The following are four chapters to be read in preparation for the Self-Empathy and Self-Empowerment process.

- Observations
- Feelings
- Needs
- Requests

Please read by August 15, 2023.

Introduction to Part One

Nonviolent Communication is a revolutionary way of being in the world that is peaceful and more humane.

MARGE WITTY

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a process developed by Marshall Rosenberg to help us embody a consciousness, an attitude that manifests as a way of being in the world. In the rest of Part One, we will explore this process, but for now, let's focus on the essence of NVC and this way of being:

- ✧ NVC involves language, thought, nonverbal communication, and a commitment to a certain use of power.
- ✧ NVC emphasizes care and compassion, or natural giving, as the motivation for others to agree with our requests, rather than fear, guilt, shame, obligation, or desire for reward.
- ✧ NVC aims to create the quality of connection in which everyone's needs matter and are met through compassionate giving. NVC assumes that in the context of connection, people can find solutions that honor and can meet everyone's needs.

When grounded in NVC consciousness, we are in a state of awareness that manifests as a specific way of relating to self and others. In that state, we care about the needs of others as much as our own, and we commit to finding strategies that cherish, honor, and incorporate everyone's needs.

When applied to psychotherapy, the NVC process results in Empowerment Therapy (ET). ET's primary focus is on helping clients identify and meet their needs to build more fulfilling lives. Grounded in Carl Rogers 'Client-Centered Theory, NVC offers a process for embodying the "necessary and sufficient conditions" by which the therapist develops a relationship with the client and facilitates "constructive personality change." These conditions are: empathy, congruence, unconditional positive regard, and respect for clients 'autonomy, also known as nondirectivity.

Abraham Maslow proposed that psychological health is predicated on the fulfillment of innate human needs building upon each other, culminating in self-actualization—realizing one's full potential. "Gratification of any need whatsoever," he said, "helps to determine character formation. Furthermore, any true need gratification tends toward the improvement, strengthening, and healthy development of the individual." (*Motivation and Personality*, p. 61.)

Nonviolent Communication is anchored in the fulfillment of universal human needs, and it invites us to attend to needs consciously, intentionally, and consistently as they arise in our daily experience, because *when our needs are met, we thrive.*

PART ONE: BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION PROCESS

The chapters in Part One are a distillation of the elements of NVC that I deem most fundamental to understanding Empowerment Therapy. Chapter 1 sets forth the philosophical building blocks of Nonviolent Communication. Chapters 2–5 treat the practical building blocks: observations, feelings, needs, and requests.

CHAPTER 2

Observations

The way you look at things is the most powerful force in shaping your life. In a vital sense, perception is reality.

JOHN O'DONOHUE

When we make an observation in NVC, we refer to something another person said or did that met or did not meet some needs of ours. We identify the action plainly, without interpretation or judgment. When observations are mixed with interpretations, people can hear criticism. When they hear criticism, they are likely to defend themselves, counterattack, or withdraw. Evaluations prevent empathic connection, which is the purpose of NVC.

In the context of therapy, it is, of course, important to refrain from judging our clients. Nonjudgment is a necessary condition for creating emotional safety in the room. Differentiating clients' actions from our interpretations helps us recognize our judgments. Clearly distinguishing observations from evaluations helps us address difficult situations without implying criticism, thus protecting the client's emotional safety as well as the therapeutic relationship.

OBSERVATION VS. EVALUATION

To get a feel for the distinction between evaluation and observation, pretend you are a client and imagine that your therapist is talking to you. Notice if you feel differently when you hear a statement that contains an evaluation versus one that doesn't.

Evaluation	Observation
I notice that you've been late the past three sessions. Does this time still work well for you?	I notice that the past three sessions you've arrived 10 or 15 minutes after 4:00. Does this time still work well for you?
I'm concerned that you drove home while you were intoxicated because it's not safe. Would you consider talking to your friends about having a designated driver? How does this sound?	When you tell me that you had seven drinks and drove home, I feel concerned about safety. I'd like to propose something that would give me peace of mind. Would you consider talking to your friends about having a designated driver? How does this sound?

The words late and intoxicated both evaluate the bare facts of arriving after the appointed time and of consuming several drinks. "It's not safe" takes it a step further by evaluating the client's actions based on the therapist's viewpoint, albeit accurate. The precision, clarity, and simplicity of NVC observations move the conversation forward rather than prompting defensiveness.

