

Nonviolent Communication: Tools and Talking-Points for Practicing the Person-Centered Approach

Ian Mayes

Camphill Soltane, Glenmoore, PA

I see the process of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) as being a set of tools to aid one in practicing the Person-Centered Approach (PCA) within interpersonal relationships. The great value of NVC as I see it is that it enables one to take the PCA, which is usually looked at in a very theoretical way, and make it into a very practical thing that anyone can do. I see great potential for Nonviolent Communication being used to assist in the real-life applicability of the Person-Centered Approach in more and more diverse situations.

I will briefly examine here some of the key points of the Person-Centered Approach, with a particular emphasis on Carl Rogers' 1956 document entitled "The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change", and relate each to their complementary practices that exist within Nonviolent Communication.

The Origin of Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication was first developed by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. Rosenberg was a student of Carl Rogers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during the 1957–1963 time-period. Rosenberg cites Rogers as being a major influence in the development of his work. Towards the end of their time together they were also colleagues working on the Wisconsin Project. In 1966, Rosenberg was awarded diplomate status in clinical psychology from the American Board of Examiners in Professional Psychology.

The process of Nonviolent Communication came into being through Marshall Rosenberg's work in the 1960s providing mediation and communication skills training for communities working to peacefully desegregate schools and other public institutions. In the

The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 17, No. 1-2, 2010
Printed in the United States. All rights reserved.

1980s an organization was created, the “Center for Nonviolent Communication,” to provide structure and coordination for all of the Nonviolent Communication training that was taking place worldwide.

Applying Nonviolent Communication Practices to Carl Rogers’ “Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change”

Here is what Carl Rogers (1957/1989) wrote about the necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change:

“For constructive personality change to occur, it is necessary that these conditions exist and continue over a period of time:

- Two persons are in psychological contact.
- The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious.
- The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship.
- The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client.
- The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client.
- The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved.

No other conditions are necessary. If these six conditions exist, and continue over a period of time, this is sufficient. The process of constructive personality change will follow.”

I will now elaborate on how Nonviolent Communication provides specific practices and means to assist one in creating each of

these six conditions mentioned above. I will begin by discussing the three conditions which Rogers refers to as the “core conditions,” which are “authenticity, empathy, and unconditional positive regard.”

Authenticity

Nonviolent Communication has two practices to help bring out authenticity (aka “congruence”) within a relationship. The first is what is called “self-empathy.” This consists of stopping and asking yourself what you are feeling and what you are needing within a given situation. It is a form of “giving yourself empathy”, genuinely listening to yourself to discover what your emotional feelings really are and what needs are motivating them.

The second practice is referred to as “honest expression”. Traditionally this is presented as someone first saying what is observed (i.e., what is specifically said or done) without any evaluation or interpretation mixed in. Then the speaker says what feelings and needs come alive for them when that observation happens. This expression of one’s own feelings and needs is where it is useful, perhaps even essential, for the speaker to go through a self-empathy process first before honestly expressing to the other person. Finally the speaker gives a clear and doable request to the other person describing what specifically could be done to better meet the needs expressed.

Empathy

The practice of empathy within Nonviolent Communication consists of attentively listening to someone with an active curiosity towards what the speaker could possibly be feeling and needing. This kind of listening could be done silently, or it could involve verbalizing guesses of possible feelings and needs to ask the speaker.

Within Nonviolent Communication empathy is something that is focused on to such a great extent that it exists as a specific practice that NVC practitioners often arrange to set aside specific times to practice exclusively. In addition to this empathy is also seen as an element that can exist within all interpersonal interactions, the presence of which it would be beneficial to increase. The NVC practice of

empathic listening (often referred to as “giving empathy”) is explicit, intentional, learnable, and resources are available to support the development of this skill.

New social forms have developed within the NVC community to support people’s empathic listening skills. For example, there is the “empathy buddy” one-on-one partnership relationship where individuals take turns empathically listening to the other person and being empathically listened to. There is also the “empathy group” relationship where a whole group of people takes turns empathically listening to an individual.

Unconditional Positive Regard

An important differentiation within NVC is made between “heart-open” and “heart-closed” communication, i.e., “is your heart open, or is it closed?” The phrase “heart-open” is synonymous with “unconditional positive regard,” whereas “heart-closed” is synonymous with “conditional positive regard.” Various practices extant in NVC are being developed to discern whether one’s heart is open or closed.

If one is holding judgments of another person, if one’s regard is given “conditionally,” then there is a process within NVC called the “Translating Enemy Images” process. This process involves learning your judgments of another person, seeing what demands you may hold of them, and reviewing your thought process therein. Then the NVC process of discerning “Observations,” “Feelings”, and “Needs” is used/applied both to yourself and in guesses about the situation of the person being judged. Eventually, through this process, the judgmental thinking (aka “enemy images”) is transformed into greater clarity and care for both yourself and the other person.

