doesn't do anything. She made him stop walking when his pulse got high.

Nurse: *(continuing to hear the wife's feelings and wants)* Is it because you want your husband to get better that you're scared if the physical therapist doesn't push him, he won't get stronger?

Wife: *(starting to cry)* Yes, I'm so scared!

Nurse: Are you scared of losing him?

Wife: Yes, we've been together so long.

Nurse: *(listening for other feelings behind the fear)* Are you worrying about how you would feel if he dies?

Wife: I just can't imagine how I am going to live without him. He's always been there for me. Always.

Nurse: So you're sad when you think of living without him?

Wife: There is no one else besides him. He's all I have, you know. My daughter won't even talk to me.

Nurse: It sounds like when you think of your daughter, you feel frustrated because you wish you had a different relationship with her.

Wife: I wish I did, but she is such a selfish person. I don't know why I even bothered having kids. A lot of good it does me now!

Nurse: Sounds to me like you might be somewhat angry and disappointed because you want more support from the family during your husband's illness.

Wife: Yes, he's so sick; I don't know how I am going to get through this alone. I haven't anyone . . . not even to talk to, except with you here . . . now. Even he won't talk about it. . . . Look at him! *(Husband remains silent and impassive.)* He doesn't say anything!

Nurse: Are you sad, wishing the two of you could support each other and feel more connected?

Wife: Yes. *(She pauses, then makes a request.)* Talk to him the way you talk to me.

Nurse: *(wishing to clearly understand the need that is being addressed behind the wife's request)* Are you wanting him to be listened to in a way that helps him express what he's feeling inside?

Wife: Yes, yes, that's exactly it! I want him to feel comfortable talking and I want to know what he is feeling.

Using the nurse's guess, the wife was able to first become aware of what she wanted and then find the words to articulate it. This was a key moment: often it is difficult for people to identify what they want in a situation, even though they may know what they don't want. We see how a clear request—"Talk to him the way you talk to me"—is a gift that empowers the other person. The nurse was then

able to act in a way she knew to be in harmony with the wife's wishes. This altered the atmosphere in the room, as the nurse and the wife could now "work together," both in a compassionate mode.

Nurse: (turning to the husband) How do you feel when you hear what your wife has shared?

Husband: I really love her.

Nurse: Are you glad to have an opportunity to talk about this with her?

Husband: Yes, we need to talk about it.

Nurse: Would you be willing to say how you are feeling about the cancer?

Husband: (after a brief silence) Not very good.

The words *good* and *bad* are often used to describe feelings when people have yet to identify the specific emotion they are experiencing. Expressing his feelings more precisely would help this patient with the emotional connection he was seeking with his wife.

Nurse: (encouraging him to move toward more precision) Are you scared about dying?

Husband: No, not scared. (Notice the nurse's incorrect guess does not hamper the continued flow of dialogue.)

Nurse: (Because this patient isn't able to verbalize his internal experience easily, the nurse continues to support him in the process.) Do you feel angry about dying?

Husband: No, not angry.

Nurse: (At this point, after two incorrect guesses, the nurse decides to express her own feelings.) Well, now I'm puzzled about what you may be feeling, and wonder if you can tell me.

Husband: I reckon, I'm thinking how she'll do without me.

Nurse: Oh, are you worried she may not be able to handle her life without you?

Husband: Yes, worried she'll miss me.

Nurse: *(She is aware that dying patients often hang on due to worry over those they are leaving behind, and sometimes need reassurance that loved ones can accept their death before they can let themselves go.)* Do you want to hear how your wife feels when you say that?

Husband: Yes.

Here the wife joined the conversation; in the continued presence of the nurse, the couple began to express themselves openly to each other.

In this dialogue, the wife began with a complaint about the physical therapist. However, after a series of exchanges during which she felt empathically received, she was able to determine that what she really sought was a deeper connection with her husband during this critical stage of their lives.