EVALUATING PEOPLE IN OTHERS' LIVES

When clients talk to us about their problems with others, it's important to refrain from evaluating or judging those people in terms of right and wrong, good and bad. Some years ago, I had an African American colleague who used to complain about the lack of respect and equality she experienced in the workplace. As frustrated and upset as I was on her behalf, my responses were always grounded in observation rather than evaluation. Once, she said, "I like talking to you because you understand, and I don't come away feeling bitter."

Fueling Anger When we make moralistic judgments about people in our clients' lives, we can fuel clients' anger toward them, making clients more likely to approach the situation with violence.

Evaluation: "Your brother is violent."
Observation: "You said that your brother called you a 'weakling' and 'untrustworthy.'"

Even if certain people in clients' lives are clearly toxic to them, evaluating them only reinforces anger and prevents forward movement. Here's an example from my own work.

> At my first job as a therapist, I worked with a man who disclosed that he was sexually abused as an adolescent; he was angry and resentful. When he talked about specific incidents, my responses included judgment about the person who caused him harm, including evaluations such as "He took advantage of you." Over time, I noticed that he was stuck in anger. It took me a while to realize that I was contributing to his lack of progress.

Instead of moralistic, right/wrong judgments, we can express needs-based judgments, also known as value judgments, which assess how well actions or situations harmonize with our needs. Today I would respond differently.

Evaluation	**Observation**
You were an innocent boy. You trusted him and he took advantage of you.	You were an innocent boy. You trusted him and he didn't treat you with <u>respect</u> or <u>care</u>.
She's deserting you after 26 years of marriage.	She asked for a divorce after 26 years of marriage.

When clients are angry at someone in their lives, my goal is to listen empathically and understand their experience as fully as I can. In no way invalidate their anger or try to transform it; and, in no way fuel it with judgment, blame, indignation, outrage or other such thoughts and feelings. I believe this stance to be more therapeutic than joining clients in anger.

Reducing Freedom Another reason to refrain from criticizing the people clients care about is that when we do, they are likely to defend them or stop talking about them. They are less likely to share freely. A client said to me once: "[My previous therapist] criticized my husband. I didn't like that. I'm the only one who can criticize him."

Here are two examples of responses to clients that contain interpretations and judgments, followed by a translation to observations:

Evaluation	Observation
Your husband is dishonest.	You have said that your husband has had relationships with other women three times during the marriage.
Your mother abandoned you when you were 11.	Your mother met a man and moved out of the house when you were 11.

Reducing Safety When we judge people in clients' lives, we alert clients that we view situations through a judgmental, critical lens, thus reducing safety for clients. They may fear that if they disclose an action about which they feel ashamed or guilty, we will judge them the way we judge the people in their lives.

Seeking Like-Minded Consultants When we need help regarding a client and seek consultation, it's important to work with a consultant who will not judge our clients or the people in their lives or diagnose them with personality disorders. This could influence our thinking and the way we relate to our clients. It could also stimulate anger that we could pass on to clients. The same is true when colleagues consult with us. We want to make sure not to judge their clients nor the people in their clients' lives.

Of course, it's important to respect clients' self-expression. They can express evaluations, curse, judge, and blame as they wish during the session. Venting anger freely and fully is a necessary step toward therapeutic movement.

EXERCISE: OBSERVATION VS. EVALUATION

To practice distinguishing observations from evaluations, circle the sentences that express a pure observation.

1. Richard is depressed—he's been isolating.
2. John was very angry yesterday when he came to session.
3. Patricia has never missed a therapy session. She is very motivated for treatment.
4. Nancy said that she had a panic attack on Saturday.
5. You work too much. It's affecting your health.

6. Katie didn't ask for my opinion during the session.
7. Joe is oppositional-defiant. He's threatened to hit his mother twice.
8. I'm worried about Laura. She said that she has been restricting and binging.
9. Evelyn misses therapy sessions often.
10. Luke has no insight into his OCD.

Answers: 4, 6, and 8. No. 1 is not an observation according to NVC because the words depressed and isolating are not observable actions. To turn this evaluation into an observation, we would say, "Richard reports that he is not eating well, that he is fatigued, is not sleeping, not interested in activities he used to enjoy, and staying in his room alone."

