

Being Me, *Loving You*

**A Practical Guide to
Extraordinary Relationships**

*A Nonviolent Communication™
presentation and workshop transcription by*

Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD



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*A Q&A Session With
Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD*

The following are excerpts from workshops and media interviews given by Marshall Rosenberg on the subject of intimacy and close, personal relationships. Through role-playing and discussion, Marshall touches on most of the key aspects of applying Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to create loving relationships with our partners, spouses, and family, while maintaining our personal integrity and values.

Introduction

So guess what happened today? I'm doing this relationship workshop in the evening, and I had a crisis at seven o'clock this morning. My wife called and asked me one of those questions that you just hate to have in a relationship at any time of the day, but especially at seven in the morning when you don't

have your lawyer. What did she ask at seven o'clock in the morning? "Did I wake you up?" That question wasn't the hard one. She says, "I have a very important question: Am I attractive?" [Laughter] I hate those questions. That's like the time I came home after being on the road quite awhile and she asked me, "Can you see anything different in the house?" I looked and I looked: "No." She had painted the whole house! [Laughter]

I knew that question this morning was the kind that comes up in relationships. "Am I attractive?" Of course, as an NVC-speaking person, I could get out of that by claiming that it's not an NVC question, because we know that nobody "is" anything. Nobody is right, wrong, attractive, or unattractive. But I knew she wouldn't settle for any of that stuff, so I said, "You want to know if you're attractive?" She said, "Yes." "Sometimes yes, sometimes no; can I go back to bed?" [Laughter] She liked that, thank goodness, thank goodness! In one of my favorite books, *How to Make Yourself Miserable*, by Dan Greenberg, you see this dialog:

"Do you love me? Now, this is very important to me. Think it over: Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Please, this is very important; give it very serious consideration: Do you love me?"

(Period of silence) "Yes."

"Then why did you hesitate?" [Laughter]

People can change how they think and communicate. They can treat themselves with much more respect, and they can learn from their limitations without hating themselves. We teach people how to do this. We show people a process that can help them connect with the people they're closest to in a way that can allow them to enjoy deeper intimacy, to give to one another with more enjoyment, and to not get caught up in doing things out of duty, obligation, guilt, shame, and the other things that destroy intimate relationships. We show people how to enjoy working cooperatively in a working community. We show them how to transform domination structures, hierarchal

structures into working communities in which people share a vision of how they can contribute to life. And we're thrilled with how many people all over the world have great energy for making this happen.

A Typical Conflict

Participant: Marshall, what do you think is the major conflict, the major issue between men and women?

Marshall: Well, I hear a lot of this in my work. Women come up to me regularly and say, "Marshall, I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea. I have a very wonderful husband." And then, of course, I know the word "but" is coming. "But I never know how he's feeling." Men throughout the planet—and there are exceptions to this—come from the John Wayne school of expressing emotions, the Clint Eastwood, the Rambo school, where you kind of grunt. And instead of saying clearly what's going on inside of you, you label people as John Wayne would when he walked into a tavern in the movies. He never, even if there were guns trained on him, said, "I'm scared." He might have been out in the desert for six months, but he never said, "I'm lonely." But how did John communicate? John communicated by labeling people. It's a simple classification system. They were either a good guy—buy them a drink—or a bad guy—kill them.

With that way of communicating, which was how I was trained to communicate basically, you don't learn how to get in touch with your own emotions. If you're being trained to be a warrior, you want to keep your feelings out of your consciousness. Well, to be married to a warrior is not a very rich experience for a woman who may have been playing dolls while the men were out playing war. She

wants intimacy, but the man doesn't have a vocabulary that makes it easy to do that.

On the other hand women are not taught to be very clear about their needs. They've been taught for several centuries to deny their own needs and take care of others. So, they often depend on the man for leadership and expect him to kind of guess what she needs and wants and to fulfill that, to take care of that. So I see these issues regularly, but as I say, there are certainly a lot of individual differences.

Participant: Let's do a role-play, the kind of thing that happens between men and women. Can you set it up? I mean, you know what they fight about the most.