Exercise 5
**RECEIVING EMPATHICALLY
 VERSUS NON-EMPATHICALLY**

To see whether we are in agreement about the verbal expression of empathy, please circle the number in front of each statement in which person B is responding empathically to what is going on within Person A.

1. Person A: How could I do something so stupid?
 Person B: Nobody is perfect; you're too hard on yourself.
2. Person A: If you ask me, we ought to ship all these immigrants back to where they came from.
 Person B: Do you really think that would solve anything?
3. Person A: You aren't God!
 Person B: Are you feeling frustrated because you would like me to admit that there can be other ways of interpreting this matter?
4. Person A: I think that you take me for granted. I wonder how you would manage without me.
 Person B: That's not true! I don't take you for granted.
5. Person A: How could you say a thing like that to me?
 Person B: Are you feeling hurt because I said that?
6. Person A: I'm furious with my husband. He's never around when I need him.
 Person B: You think he should be around more than he is?
7. Person A: I'm disgusted with how heavy I'm getting.
 Person B: Perhaps jogging would help.
8. Person A: I've been a nervous wreck planning for my daughter's wedding. Her fiancé's family is not helping. About every day they change their minds about the kind of wedding they would like.

Person B: So you're feeling nervous about how to make arrangements and would appreciate it if your future in-laws could be more aware of the complications their indecision creates for you?

9. Person A: When my relatives come without letting me know ahead of time, I feel invaded. It reminds me of how my parents used to disregard my needs and would plan things for me.

Person B: I know how you feel. I used to feel that way too.

10. Person A: I'm disappointed with your performance. I would have liked your department to double your production last month.

Person B: I understand that you are disappointed, but we have had many absences due to illness.

Here are my responses for Exercise 5:

1. I didn't circle this one because I see Person B giving reassurance to Person A rather than empathically receiving what Person A is expressing.
2. I see Person B attempting to educate Person A rather than empathically receiving what Person A is expressing.
3. If you circled this we are in agreement. I see Person B empathically receiving what Person A is expressing.
4. I didn't circle this one because I see Person B disagreeing and defending rather than empathically receiving what is going on in Person A.
5. I see Person B taking responsibility for Person A's feelings rather than empathically receiving what is going on in Person A. An example of an empathic response might be: "Are you feeling hurt because you would have liked me to agree to do what you requested?"

6. If you circled this we are in partial agreement. I see Person B receiving Person A's thoughts. However, I believe we connect more deeply when we receive the feelings and needs being expressed rather than the thoughts. Therefore, I would have preferred it if Person B had said, "So you're feeling furious because you would like him to be around more than he is?"
7. I didn't circle this one because I see Person B giving advice rather than empathically receiving what is going on in Person A.
8. If you circled this we are in agreement. I see Person B empathically receiving what is going on in Person A.
9. I didn't circle this one because I see Person B assuming they understand and talking about their own feelings rather than empathically receiving what is going on in Person A.
10. I didn't circle this one because I see Person B starting by focusing on Person A's feelings but then shifting to explaining.



The Power of Empathy

Empathy That Heals

Carl Rogers described the impact of empathy on its recipients: “When . . . someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels damn good! . . . When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It is astonishing how elements that seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens, how confusions that seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is heard.”

Empathy allows us “to re-perceive [our] world in a new way and to go on.”

One of my favorite stories about empathy comes from the principal of an innovative school. She had returned after lunch one day to find Milly, an elementary school student, sitting dejectedly in her office waiting to see her. She sat down next to Milly, who began, “Mrs. Anderson, have you ever had a week when everything you did hurt somebody else, and you never intended to hurt anyone at all?”

“Yes,” the principal replied, “I think I understand,” whereupon Milly proceeded to describe her week. “By now,” the principal related, “I was quite late for a very important meeting—still had my coat on—and anxious not to keep a room full of people waiting, and so I asked, ‘Milly, what can I do for you?’ Milly reached over, took both my shoulders in her hands, looked me straight in the

“Don’t just do something. . . .”

eyes, and said very firmly, 'Mrs. Anderson, I don't want you to *do* anything; I just want you to listen.'