Take It to Your Practice

Think of a past or current client who expresses judgments about someone in their lives. How can you translate the actions into observations free from evaluations?

Invitation for Reflection

Do you have a negative evaluation of a client or someone in a client's life at this time? If you do, do you think this could impact the client? If so, how?

SUMMARY

Observations describe the actions of others devoid of interpretations, inferences, or judgments. When discussing sensitive matters with clients, we want to refer to their actions using pure observations free from criticism or blame. This helps protect their emotional well-being. It is also important to avoid making evaluations of people in our clients' lives with whom they have conflict. When we express judgments about them, our clients might feel compelled to defend them or they may not feel free talking about their actions in the future. They will also see us as people who evaluate situations judgmentally, thus reducing safety for them. In the next chapter, we'll take a look at feelings, the first element in creating heart connection.

CHAPTER 3

Feelings

We are dangerous when we are not conscious of our responsibility for how we behave, think, and feel.

MARSHALL ROSENBERG

In NVC, feelings are the emotions and sensations we experience in connection with our needs. These important messengers raise awareness of our fulfillment or lack thereof. What causes feelings? According to NVC, feelings are caused by our met or unmet needs—*not the actions of others*. People's actions may be the stimulus but not the cause of our feelings. In addition, our feelings are greatly influenced by the meaning we ascribe to events, as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy has taught us. Let's look at the following scenarios to illustrate this concept.

Situation:	My client Henry did not attend an appointment with me scheduled for 11:00 a.m., nor did he call with an explanation.
Scenario 1:	My 9:00 a.m. client was in crisis, and I worked with her for almost two hours to help her stabilize. By 11:00 a.m., I am stressed out and tired, and I need space and rest. How do I feel? Relieved!
Scenario 2:	It's 11:30 a.m., and I haven't heard from Henry. I think, "That's unusual. I wonder if he's OK." How do I feel? Concerned.
Scenario 3:	It's 11:30 a.m., and I haven't heard from Henry. I think, "That's inconsiderate. He could have left me a voicemail." How do I feel? Irritated.

Same situation, different feelings. The difference lies in my needs at that moment and the way I interpret the client's action.

Of course, a nuanced analysis would show that feelings emerge from a complex web of causality: our current state, temperament, predispositions, psychological history, interpretations of events, and our implicit assessment of how our needs are being impacted. Some argue that the actions of others should be included in that causal web. Yet, by inviting us to regard our needs and interpretations as the cause of our feelings, NVC encourages us to focus on what we can control and to attend to the root factors that affect our well-being. Such focus can help keep us from blaming others while reframing feelings as beneficial indicators of what is important.

This functional premise, in my own experience, is liberating and empowering. In ET, it serves clarity about feelings, both for the therapist and for the client. If clients do something that stimulates anger, frustration, or another distressing emotion in us, they are not to blame. If they do not attend sessions, put themselves at risk despite our

recommendations, or get angry with us, it's important to distinguish those actions from our reactions. We want to recognize our feelings, identify our needs, and shed light on our interpretations. If we think that their actions cause our feelings, we may do harm inadvertently. For instance, we may talk to them harshly or make demands—reactions that undermine the relationship and the therapy outcome.

It's also critical to help our clients understand what causes feelings. Parents (or partners) might say, "I didn't want to hit you, but *you made me angry.*" But children (or partners) are not to blame for the violence directed at them. Sharing this concept with clients can help reduce violence and increase safety and respect in families. When they realize and understand that their feelings are caused by their needs and not the actions of others, clients can move from victimhood to agency.

FEELINGS VS. THOUGHTS

Nonviolent Communication also invites us to distinguish feelings from thoughts. While we may automatically use the formulation "I feel _____" to describe feelings, lots of nonfeeling sentiments can find their way into that blank space.

I feel that my supervisor is manipulative.

I feel as if I were living alone.

When we begin a sentence with the words "I feel *that*," "I feel *as if*," or "I feel *like*," we are expressing not feelings but thoughts. When clients express a thought in this way, we try to guess their feelings to increase empathic connection.

CLIENT: I feel that my supervisor is manipulative.
THERAPIST: Are you bothered because you need honesty and direct, straightforward communication?