Another practice of unconditional positive regard is expressions of gratitude and appreciation to another person. These expressions can be aided with the NVC process through containing within the expression reference to the actions that have been done, the specific needs that have been met by these actions, and the positive feelings that arise as a result of all of this.

The Client’s Perception of the Core Conditions

The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 17, No. 1-2, 2010

There is a means within Nonviolent Communication to gain a sense as to whether the person you are interacting with perceives you as being authentic, empathic and caring. This is through using what are referred to as “connection requests.” These kinds of requests are focused primarily on the relationship itself in the present moment. Examples of connection requests can be things like “how do you feel hearing me say that?” “Can you tell me back what you just heard me say?” “Do you trust that I mean what I’m saying here?” Based on how the person replies to these you then have more information to work with to better access whether the other person perceives the core conditions as being present within the relationship.

Anxiety and Fear in the Client

One concept that is used within Nonviolent Communication is that of “edges” and “working with your edges.” An “edge” is the area where one’s comfort regarding looking at and talking about a personal matter suddenly shifts. This is where a personal area then becomes “too personal,” “too dangerous,” “scary,” etc. The “edge” is where one’s “comfort zone” meets “out of one’s comfort zone.” Various practices exist to identify these areas and to experiment with them.

Another concept and practice within Nonviolent Communication is referred to as “walking towards your fear.” This is done through first identifying something which one is habitually afraid of and then identifying a specific individual who epitomizes that which one is afraid of. After that is done then one approaches that specific individual and initiates a conversation with them. Throughout this conversation one tries as best one can to be authentic, empathic and caring, while also offering clear doable requests for what could be done to improve things.

A third concept within Nonviolent Communication that is related to this area is that of “scary honesty.” What this refers to are those things that are on one’s mind and one is aware of, but which one is too afraid to verbalize. Saying what is on one’s mind here would be honest, but it is also “scary” to do so. Developing a practice of

conjuring up the courage necessary and then proceeding to say these things is engaging in a practice of “scary honesty.”

Psychological Contact

What is referred to by Carl Rogers as “psychological contact” is referred to in Nonviolent Communication as “heart-felt connection”. Within NVC establishing “connection” is highly valued, with many practitioners seeing it as being the entire purpose of it all. To quote the renowned NVC trainer Robert Gonzales:

“The primary intention of NVC is to create a quality of connection in which everyone’s needs are equally valued and met through natural giving.”

Similar to the other qualities mentioned above, various practices exist within NVC to discern and strengthen the quality of connection between individuals.

Additional Person-Centered Approach Key Concepts

The Actualizing Tendency

NVC has a core belief that everything that people do is an attempt to meet some kind of fundamental human need. A fundamental human need is distinct from a strategy to meet needs, in other words, it is independent of any particular person, place, thing, or action. For example, “love,” “acknowledgement,” “understanding,” “accomplishment,” “belonging,” etc., are fundamental human needs, whereas “Mr. Smith,” “sitting next to me,” “reading a book,” “winning the prize,” and “having a membership card” are all strategies to meet needs and are not considered needs themselves.

The actualizing tendency can be seen then as being the basic drive that each person has to meet needs. The actualizing tendency is not the same thing as fundamental human needs, it is instead the basic urge that one has to have needs met. I believe that viewing things this way helps to give a clearer picture of how the actualizing tendency interacts with our day-to-day life.

Personal Power

I see Nonviolent Communication as relating with personal power in two ways. First, it strengthens the ability of each person to see the world in terms of concrete observations and do-able requests that are separate and distinct from interpretations and evaluations. Seeing the world as it is apart from people's thoughts about it I believe helps one to have more of a full understanding as to what actually exists that could be used to potentially meet needs. Secondly, NVC strengthens the ability of each person to be aware of the moment-by-moment choices that they make as attempts to meet particular needs. Once one is aware of which needs one wants to have met in a given situation, then one can re-evaluate one's course of action and chose that which they think is most likely to result in those needs being met.

Nonviolent Communication as a Modern PC Approach

Teachable

There are very specific places to focus one's attention on. For example, you can focus on "observations," "feelings," "needs," or "requests" in a number of different ways. You can focus on them in terms of how they relate to you in the present, past, or future, or in terms of another person, or you can focus on them in terms of the thoughts that you have about another person. With the assistance of a skilled practitioner one's attention can be repeatedly directed to areas where NVC concepts and practices can be applied. You can also break NVC down into bite-size "chunks." For example, "observations," "feelings," "needs," or "requests" can each be focused on individually until one feels comfortable enough with each concept before proceeding on to another one. One does not need to fully understand the other concepts in order to find value in working with one of them.