"This was one of the most significant moments of learning in my life—taught to me by a child—so I thought, 'Never mind the roomful of adults waiting for me!' Milly and I moved over to a bench that afforded us more privacy and sat, my arm around her shoulders, her head on my chest, and her arm around my waist, while she talked until she was done. And you know, it didn't take that long."

One of the most satisfying aspects of my work is to hear how individuals have used NVC to strengthen their ability to connect empathically with others. My friend Laurence, who lives in Switzerland, described how upset she felt when her six-year-old son had stormed away angrily while she was still talking to him. Isabelle, her ten-year-old daughter, who had accompanied her to a recent NVC workshop, remarked, "So you're really angry, Mom. You'd like for him to talk when he's angry and not run off." Laurence marveled at how, upon hearing Isabelle's words, she felt an immediate diminishing of tension, and was subsequently able to be more understanding with her son when he returned.

A college instructor described how relationships between students and faculty had been affected when several members of the faculty learned to listen empathically and to express themselves more vulnerably and honestly. "The students opened up more and more and told us about the various personal problems that were interfering with their studies. The more they talked about it, the more work they were able to complete. Even though this kind of listening took a lot of our time, we were glad to spend it in this way. Unfortunately, the dean got upset; he said we were not counselors and should spend more time teaching and less time talking with the students."

When I asked how the faculty had dealt with this, the instructor replied, "We empathized with the dean's concern. We heard that he felt worried and wanted to know that we weren't getting involved in things we couldn't handle. We also heard that he needed reassurance

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that the time spent on talking wasn't cutting into our teaching responsibilities. He seemed relieved by the way we listened to him. We continued to talk with the students because we could see that the more we listened to them, the better they did in their studies."

When we work in a hierarchically structured institution, there is a tendency to hear commands and judgments from those higher up in the hierarchy. While we may easily empathize with our peers and with those in less powerful positions, we may find ourselves being defensive or apologetic, instead of empathic, in the presence of those we identify as our "superiors." This is why I was particularly pleased that these faculty members had remembered to empathize with their dean as well as with their students.

It's harder to empathize with those who appear to possess more power, status, or resources.

Empathy and the Ability to Be Vulnerable

Because we are called to reveal our deepest feelings and needs, we may sometimes find it challenging to express ourselves in NVC. Self-expression becomes easier, however, after we empathize with others, because we will then have touched their humanness and realized the common qualities we share.

The more we connect with the feelings and needs behind their words, the less frightening it is to open up to other people. The situations where we are the most

The more we empathize with the other party, the safer we feel.

reluctant to express vulnerability are often those where we want to maintain a "tough image" for fear of losing authority or control.

Once I showed my vulnerability to some members of a street gang in Cleveland by acknowledging the hurt I was feeling and my desire to be treated with more respect. "Oh, look," one of them remarked, "he's feeling hurt; isn't that too bad!" at which point all his friends chimed in laughing. Here again, I could interpret them as taking advantage of my vulnerability (Option 2: Blame others), or I could empathize with the feelings and needs behind their behavior (Option 4: Sense others' feelings and needs).

If, however, I have an image that I'm being humiliated and taken advantage of, I may feel too wounded, angry, or scared to be able to empathize. At such a moment, I would need to withdraw physically in order to offer myself some empathy or to request it from a reliable source. After discovering the needs that had been so powerfully triggered in me and receiving adequate empathy for them, I would then be ready to return and empathize with the other party. In situations of pain, I recommend first getting the empathy necessary to go beyond the thoughts occupying our heads and recognize our deeper needs.

As I listened closely to the gang member's remark, "Oh look, he's feeling hurt; isn't that too bad?" and the laughter that followed, I sensed that he and his friends were annoyed and not wanting to be subjected to guilt trips and manipulation. They may have been reacting to people in their pasts who used phrases like *that hurts me* to imply disapproval. Since I didn't verify it with them out loud, I have no way of knowing if my guess was in fact accurate. Just focusing my attention there, however, kept me from either taking it personally or getting angry. Instead of judging them for ridiculing me or treating me disrespectfully, I concentrated on hearing the pain and the needs behind such behavior.