CLIENT: I feel [that] he doesn't love me.
THERAPIST: I'm guessing you are hurting, wishing the love was mutual.

CLIENT: We never have meals together in my family. I feel as if I were living alone.
THERAPIST: Are you sad and lonely, needing connection and closeness with your family members?

Trying to guess the client's feelings has at least two benefits. When we ask open-ended questions like "How do you feel about that?" we put clients on the spot and move them from an experiential process to a cognitive task. Guessing feelings is also a way to join clients in vulnerability because our guesses can be inaccurate. We take a small risk by making a guess, instead of them taking all the risk.

Acknowledging clients' feelings is the first step to connecting with them. For this reason, it's helpful for us to develop a vast vocabulary of emotions. Imagine that you are a client

and a therapist is trying to capture your feelings. Compare how you experience the following responses.

Generic Feelings	**Specific Feelings**
I'm hearing that you are *very upset*.	I'm hearing that you are *distraught*.
I hear that you've lost *enthusiasm*.	I hear that you are feeling *disheartened and dispirited*.
I'm hearing that you are *very angry* about this.	I'm hearing that you are *livid* about this.
I imagine you are *very scared* as you remember and talk about the hurricane.	I imagine you are *terrified* as you remember and talk about the hurricane.
Does this *bother* you *very much*?	Is this *disturbing* to you?

The more colorful vocabulary in the right-hand column helps capture and acknowledge clients' intensity. If they are experiencing fury, asking if they are *angry* risks minimizing their experience. Adding *very* is no substitute for a word with the intensity built-in. Conversely, if a client is feeling annoyance, we don't want to guess anger. We want our feeling words to match clients' experience as closely as possible.

In doing this work, it's important to capture clients' feelings in the present, as opposed to how they fET when the incident occurred. What matters is what is alive in them right now, not yesterday or when they were children. Understanding their present experience helps clients move forward.

EXERCISE: FEELINGS

I invite you to practice identifying your own feelings throughout the day. Pay attention to the flow of emotions that various experiences evoke in you and name them. You may want to carry the feelings inventory (Appendix 4.1) with you and refer to it when identifying the feelings most alive in you. Here is a personal example of identifying nuanced feelings throughout the day:

This morning, a tree-services crew came to my house and took down two dying trees in the backyard. As I write, I look out the window and feel emptiness, gazing at the space where the trees were. Inadvertently, one of the men knocked down a bird house and three baby sparrows came hopping out. We tried to catch them to return them to the bird house, but they hopped away into the bushes. Thinking that they may not survive, I feel grief-stricken. I've cried for about a half hour, on and off. I also feel regretful that I didn't remove the bird house from the tree to protect the birds. As I finish writing this story, I'm experiencing calm. My mourning is complete.

Take It to Your Practice

By way of self-care, and to prevent unpleasant, unacknowledged feelings from accumulating in your nervous system, think of a situation that is troubling you and identify and voice as many feelings as you can.

When you read or listen to the news, notice your feelings after each story. Do the same with various experiences throughout the day, especially those that evoke strong emotional responses in you.

INTERPRETATIONS PASSING AS FEELINGS

Some apparent "feelings" are really an evaluation of others' actions. I call these expressions "interpretation passing as feelings" and view them as judgments in disguise. Examples of interpretation feelings include:

- ✧ ignored
- ✧ manipulated
- ✧ abandoned
- ✧ humiliated
- ✧ betrayed
- ✧ unloved
- ✧ misunderstood

All these words allude to someone else's actions. They imply blame, and they shift the agency to the other person.

Interpretation passing as feelings do not reveal how the speaker feels. If I say to you "I feel ignored," you don't know if I'm hurt, angry, or relieved. Sometimes I need space and don't want to engage with anyone. So, if I interpret someone's action as ignoring me, I may feel relief. It's helpful to recognize interpretations passing as feelings and connect them with possible unmet needs, not to correct clients but to avoid reinforcing their perception of victimhood.

CLIENT: When Susan doesn't say hello to me, I feel ignored.
THERAPIST: I'm guessing you're hurt, wanting to be acknowledged?

CLIENT: My mother guilt-trips me into visiting her. I feel so manipulated.
THERAPIST: Are you angry because you need honesty, as in straightforward communication? You wish she would tell you she misses you and ask if you could come over. Is that so?

