

◆ Theory library · Framework 04 / 06

# Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

*A practice of empathy, awareness and connection*

11 min read



How can we express what matters to us while remaining open to the experiences of others?  
How can we navigate disagreements without losing connection, and listen without immediately judging, defending, or trying to fix things?

**Nonviolent Communication (NVC)** offers a way to explore these questions and develop more conscious, compassionate ways of relating to ourselves and others.

Developed by Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg in the 1960s, NVC is an approach to communication rooted in empathy, honesty, and mutual understanding. Also known as *empathic communication* or *the language of the heart*, it invites us to look beyond words and actions to recognize the feelings and needs that shape our experiences.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) aims to support dialogue between people and contribute to building societies based on empathy and consideration for everyone's needs.

It helps us become more conscious of the words we choose to express what matters to us, increasing the possibility of connection, dialogue, and mutual understanding.

## ◆ KEY IDEA

At its heart, NVC is more than a communication technique. It is a practice of connection — with ourselves, with others, and with what truly matters to us.

---

# The principles of NVC

NVC is grounded in a number of guiding principles that invite us to see ourselves and others with greater understanding and compassion.

- ◆ **All actions are attempts to meet needs.** Even when we disagree with someone's behaviour, we can explore the needs they may be trying to meet.
- ◆ **We share universal human needs.** Regardless of age, culture, gender, or background, we all have needs for things such as connection, safety, autonomy, understanding, and belonging.
- ◆ **Everyone's needs matter.** We can acknowledge the needs of everyone involved without assuming that every strategy or action is equally appropriate.
- ◆ **Feelings offer clues about our needs.** They can help us recognize when our needs are being met or are calling for attention.
- ◆ **We have different strategies for meeting our needs.** Conflict often arises when we focus on competing strategies rather than the needs beneath them.
- ◆ **We can cultivate choice.** By becoming more aware of our motivations, we can move from acting out of obligation or fear towards acting with greater willingness and intention.
- ◆ **Giving can be an expression of choice.** When we give freely, rather than out of pressure, guilt, or fear, generosity and connection can flourish.
- ◆ **Expressing our needs creates opportunities for understanding.** It helps others understand what matters to us and how they might contribute.
- ◆ **Connection comes before solutions.** Before trying to resolve a disagreement, we can first seek to understand what is important to everyone involved.

These principles encourage us to approach communication with curiosity rather than judgment, and with a willingness to discover what lies beneath our own reactions and those of others.

---

## Two pillars of NVC: empathy and honesty

### 1. Empathy — listening to understand

Empathy means giving our attention to ourselves or another person with openness and care. It involves becoming aware of feelings and needs, without rushing to judge, advise, reassure, or solve a problem.

We can practise empathy in two ways: **self-empathy**, by listening to what is happening within us, and **empathic listening**, by seeking to understand another person's experience.

The intention is to create a space where feelings and needs can be acknowledged and where people can be heard, without the pressure to find an immediate solution.

## How can we listen with empathy?

- ◆ Being present and giving our full attention.
- ◆ Listening in silence, without feeling the need to respond.
- ◆ Paraphrasing what we have heard to check our understanding.
- ◆ Asking open, supportive questions.
- ◆ Gently guessing the feelings and needs that may be present.
- ◆ Remaining curious rather than assuming we know what another person is experiencing.

Empathy does not require us to agree with someone or approve of their actions. It means being willing to understand their experience.

## 2. Honesty — expressing ourselves with care

Honesty in NVC means expressing what is happening within us in a way that invites understanding and connection.

Rather than focusing on judgments, accusations, interpretations, or evaluations, we describe what we observe, how we feel, what we need, and what we would like to ask for.

Honesty is not simply about telling the truth. It is also about openness, integrity, and respect for ourselves and others. It allows us to express our experience without blaming another person or making them responsible for our feelings.

For example, instead of saying, *"You never listen to me,"* we might say:

**"When I was speaking and you looked at your phone, I felt disappointed because being heard and connected matters to me. Would you be willing to put your phone aside while we talk?"**

This way of communicating makes our experience more visible while leaving room for the other person to share theirs.

---

## The heart of NVC: self-empathy

Before we can communicate clearly or listen openly, it can be helpful to pause and ask ourselves:

**What is alive in me right now?**

Self-empathy is the practice of turning our attention inward to notice our bodily sensations, feelings, and needs. It invites us to slow down, become aware of what is happening within us, and explore what our reactions may be telling us.

Instead of immediately judging ourselves or looking for someone to blame, we can become curious:

- ◆ What am I feeling right now?
- ◆ What is important to me in this situation?
- ◆ Which of my needs are being met, and which are calling for attention?
- ◆ What would help me respond with greater clarity and care?

Our feelings are influenced by what happens around us, as well as by our interpretations, experiences, and needs. By connecting our feelings with our needs, we can better understand our experience and discover more possibilities for responding.

Self-empathy does not mean ignoring difficult circumstances or accepting harmful behaviour. It means creating enough inner space to recognize what matters to us and choose how we want to respond.

---

## From self-empathy to honest expression

Once we have a clearer understanding of what is happening within us, we may choose to share it with another person.