"Hey," one of them burst out, "this is a bunch of crap you're offering us! Suppose there are members of another gang here and they have guns and you don't. And you say just stand there and *talk* to them? Crap!"

Then everybody was laughing again, and again I directed my attention to their feelings and needs: "So it sounds like you're really fed up with learning something that has no relevance in those situations?"

"Yeah, and if you lived in this neighborhood, you'd *know* this is a bunch of crap."

"So you need to trust that someone teaching you something has some knowledge of your neighborhood?"

"Damn right. Some of these dudes would blast you away before you got two words out of your mouth!"

"And you need to trust that someone trying to teach you something understands the dangers around here?" I continued to listen in this manner, sometimes verbalizing what I heard and sometimes not. This continued for forty-five minutes, and then I sensed a shift: they felt that I was truly understanding them. A counselor in the program noticed the shift, and asked them out loud, "What do you think of this man?" The gentleman who had been giving me the roughest time replied, "He's the best speaker we've ever had."

Astonished, the counselor turned to me and whispered, "But you haven't said anything!" In fact, I had said a lot by demonstrating that there was nothing they could throw at me that couldn't be translated into universal human feelings and needs.

We "say a lot" by listening for other people's feelings and needs.

Using Empathy to Defuse Danger

The ability to offer empathy to people in stressful situations can defuse potential violence.

A teacher in the inner city of St. Louis related an incident where she had conscientiously stayed after school to help a student, even though teachers were warned, for their own safety, to leave the building after classes were dismissed. A stranger entered her classroom, where the following exchange took place:

Young man: Take off your clothes.

Teacher: (noticing that the young man was shaking) I'm sensing this is very scary for you.

Young man: Did you hear me? God damn it, take off your clothes!

Teacher: I'm sensing you're really pissed off right now and you want me to do what you're telling me.

Young man: You're damned right, and you're going to get hurt if you don't.

Teacher: I'd like you to tell me if there's some other way of meeting your needs that wouldn't hurt me.

Young man: I said take them off.

Teacher: I can hear how much you want this. At the same time, I want you to know how scared and horrible I feel, and how grateful I'd be if you'd leave without hurting me.

Young man: Give me your purse.

The teacher handed the stranger her purse, relieved not to be raped. She later described how, each time she empathized with the young man, she could sense him becoming less adamant in his intention to follow through with the rape.

A metropolitan police officer attending a follow-up training in NVC once greeted me with this account:

I'm sure glad you had us practicing empathy with angry people that last time. Just a few days after our session, I went to arrest someone in a public housing project. When I brought him out, my car was surrounded by about sixty people screaming things at me like, 'Let him go! He didn't do anything! You police are a bunch of racist pigs!' Although I was skeptical that empathy would help, I didn't have many other options. So I reflected back the feelings that were coming at me; I said things like, 'So you don't trust my reasons for arresting this man? You think it has to do with race?' After several minutes of my continuing to reflect their feelings, the group became less hostile. In the end they opened a path so I could get to my car.

Finally, I'd like to illustrate how a young woman used empathy to bypass violence during her night shift at a drug detoxification center in Toronto. The young woman recounted this story during the second NVC workshop she attended. At eleven o'clock one night, a few weeks after her first NVC training, a man who'd obviously been taking drugs walked in off the street and demanded a room. The young woman started to explain to him that all the

rooms had been filled for the night. She was about to hand the man the address of another detox center when he hurled her to the ground. "The next thing I knew, he was sitting across my chest holding a knife to my throat and shouting, 'You bitch, don't lie to me! You do too have a room!'"

She then proceeded to apply her training by listening for his feelings and needs.

"You remembered to do that under those conditions?" I asked, impressed.

"What choice did I have? Desperation sometimes makes good communicators of us all! You know, Marshall," she added, "that joke you told in the workshop really helped me. In fact, I think it saved my life."