Marshall: Well, one of the most frequent ones is the woman saying to the man: "I don't feel the connection with you that I would like. I really want to feel more an emotional connection with you. And how do you feel when I say that?" And the man says, "Huh?"

Participant: Well, yeah, let me play the man. [beginning the role-play] Well what do you want? What do you want me to do?

Marshall: Well, like right now, instead of asking me that question, I would like to know what you're feeling. Like, are you hurt by what I said? Are you angry? Are you scared?

Participant: I don't know.

Marshall: Yeah, and this is what I mean. When you don't know what you're feeling it's very hard for me to feel safe and trusting.

Participant: Well, I feel like you're . . . I feel like you're criticizing me.

Marshall: So, you're feeling kind of hurt and you want me to respect you and to appreciate what you offer in our relationship.

Participant: Well, yeah.

Marshall: And see, I would've liked for you to have said that. I would've liked to have heard you say I'm hurt, I'd like some appreciation. But notice you didn't say that. You said, "You're criticizing me." You required me to have to take a deep breath and not get caught up in that and not hear a judgment in what you say, and instead to try to hear what you're feeling and what you might need. I'd like not to work so hard at that. I'd really appreciate it if you could just tell me what's going on inside you.

Participant: Well, I don't know what's going on inside of me, most of the time. What do you want from me?

Marshall: Well, first I just am glad we're having this conversation now. I want you to know that I hope I can stay aware of how confusing it is to give me what I want. I'm trying to become conscious that it is such a new thing for you and I want to be patient. But, I would like to hear what's going on in you.

Participant: Well, right now, I guess I'm just glad that you're telling me what you need.

Marshall: So, that's a very typical kind of interaction that goes on. The man, he very often hears demands coming from the woman.

On the Subject of Marriage

Marshall: You may have heard me say that it is harder to relate within a marriage than outside because of all the crazy things we are taught as to what “marriage” means. I find I enjoy the person I’m living with much more if I don’t think of her as “my wife,” because in the culture I grew up in, when someone says “my wife,” they start to think of her as some kind of property.

NVC is a language that makes it possible for us to connect with one another in a way that enables us to give to each other from the heart. That means with your partner, you don’t do things because of titles that imply you are “supposed to,” “should,” “ought to,” or “must.” You don’t give out of guilt, shame, unconsciousness, fear, obligation, duty. It is my belief that whenever we do anything for one another out of that kind of energy, everybody loses. When we receive something given out of that kind of energy, we know we are going to have to pay for it because it was done at the other person’s expense. I’m interested in a process in which we give to each other from the heart.

How do we learn to give from the heart in such a way that giving feels like receiving? When things are being done in a human way, I don’t think you can tell the giver from the receiver. It’s only when we interact with one another in what I call a judging, or judgmental, manner, that giving isn’t much fun.

Learning Through Four Questions

Let me suggest that you write some things down. I’m going to ask you four questions. If you are married or partnered, then pretend that you’ll be speaking with your partner or

spouse. If you want to focus on some other relationship, pick someone you're close to, perhaps a good friend. Now as your NVC partner, I'm going to ask you the four questions that deeply interest NVC-speaking people around all relationships, but particularly intimate ones. Please write down your answer to each of these four questions as though you were asked by this other person. Reader: We invite you to do this on your own on a separate sheet of paper.

The first question:

Would you tell me one thing that I do as your partner or friend that makes life less than wonderful for you?

You see, as an NVC-er I don't want to take any action or say anything that doesn't enrich your life. So it would be a great service if, anytime I do something that isn't enriching your life, you bring that to my attention. Could you think of one thing that I do—or don't do—that makes life less than wonderful for you? Write down one thing.

Now the second question. As an NVC-speaking person, not only do I want to know what I do that makes life less than wonderful for you, it's also important for me to be able to connect with your feelings moment by moment. To be able to play the game of giving to one another from our hearts, your feelings are critical and I need to be aware of them. It's stimulating when we can be in touch with one another's feelings. My second question then:

When I do what I do, how do you feel?

Write down how you feel.