Learnable

There are specific step-by-step processes that can be applied for practice and learning. These processes can be gone through repetitively until one develops new habits around using them. Also,

each step can be checked to make sure that it is actually accomplished correctly. For example, there are ways to check to make sure that a request is actually a request, to check that an observation is actually an observation, a need a need, etc.

Demonstrable

The Nonviolent Communication process can be embodied at will by people who are trained in it and who make the choice to use it. Situations where the process is demonstrated by one or more persons using the NVC process can be role-played by people trained in it.

An Invitation to You

For the sake of developing your own skill and proficiency in creating the six conditions that Rogers spoke of as being necessary for constructive personality change, I invite you to investigate more about Nonviolent Communication.

References

- d'Ansembourg, Thomas. (2007). *Being Genuine: Stop Being Nice, Start Being Real*. Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press.
- Rogers, Carl. (1989). The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change. *The Carl Rogers Reader*. Mariner Books.
- Rogers, Carl. (1967). *The Therapeutic Relationship and Its Impact: A Study of Psychotherapy with Schizophrenics*. The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Rosenberg, Marshall. (2003). *Life-Enriching Education: NVC Helps Schools Improve Performance, Reduce Conflict and Enhance Relationships*. Encinitas, CA: Puddledancer Press.
- Rosenberg, Marshall. (2003). *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. Second Edition. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press.

Appendix

The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 17, No. 1-2, 2010

Nonviolent Communication Quick Reference Guide

Expression	Empathy
Observation <i>When I see/hear . . .</i>	[Observation] <i>[When you see/hear . . .]</i>
Feeling <i>I feel . . .</i>	Feeling <i>Are you feeling . . .</i>
Need <i>Because I need . . .</i>	Need <i>Because you need . . .</i>
Request <i>Would you be willing...?</i>	[Request] <i>[Would you like...?]</i>

Observations: Description of what is seen or heard without added interpretations. For example, instead of “She’s having a temper tantrum,” you could say “She is lying on the floor crying and kicking.” If referring to what someone said quote as much as possible instead of rephrasing.

Feelings: Our emotions rather than our story or thoughts about what others are doing. For example, instead of “I feel manipulated,” which includes an interpretation of another’s behavior, you could say “I feel uncomfortable.” Avoid the phrasing: “I feel like . . .” and “I feel that...”- the next words will be thoughts, not feelings.

Needs: Feelings are caused by needs, which are universal and ongoing and not dependent on the actions of particular individuals. State *your need* rather than the other person’s actions as the cause. For example, “I feel annoyed *because I* need support” rather than “I feel annoyed *because you* didn’t do the dishes.”

Requests: Asking concretely and clearly for what we want (instead of what we don’t want). For example, “Would you be willing to come back tonight at the time we’ve agreed?” rather than “Would you make sure not to be late again?” By definition, when we make requests we are open to hearing a “no,” taking it as an opportunity for further dialogue.

Empathy: In NVC, we empathize with others by guessing their feelings and needs. Instead of trying to “get it right,” we aim to understand. The observation and request are sometimes dropped. When words are not wanted or are hard to offer, empathy can be offered silently.

Self-Empathy: In self-empathy, we listen inwardly to connect with our own feelings and needs. It is that connection which enables us to choose our next step.

A List of Some Fundamental Human Needs

The Person-Centered Journal, Vol. 17, No. 1-2, 2010

<p>Physical Survival</p> <p>air nutrition food waste water sleep shelter movement safety rest chemical balance sexual expression</p>	<p>Nurturance</p> <p>touch closeness physical affection sensitivity warmth intimacy relaxation tenderness caring bonding comfort love</p>	<p>Autonomy</p> <p>freedom space independence will choice fortitude individuality stamina self-empowerment options solitude</p>
<p>Mental</p> <p>stimulation focus clarity / to understand comprehension discernment belief information memory awareness reflection perspective discrimination</p>	<p>Self-Expression</p> <p>creativity to be heard growth speaking healing singing learning / mastery meaning teaching to create / generate</p>	<p>Integrity</p> <p>self-worth centeredness authenticity identity self-respect composure purpose conviction vision / dreams direction honesty dignity</p>
<p>Celebration of Life</p> <p>aliveness ecstasy pleasure delight accomplishment stimulation excitement dance humor passion intensity play to celebrate losses: mourning loved ones, dreams unfulfilled, etc.</p>	<p>Spiritual</p> <p>beauty / aesthetic bliss harmony / peace self-awareness order serenity grace faith inspiration hope communion being / beingness higher purpose transcendence</p>	<p>Interdependence/Social</p> <p>acceptance trust companionship empathy appreciation cooperation belonging community contribution to others acknowledgment reassurance connection group identity respect communication consideration support honesty from others emotional freedom understanding emotional safety</p>