In NVC, honest expression involves four elements:

- 1 Observation — What happened?** Describe what you saw or heard as specifically and objectively as possible, without adding interpretations, judgments, or assumptions.
- 2 Feelings — How do I feel?** Identify the emotions you are experiencing, such as sadness, frustration, relief, joy, or concern, rather than thoughts about what another person has done to you.
- 3 Needs — What matters to me?** Recognize the underlying human needs, values, or qualities of life connected to your feelings, such as respect, trust, rest, clarity, autonomy, or connection.
- 4 Request — What would I like?** Make a clear, specific, and achievable request that could help meet your needs or create greater understanding.

A request leaves room for the other person to say no, ask questions, or offer an alternative. It is an invitation to dialogue, rather than a demand for compliance.

By expressing ourselves in this way, we take responsibility for communicating our experience while respecting the other person's autonomy.

## Listening with empathy to others

When we have the capacity, we can also turn our attention towards another person's experience and ask:

**What might be alive in them right now?**

Rather than focusing only on their words, behaviour, or explanations, we can listen for the feelings and needs that may be present beneath them.

We do not know exactly what another person is feeling or needing unless they tell us. Empathic listening therefore involves making tentative guesses and remaining open to being corrected.

We might wonder:

- ◆ Are they feeling overwhelmed, disappointed, worried, or hopeful?
- ◆ Might they be longing for understanding, safety, autonomy, appreciation, or connection?
- ◆ What is important to them in this situation?

These are invitations to explore, not conclusions about another person's inner world.

Empathy does not mean agreeing, taking responsibility for someone else's feelings, or abandoning our own needs and boundaries.

And sometimes, we may not have the capacity to listen. We might feel overwhelmed, exhausted, or emotionally activated ourselves. In those moments, returning to self-empathy can help us regain clarity before engaging with another person.

We do not have to begin with the other person. Often, the first step towards connection is listening to ourselves.

## Four key distinctions in NVC

NVC invites us to distinguish between four elements that are often mixed together in everyday communication. These distinctions can help us communicate more clearly and understand one another more deeply.

### 1. Observations and judgments

An observation describes what we can see or hear, without adding an interpretation or evaluation.

**JUDGMENT**

**OBSERVATION**

"You are inconsiderate."



"You arrived 30 minutes after the time we agreed on."

The observation creates space to discuss what happened without defining the other person's character or intentions.

## 2. Feelings and thoughts

Feelings describe our emotional experience. Thoughts describe our interpretations, conclusions, or beliefs about a situation.

### THOUGHT

### FEELING

"I feel that you don't respect me."



"I feel hurt and disappointed."

Recognizing the difference helps us identify our actual emotions and explore the needs connected to them.

Expressions such as "I feel ignored," "I feel rejected," or "I feel manipulated" often contain an interpretation of another person's behaviour. Exploring the emotions beneath these expressions can help us communicate more clearly.

## 3. Needs and strategies

Needs are the underlying human values or qualities that matter to us. Strategies are the particular actions or solutions we choose to meet those needs.

For example, two people may share a need for connection but have different strategies: one wants to spend the evening together, while the other needs time alone before reconnecting.

### STRATEGY

### UNDERLYING NEED

"I need you to call me every evening."



"I would like to feel connected and reassured."

Recognizing the need beneath a strategy can open up more possibilities for meeting everyone's needs.

## 4. Requests and demands

A request invites another person to contribute willingly. A demand, by contrast, leaves little room for refusal and may involve pressure, guilt, shame, or punishment.

| DEMAND                           | REQUEST                                                             |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| "You have to help me with this." | → "Would you be willing to help me with this for 20 minutes today?" |

A request does not guarantee that the answer will be yes. It creates an opportunity for an honest response and further dialogue.

The distinction is not only in the words we use, but also in how we respond when someone says no.

## Bringing NVC into everyday life

These four components — observations, feelings, needs, and requests — can support us in three interconnected practices:

- ◆ **Self-empathy:** Recognizing what is happening within us and understanding our feelings and needs.
- ◆ **Honest expression:** Sharing our observations, feelings, needs, and requests with others in a clear and respectful way.
- ◆ **Empathic listening:** Seeking to understand the observations, feelings, needs, and requests of another person.

We can move between these practices depending on what is happening and what we have the capacity for at the moment.

NVC is not about finding the perfect words or following a rigid formula. It is an ongoing practice of awareness, curiosity, and choice. Some conversations may become easier, while others will remain challenging. What matters is our willingness to return to connection, to listen, and to learn.

At Wellness Navigators, we see this practice as an invitation to navigate our inner worlds and our relationships with greater awareness, compassion, and authenticity.

Connection begins with listening — to ourselves and to one another.

## Explore further: feelings and needs

A feelings and needs list can help us find words for our inner experience and develop a richer understanding of what matters to us.

Use these lists as a starting point for self-reflection, honest expression, or empathic listening.

Download the lists of feelings and needs to support your NVC practice.

## FEELINGS AND NEEDS LISTS

### Feelings & Needs inventory (interactive, 4 languages)

Explore and download the lists of feelings and needs to support your NVC practice.

<https://www.wellnessnavigators.eu/feelingsneeds.html>



This content is educational and does not replace professional psychological support. If you or a young person you work with is in distress, please contact a qualified professional or local emergency services.



**Co-funded by  
the European Union**

Co-funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

[www.wellnessnavigators.eu](http://www.wellnessnavigators.eu) · Theory library · Framework 04