Let's move to the third question. As an NVC-speaking person, I realize that how we feel is a result of what our

needs are and what is happening to our needs. When our needs are getting fulfilled, then we have feelings that fall under the heading of “pleasurable feelings,” like happy, satisfied, joyful, blissful, content . . . and when our needs are not being satisfied, we have the kind of feelings that you just wrote down. So this is question three:

What needs of yours are not getting met?

I'd like you to tell me why you feel as you do in terms of your needs: “I feel as I do because I would have liked _____ (or because I was wanting, wishing, or hoping for _____).” Write down what you need in this format.

Now the NVC-er is excited because he wants to get on to this next question, which is the center of life for all NVC-speaking people. I can't wait to hear the answer to this. Everybody ready for the big NVC question?

I am aware that I am doing something that is not enriching your life and that you have certain feelings about that. You've told me what needs of yours are not getting fulfilled. Now, please tell me what I can do to make your most wonderful dreams come true. That is what NVC is all about:

What can we do to enrich one another's lives?

NVC is about clearly communicating those four things to other people at any given moment. Of course, the situation is not always about our needs getting met. We also say “thank you” in NVC and tell people how they have truly enriched our lives by telling them the first three things. We tell them (1) what they've done to enrich us, (2) what our feelings are, and (3) what needs of ours have been fulfilled by their actions. I believe that, as human beings, there are only two things that we are basically saying: “please” and

“thank you.” The language of NVC is set up to make our “please” and “thank you” very clear so that people do not hear anything that gets in the way of our giving to one another from the heart.

Criticism

There are primarily two forms of communication that make giving from the heart almost impossible for people. The first is anything that sounds to them like a criticism. If you have expressed the four things that you have written in NVC, there would be no words written there that can be heard by the other person as a criticism of them. As you see, the only time you are talking about them is in the first part where you mention their behavior. You are not criticizing them for the behavior; you are just calling that behavior to their attention. The other three parts are all about you: your feelings, your unmet needs, and your requests. If there are any words in there that can easily be heard by the other person as a criticism, then my guess is that you’ve mixed a bit of judgment into those four ingredients.

By “criticism,” I mean attack, judgment, blame, diagnosis, or anything that analyzes people from the head. If your answers are in NVC, there will hopefully be no words that are easy to pick up as criticism. However, if the other person has these ears [Marshall puts on a pair of judging ears], they could hear criticism no matter what you say. Tonight we’ll learn how to clean up such a mess if it happens. We want to be able to speak NVC to anybody.

Coercion

The second block to our ability to give from the heart is any hint of coercion. As an NVC-er, you want to be able to present those four things you wrote down such that the other person

receives them as a gift, an opportunity to give, not as a demand or order. There is no criticism or coercion in the NVC language. When we tell others what we want, we do so in a way that communicates to them, “Please do this only if you can do so willingly. Please never do anything for me at your expense. Never do anything for me where there is the least bit of fear, guilt, shame, resentment, or resignation behind your motives. Otherwise we’ll both suffer. Please honor my request only if it comes from your heart, where it is a gift to yourself to give to me.” Only when neither person feels like they’re losing, giving in or giving up, do both people benefit from the action.

Receiving From the Heart

There are two main parts to NVC: the first is the ability to say those four things and get them across to the other person without the other person hearing criticism or demand. The other part of NVC is to learn how to receive these four pieces of information from the other person regardless of whether they speak a judging language or NVC. If the other person speaks NVC, our life will be a lot easier. They will say these four things with clarity, and our job will be to accurately receive them before we react.

However, if the other person speaks a judging language, then we need to put on NVC ears. [Laughter as Marshall dons a set of NVC ears] NVC ears serve as a translator: No matter what language the other person speaks, when we have these ears on we only hear NVC. For example, the other person says, “The problem with you is _____,” with these ears I hear, “What I would like is _____.” I hear no judgment, criticism, attack. With these ears on, I realize that all criticism is a pathetic expression of an unmet need, pathetic because it usually doesn’t get the person what they want, causing instead all kinds of tension and problems. With NVC, we skip through all that. We never hear a criticism, just unmet needs.