"What joke?"

"Remember when you said never to put your 'but' in the face of an angry person? I was all ready to start arguing with him; I was about to say, 'But I don't have a room!' when I remembered your joke. It had really stayed with me because only the week before, I was arguing with my mother and she'd said to me, 'I could kill you when you answer "but" to everything I say!' Imagine, if my own mother was angry enough to kill me for using that word, what would this man have done? If I'd said, 'But I don't have a room!' when he was screaming at me, I have no doubt he would have slit my throat.

Rather than put your "but" in the face of an angry person, empathize.

"So instead, I took a deep breath and said, 'It sounds like you're really angry and you want to be given a room.' He yelled back, 'I may be an addict, but by God, I deserve respect. I'm tired of nobody giving me respect. My parents don't give me respect. I'm gonna get respect!' I just focused on his feelings and needs and said, 'Are you fed up, not getting the respect that you want?'"

"How long did this go on?" I asked.

"Oh, about another thirty-five minutes," she replied.

"That must have been terrifying."

When we listen for feelings and needs, we no longer see people as monsters.

“No, not after the first couple of interchanges, because then something else we’d learned here became apparent. When I concentrated on listening for his feelings and needs, I stopped seeing him as a monster. I could see, just as you’d said, how people who seem like monsters are simply human beings whose language and behavior sometimes keep us from seeing their humanness. The more I was able to focus my attention on his feelings and needs, the more I saw him as a person full of despair whose needs weren’t being met. I became confident that if I held my attention there, I wouldn’t be hurt. After he’d received the empathy he needed, he got off me, put the knife away, and I helped him find a room at another center.”

Delighted that she’d learned to respond empathically in such an extreme situation, I asked curiously, “What are you doing back here? It sounds like you’ve mastered NVC and should be out teaching others what you’ve learned.”

“Now I need you to help me with a hard one,” she said.

“I’m almost afraid to ask. What could be harder than that?”

“Now I need you to help me with my mother. Despite all the insight I got into that ‘but’ phenomenon, you know what happened? At supper the next evening when I told my mother what had happened, she said, ‘You’re going to cause your father and me to have a heart attack if you keep that job. You simply have to find different work!’ So guess what I said to her? ‘*But*, mother, it’s my life!’”

It may be difficult to empathize with those who are closest to us.

I couldn’t have asked for a more compelling example of how difficult it can be to respond empathically to one’s own family members!

Empathy in Hearing Someone’s “No!”

Because of our tendency to read rejection into someone else’s “no” and “I don’t want to . . .,” these are important messages for

us to be able to empathize with. If we take them personally, we may feel hurt without understanding what's actually going on within the other person. When we shine the light of consciousness on the feelings and needs behind someone else's "no," however, we become cognizant of what they are wanting that prevents them from responding as we would like.

Empathizing with someone's "no" protects us from taking it personally.

One time I asked a woman during a workshop break to join me and other participants for some ice cream nearby. "No!" she replied brusquely. The tone of her voice led me to interpret her answer as a rejection, until I reminded myself to tune in to the feelings and needs she might be expressing through her "no." "I sense that you are angry," I said. "Is that so?"

"No," she replied, "it's just that I don't want to be corrected every time I open my mouth."

Now I sensed that she was fearful rather than angry. I checked this out by asking, "So you're feeling fearful and want to protect yourself from being in a situation where you might be judged for how you communicate?"

"Yes," she affirmed, "I can imagine sitting in the ice cream shop with you and having you notice everything I say."

I then discovered that the way I'd been providing feedback in the workshop had been frightening to her. My empathy for her message had taken the sting out of her "no" for me: I heard her desire to avoid receiving similar feedback in public. Assuring her that I wouldn't evaluate her communication in public, I then conferred with her on ways to give feedback that would leave her feeling safe. And yes, she joined the group for ice cream.

