

than accommodating them to prevent their upset. I also clarified ways she could empathize with people when they were upset without taking responsibility for their feelings.

A short time later, I saw evidence that my daughter was beginning to express her needs more openly. A call came from her school principal, apparently disturbed by a communication he'd had with Marla, who had arrived at school wearing overalls. "Marla," he'd said, "young women do not dress this way." To which Marla had responded, "F___ off!"

Hearing this was cause for celebration: Marla had graduated from emotional slavery to obnoxiousness! She was learning to express her needs and risk dealing with the displeasure of others. Surely she had yet to assert her needs comfortably and in a way that respected the needs of others, but I trusted this would occur in time.

Stage 3: At the third stage, *emotional liberation*, we respond to the needs of others out of compassion, never out of fear, guilt, or shame. Our actions are therefore fulfilling to us, as well as to those who receive our efforts. We accept full responsibility for our own intentions and actions, but not for the feelings of others. At this stage, we are aware that we can never meet our own needs at the

Third stage: Emotional liberation. We take responsibility for our intentions and actions.

expense of others. Emotional liberation involves stating clearly what we need in a way that communicates we are equally concerned that the needs of others be fulfilled. NVC is designed to support us in relating at this level.

Summary

The third component of NVC is the acknowledgment of the needs behind our feelings. What others say and do may be the stimulus for, but never the cause of, our feelings. When someone communicates negatively, we have four options as to how to receive the message: (1) blame ourselves, (2) blame others, (3) sense our own feelings and needs, (4) sense the feelings and needs hidden in the other person's negative message.

Judgments, criticisms, diagnoses, and interpretations of others are all alienated expressions of our own needs and values. When others hear criticism, they tend to invest their energy in self-defense or counterattack. The more directly we can connect our feelings to our needs, the easier it is for others to respond compassionately.

In a world where we are often harshly judged for identifying and revealing our needs, doing so can be very frightening, especially for women who are socialized to ignore their own needs while caring for others.

In the course of developing emotional responsibility, most of us experience three stages: (1) "emotional slavery"—believing ourselves responsible for the feelings of others, (2) "the obnoxious stage"—in which we refuse to admit to caring what anyone else feels or needs, and (3) "emotional liberation"—in which we accept full responsibility for our own feelings but not the feelings of others, while being aware that we can never meet our own needs at the expense of others.

NVC in Action

"Bring Back the Stigma of Illegitimacy!"

A student of Nonviolent Communication volunteering at a food bank was shocked when an elderly co-worker burst out from behind a newspaper, "What we need to do in this country is bring back the stigma of illegitimacy!"

The student's habitual reaction to this kind of statement would have been to say nothing, to judge the other severely but silently, and eventually to process her own feelings safely away from the scene. This time, she remembered she had the option of listening for the feelings and needs behind the words that had shocked her.

Student: (first checking out her guess as to what the co-worker was observing) Are you reading something about teenage pregnancies in the paper?

Co-worker: Yes, it's unbelievable how many of them are doing it!

Student: *(now listening for the co-worker's feeling, and what unmet need might be giving rise to this feeling)* Are you feeling alarmed because you'd like kids to have stable families?

Co-worker: Of course! Do you know, my father would have killed me if I had done anything like that!

Student: So you're remembering how it was for the girls in your generation who got pregnant?

Co-worker: Sure thing! We knew what would happen to us if we got pregnant. We were scared about it all the time, not like these girls nowadays.

Student: Are you annoyed that there is no fear of punishment for the girls who get pregnant these days?

Co-worker: Well, at least fear and punishment worked! It says here that there are girls sleeping around with different men just so they can get pregnant! That's right! They have babies and the rest of us in society pay for it!

The student of NVC heard two different feelings in this statement: astonishment that girls would deliberately get pregnant, and annoyance that taxpayers end up paying for children born in this way. She chose which feeling to empathize with.

Student: Are you astonished to realize that people are getting pregnant these days without any consideration for reputation, consequences, financial stability . . . all the things you used to consider?

Co-worker: Yeah, and guess who ends up paying for it?

The co-worker, probably feeling heard around her astonishment, moved on to her other feeling: that of annoyance. As often happens when there is a mixture of feelings present, the speaker will return to those that have not received empathic attention. It is not necessary for the listener to reflect back a complex mixture of feelings all at once; the flow of compassion will continue as each feeling comes up again in its turn.

Student: Sounds like you're exasperated because you'd like your tax money to be used for other purposes. Is that so?

Co-worker: Certainly is! Do you know that my son and his wife want a second child and they can't have one—even though they have two jobs—because it costs so much?

Student: I guess you're sad about that? You'd probably love to have a second grandchild . . .

Co-worker: Yes, and it's not just for me that it would make a difference.

Student: . . . and for your son to have the family he wants . . . *(Even though the student guessed only partially correctly, she did not interrupt the flow of empathy, instead allowing the co-worker to continue and realize another concern.)*

Co-worker: Yes, I think it's sad to be a single child too.

Student: Oh, I see; you'd like for Katie to have a little brother?

Co-worker: That would be nice.

At this point, the student sensed a release in her co-worker. A moment of silence elapsed. She felt surprised to discover that, while she still wanted to express her own views, her urgency and tension had dissipated because she no longer felt "adversarial." She understood the feelings and needs

behind her co-worker's statements and no longer felt that the two of them were "worlds apart."

Student: (expressing herself in NVC, and using all four parts of the process: observation [O], feeling [F], need [N], request [R]) You know, when you first said that we should bring back the stigma of illegitimacy (O), I got really scared (F), because it really matters to me that all of us here share a deep caring for people needing help (N). Some of the people coming here for food are teenage parents (O), and I want to make sure they feel welcome (N). Would you mind telling me how you feel when you see Dasha, or Amy and her boyfriend, walking in? (R)

The dialogue continued with several more exchanges until the woman got the reassurance she needed that her co-worker did indeed offer caring and respectful help to unmarried teen clients. Even more importantly, what the woman gained was a new experience in expressing disagreement in a way that met her needs for honesty and mutual respect.

In the meantime, the co-worker left satisfied that her concerns around teen pregnancy had been fully heard. Both parties felt understood, and their relationship benefited from their having shared their understanding and differences without hostility. In the absence of NVC, their relationship might have begun to deteriorate from this moment, and the work they both wanted to do in common—helping people—might have suffered.

Exercise 3 ACKNOWLEDGING NEEDS

To practice identifying needs, please circle the number in front of each statement where the speaker is acknowledging responsibility for his or her feelings.

1. "You irritate me when you leave company documents on the conference room floor."
2. "I feel angry when you say that, because I am wanting respect and I hear your words as an insult."
3. "I feel frustrated when you come late."
4. "I'm sad that you won't be coming for dinner because I was hoping we could spend the evening together."
5. "I feel disappointed because you said you would do it and you didn't."
6. "I'm discouraged because I would have liked to have progressed further in my work by now."
7. "Little things people say sometimes hurt me."
8. "I feel happy that you received that award."
9. "I feel scared when you raise your voice."
10. "I am grateful that you offered me a ride because I was needing to get home before my children arrive."

Here are my responses for Exercise 3:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. To me, the statement implies that the other person's behavior is solely responsible for the speaker's feelings. It doesn't reveal the needs or thoughts that are contributing to the speaker's feelings. To do so, the speaker might have said, "I'm irritated when you leave company documents on the conference room floor, because I want our documents to be safely stored and accessible."