

Nonviolent Communication Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Nonviolent Communication explains how focusing on people's underlying needs and making observations instead of judgments can revolutionize the way you interact with anybody, even your worst enemies.*

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Free speech advocates commonly argue that speech is the opposite of violence — words can offend us, but they don't do actual harm. From this point of view, “nonviolent communication” is practically an oxymoron.

Communications expert Marshall B. Rosenberg begs to differ: according to him, most people's default manner of speaking to others is highly violent. That is, if you consider “violence” to include attempts at cutting others down to size and coercing them into doing what we want.

Whether or not most ordinary speakers are constantly committing literal acts of “violence” or not, most of us can see the potential benefit in learning to communicate more effectively. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* provides one provocative lens (NVC) for seeing what's morally and pragmatically wrong with many of the things we tend to say in our everyday lives. NVC also helps us to figure out what we could say instead.

Here are 3 lessons I've learned:

1. Separating observations from judgments is the first step towards reducing needless conflict.
2. Connecting actions and requests to people's specific needs point the way towards solutions to any problem.
3. You can use NVC to improve your communication *with yourself*, too!

Let's use these NVC touchpoints as the foundation for a new way of speaking and thinking!

Lesson 1: Keep your observations and your judgments separate in order to keep others from feeling defensive.

Often, our brains leap to label someone: that student is “lazy,” that husband is “careless,” and so on. Often our mouths rush to speak the judgment, too!

But does it really work to go around judging people? How do they tend to respond when you judge them? How do *you* respond when other people do this to you?

A person who's feeling judged typically goes on the defensive or just shuts down. Judging someone is about the *worst* thing you can do if what you want is for them to listen to you or change something about their behavior!

Rosenberg suggests a foundational habit for NVC: that we learn to separate observations about what happened from our judgments about them. An observation is objective, concrete, and neutral. Instead of a “lazy student,” learn to think “that student did not complete the homework.” Instead of a careless husband, think “he left toothpaste in the sink.”

Straightforward observations leave much more space for potentially understanding the reasons why people did what they did, rather than making lots of assumptions. Others' actions might provide a stimulus for us feeling the way we do, but they don't literally cause our emotions. We must distinguish between our own “stuff” and what happened in the world.

Lesson 2: Connecting actions and requests to people's specific needs can diffuse tensions and point towards possible resolutions.

Why are we so judgmental, if it's not usually productive? Rosenberg explains that “analyses of others are actually expressions of our own needs and values.”

In other words, when a teacher labels a student “lazy” perhaps she's stressed because she doesn't know how to motivate him. Or the wife of that “careless” husband values neatness much more than he does, but she doesn't see a way to resolve their preferences.

People's needs are more alike than different: we have physical needs, as well as needs for autonomy, positive emotional experiences, positive social experiences, spiritual experiences of some kind, and play.

The teacher who judges her student may be trying to fulfill her need to feel competent at her job. The fastidious wife who leaps to judgment of her husband needs to feel comfortable in her own home.

Understanding other's frustrating behaviors as manifestations of their genuine needs helps to humanize conflicts. People mostly aren't just wandering around trying to cause problems for you. They are trying to take care of themselves, and they deserve empathy.

If you first find a way to show others that you truly understand their needs, you're likely to receive a respectful response to your requests of them (whether it's *exactly* what you wanted or not).

Lesson 3: Using NVC on yourself can alleviate feelings of regret and anxiety.

Since all people have needs and deserve empathy, that includes your past and current selves too!

Perhaps you're harboring painful, long-standing regrets about something you did a long time ago. Can you find a way to empathize with who you were back then? Which needs was she trying, however mistakenly, to fulfill when she made that regrettable decision?

Or maybe you're facing a difficult decision right now. By setting aside what you think you "should" do and focusing on the needs of everyone involved (including yours), you will enable a comfortable resolution.

NVC even provides a better way of giving compliments. After all, even positive judgments are still judgments, and they remind people you're critiquing them. Instead of giving a conventional compliment, try explaining to someone how something specific they did met one of your needs. This kind of compliment is much clearer and more meaningful than the alternative.

Nonviolent Communication Review

Some of the ways of speaking endorsed in *Nonviolent Communication* do sound awfully stilted. As I read it, I had a hard time imagining myself saying some of those things. However, NVC's core lessons seem sound, and it's really as simple as judging less and meeting everyone's needs more. Given how many problems in life come from communications breakdowns, what do you have to lose anyway?

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Who would I recommend the Nonviolent Communication summary to?

The 34-year old professional who hates conflict but needs to start sticking up for herself, the 25-year old hothead who doesn't seem to be able to stop getting into verbal sparring matches with everyone in his life, and anyone who's interested in learning what seems to come naturally to the best mediators among us.