Empathy to Revive a Lifeless Conversation

We have all found ourselves in the midst of a lifeless conversation. Perhaps we're at a social event, hearing words without feeling any connection to the speaker. Or we're listening to someone my friend Kelly Bryson would call a "Babble-on-ian"—someone who elicits in

their listeners the fear of interminable conversation. Vitality drains out of conversations when we lose connection with the feelings and needs generating the speaker's words, and with the requests associated with those needs. This effect is common when people talk without consciousness of what they are feeling, needing, or requesting. Instead of being engaged in an exchange of life energy with other human beings, we see ourselves becoming wastebaskets for their words.

How and when do we interrupt a dead conversation to bring it back to life? I'd suggest the best time to interrupt is when we've heard one word more than we want to hear. The longer we wait, the harder it is to be civil when we do step in. Our intention in interrupting is not to claim the floor for ourselves, but to help the speaker connect to the life energy behind the words being spoken.

We do this by tuning in to possible feelings and needs. Thus, if an aunt is repeating the story about how twenty years ago her husband deserted her and her two small children, we might interrupt by saying, "So, Auntie, it sounds like you are still feeling hurt, wishing you'd been treated more fairly." People are not aware that empathy is often what they are needing. Neither do they realize that they are more likely to receive that empathy by expressing the feelings and needs that are alive in them than by recounting tales of past injustice and hardship.

To bring a conversation back to life: interrupt with empathy.

Another way to bring a conversation to life is to openly express our desire to be more connected, and to request information that would help us establish that connection. Once, at a cocktail party, I was in the midst of an abundant flow of words that to me seemed lifeless. "Excuse me," I broke in, addressing the group of nine other people I'd found myself with, "I'm feeling impatient because I'd like to be more connected with you, but our conversation isn't creating the kind of connection I'm wanting. I'd like to know if the conversation we've been having is meeting your needs, and if so, what needs of yours are being met through it."

All nine people stared at me as if I had thrown a rat in the punch bowl. Fortunately, I remembered to tune in to the feelings and needs being expressed through their silence. "Are you annoyed with my interrupting because you would have liked to continue the conversation?" I asked.

After another silence, one of the men replied, "No, I'm not annoyed. I was thinking about what you were asking. And no, I wasn't enjoying the conversation; in fact, I was totally bored with it."

What bores the listener bores the speaker too.

At the time, I was surprised to hear his response because he had been the one doing most of the talking! Now I am no longer surprised: I have since discovered that conversations that are lifeless for the listener are equally so for the speaker.

You may wonder how we can muster the courage to flatly interrupt someone in the middle of a sentence. I once conducted an informal survey, posing the following question: "If you are using more words than somebody wants to hear, do you want that person to pretend to listen or to stop you?" Of the scores of people I approached, all but one expressed a preference to be stopped. Their answers gave me courage by convincing me that it is more considerate to interrupt people than to pretend to listen. All of us want our words to enrich others, not to burden them.

Speakers prefer that listeners interrupt rather than pretend to listen.

Empathy for Silence

One of the hardest messages for many of us to empathize with is silence. This is especially true when we've expressed ourselves vulnerably and need to know how others are reacting to our words. At such times, it's easy to project our worst fears onto the lack of response and forget to connect with the feelings and needs being expressed through the silence.

Empathize with silence by listening for the feelings and needs behind it.

One time when I was working with the staff of a business organization, I was talking about something deeply emotional and began to cry. When I looked up, I received a response from the organization's director that was not easy for me to receive: silence. He turned his face from me with what I interpreted to be an expression of disgust. Fortunately, I remembered to put my attention on what might be going on within him, and said, "I'm sensing from your response to my crying that you're feeling disgusted, and you'd prefer to have someone more in control of his feelings consulting with your staff."

If he had answered yes, I would have been able to accept that we had different values around expressing emotions, without somehow thinking that I was wrong for having expressed my emotions as I did. But instead of "yes," the director replied, "No, not at all. I was just thinking of how my wife wishes I could cry." He went on to reveal that his wife, who was divorcing him, had been complaining that living with him was like living with a rock.

