



Nonviolent Communication can hurt people

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People who struggle interpersonally, who seem unhappy, or who get into a lot of conflicts are often advised to adopt the approach of [Nonviolent Communication](#).

This is often not a good idea. Nonviolent Communication is an approach based on refraining from seeming to judge others, and instead expressing everything in terms of your own feelings. For instance, instead of “Don’t be such an inconsiderate jerk about leaving your clothes around”, you’d say “When you leave your clothing around, I feel disrespected.”. That approach is useful in situations in which people basically want to treat each other well but have trouble doing so because they don’t understand one another’s needs and feelings. In every other type of situation, the ideology and methodology of Nonviolent Communication can make things much worse.

Nonviolent Communication can be particularly harmful to marginalized people or abuse survivors. It can also teach powerful people to abuse their power more than they had previously, and to feel good about doing so. Non-Violent Communication has strategies that can be helpful in some situations, but it also teaches a lot of anti-skills that can undermine the ability to survive and fight injustice and abuse.

For marginalized or abused people, being judgmental is a necessary survival skill. Sometimes it’s not enough to say “when you call me slurs, I feel humiliated” – **particularly if the other person doesn’t care about hurting you** or actually wants to hurt you. Sometimes you have to say “The word you called me is a slur. It’s not ok to call me slurs. Stop.” Or “If you call me that again, I’m leaving.” Sometimes you have to say to yourself “**I’m ok, they’re mean.**” All of those things are judgments, and it’s important to be judgmental in those ways.

You can’t protect yourself from people who mean you harm without judging them. Nonviolent Communication works when people are hurting each other by accident; it only works when everyone means well. **It doesn’t have responses that work when people are hurting others on purpose or without caring about damage they do.** **Which, if you’re marginalized or abused, happens several times a day.** NVC does not have a framework for acknowledging this or responding to it.

In order to protect yourself from people who mean you harm, you have to see yourself as having the right to judge that someone is hurting you. You also have to be able to unilaterally set boundaries, **even when** your boundaries **are upsetting to other people**. Nonviolent Communication culture can teach you that whenever others are upset with you, you’re doing something wrong and should change what you do in order to meet the needs of others better. That’s a major anti-skill. **People need to be able to decide things for themselves even when others are upset.**

Further, NVC places a dangerous degree of emphasis on using a very specific kind of language and tone. NVC culture often judges people less on the content of what they’re saying than how they are saying it. Abusers and cluelessly powerful people are usually much better at using NVC language than people who are actively being hurt. When you’re just messing with someone’s head or protecting your own right to mess with their head, it’s easy to phrase things correctly. When someone is abusing you and you’re trying to explain what’s wrong, and you’re actively terrified, it’s much, much harder to phrase things in I-statements that take an acceptable tone.

Further, there is **always** a way to take issue with the way someone phrased something. It’s really easy to make something that’s really about shutting someone up look like a concern about the way they’re using language, or advice on how to communicate better. Every group I’ve seen that valued this type of language highly ended up nitpicking the language of the least popular person in the group as a way of shutting them up.

Short version: Be careful with Nonviolent Communication. I-statements have their uses in some contexts, but NVC is not the complete solution to conflict or communication that it presents itself as. NVC can be particularly dangerous for people with communication disabilities, and for people who have trouble setting boundaries.

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