During my practice as a psychotherapist, I was contacted by the parents of a twenty-year-old woman under psychiatric care. She had been undergoing medication, hospitalization, and shock treatments for several months, and had become mute three months before her parents contacted me. When they brought her to my office, she had to be assisted because, left to herself, she didn't move.

In my office, she crouched in her chair, shaking, her eyes on the floor. Trying to connect empathically with the feelings and needs being expressed through her nonverbal message, I said, "I'm sensing that you are frightened and would like to be sure that it's safe to talk. Is that accurate?"

She showed no reaction, so I expressed my own feeling by saying, "I'm very concerned about you, and I'd like you to tell me if there's something I could say or do to make you feel safer." Still no response. For the next forty minutes, I continued to either

reflect her feelings and needs or express my own. There was no visible response, nor even the slightest recognition that I was trying to communicate with her. Finally I expressed that I was tired, and that I wanted her to return the following day.

The next few days were like the first. I continued focusing my attention on her feelings and needs, sometimes verbally reflecting what I understood and sometimes doing so silently. From time to time I would express what was going on in myself. She sat shaking in her chair, saying nothing.

On the fourth day, when she still didn't respond, I reached over and held her hand. Not knowing whether my words were communicating my concern, I hoped the physical contact might do so more effectively. At first contact, her muscles tensed and she shrank further back into her chair. I was about to release her hand when I sensed a slight yielding, so I kept my hold; after a few moments I noticed a progressive relaxation on her part. I held her hand for several minutes while I talked to her as I had the first few days. Still she said nothing.

When she arrived the next day, she appeared even more tense than before, but there was one difference: she extended a clenched fist toward me while turning her face away from me. I was at first confused by the gesture, but then sensed she had something in her hand she wanted me to have. Taking her fist in my hand, I pried open her fingers. In her palm was a crumpled note with the following message: "Please help me say what's inside."

I was elated to receive this sign of her desire to communicate. After another hour of encouragement, she finally expressed a first sentence, slowly and fearfully. When I reflected back what I had heard her saying, she appeared relieved and then continued, slowly and fearfully, to talk. A year later, she sent me a copy of the following entries from her journal:

I came out of the hospital, away from shock treatments and strong medicine. That was about April. The three months before that are completely

blank in my mind, as well as the three and a half years before April.

They say that, after getting out of the hospital, I went through a time at home of not eating, not talking, and wanting to stay in bed all the time. Then I was referred to Dr. Rosenberg for counseling. I don't remember much of those next two or three months other than being in Dr. Rosenberg's office and talking with him.

I'd begun 'waking up' since that first session with him. I'd begun sharing with him things that bothered me—things that I would never have dreamed of telling anyone about. And I remember how much that meant to me. It was so hard to talk. But Dr. Rosenberg cared about me and showed it, and I wanted to talk with him. I was always glad afterwards that I had let something out. I remember counting the days, even the hours, until my next appointment with him.

I've also learned that facing reality is not all bad. I am realizing more and more of the things that I need to stand up to, things that I need to get out and do on my own.

This is scary. And it's very hard. And it's so discouraging that when I am trying really a lot, I can still fail so terribly. But the good part of reality is that I've been seeing that it includes wonderful things, too.

I've learned in the past year about how wonderful it can be to share myself with other people. I think it was mostly just one part that I learned, about the thrill of my talking to other people and having them actually listen—even really understand at times.

I continue to be amazed by the healing power of empathy. Time and again I have witnessed people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with

someone who can hear them empathically. As listeners, we don't need insights into psychological dynamics or training in psychotherapy. What is essential is our ability to be present to what's really going on within—to the unique feelings and needs a person is experiencing in that very moment.

Empathy lies in our ability to be present.

Summary

Our ability to offer empathy can allow us to stay vulnerable, defuse potential violence, hear the word *no* without taking it as a rejection, revive a lifeless conversation, and even hear the feelings and needs expressed through silence. Time and again, people transcend the paralyzing effects of psychological pain when they have sufficient contact with someone who can hear them empathically.

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