CLIENT: I feel abandoned by my father when he ran off with another woman when I was seven.
THERAPIST: Recalling this, do you feel resentful and hurt because you needed love and you needed to matter. Am I with you on this?

CLIENT: My supervisor yelled at Ophelia in front of everybody, and I know she feel totally humiliated.
THERAPIST: I'm guessing you are worried about her because you value safety in the workplace and you want respect from people in positions of authority, in this case, from your supervisor. Is that it?

Note that interpretations passing as feelings can also be directed inward. A client may say "I feel inadequate because I can't balance my checkbook." "Inadequate" is a self-evaluation. Are they feeling frustration, impatience, disappointment, or something else? Appendix 4.2 is a list of interpretations passing as feelings with possible underlying emotions and needs.

EXERCISE: FEELINGS VS. THOUGHTS

Select the sentences that express thoughts and guess the underlying feelings.

1. Do you feel frustrated because you need help and you're not getting it?
2. I don't feel that your sister is trustworthy.
3. Are you sad that your son is leaving home?
4. When Susan tries to force me to do what she wants, I feel coerced.
5. I hear you're relieved that you're going on vacation.
6. When Lorena said that she went back to him, I feel like shaking her.
7. I feel irritated when Lou starts talking before I finish my thoughts.
8. I'm guessing you feel as if you were invisible.
9. I feel regretful that I was late for the session.
10. When he raises his voice, I feel like running away.
11. I feel that Ralph is not committed to therapy.
12. I feel happy when I can contribute to my clients' well-being.

Answers: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, and 11.

Take It to Your Practice

Think of a client who uses interpretations passing as feelings when he or she talks. Identify their feelings and write an empathic response.

Invitation for Reflection

Do you think that addressing cognitive distortions is enough to transform distressing feelings? If not, why not?

SUMMARY

According to NVC, feelings are emotional states and physical sensations that point to needs. Thus, needs—met or unmet—along with our interpretations cause our feelings. This concept is empowering because it helps us recognize that our feelings are not controlled by the actions of others. Those actions are often the stimulus but cannot be the cause. It follows that we are responsible for our feelings. This recognition empowers clients to move from victimhood to agency.

We differentiate forms of expression that have the appearance of feelings but are actually thoughts and judgments. These expressions, like “manipulated,” “ignored,” “humiliated,” and “betrayed,” are called interpretations passing as feelings. When clients employ these forms of expression, we can use our expanded feelings vocabulary to avoid reinforcing victimhood.

CHAPTER 4

Needs

A need is life seeking expression within us.

MARSHALL ROSENBERG

The word "need" implies *deficit* or *deficiency*. Given this negative undertone, sometimes we suppress our needs for fear of appearing "needy." In doing so, we disconnect from the essence of life.

In NVC, needs refer to the conditions human beings require in order to be fulfilled and to thrive. Our needs include air, water, freedom, meaning, empathy, support, consideration, touch, honesty, and recreation. In some cases, the experience of an unfulfilled need may manifest as a physical sensation, such as hunger or thirst. At other times, it may take the form of a longing or yearning, as with empathy or meaning.

Needs are a two-way street. We want others to act in ways that help meet our needs, and we want to act in ways that help meet other people's needs—for our own well-being. For instance, we need honesty from others, and we need to relate to others with honesty. The latter will enhance our peace of mind and protect our self-respect.

The concept of needs is the cornerstone of Nonviolent Communication and Empowerment Therapy (see Appendix 4.3 for an inventory of needs). Understanding that unmet needs are the root cause of clients' suffering validates their emotions and gives them a vocabulary to address painful situations. The universality of needs makes it easier to connect across race, ethnicity, age, and other differences between therapist and client. Knowing our needs has many benefits.

EMPOWERMENT

Being aware of our needs is the first step toward meeting them, but this awareness requires some practice. Many of us disconnected from our needs in childhood. Often, when we expressed our needs, our caretakers did not listen, at best. At worst, they became annoyed or irritated. "I didn't ask if you were hungry. Put away that game and come to the table!" Children can continue to play, at the risk of stimulating anger in their parents, which could lead to disconnection and punishment, or they can comply and suppress their needs for choice and play. Confronted with the security and connection vs. freedom and autonomy dilemma, children often choose security, and the process of disconnection from needs begins. To avoid forcing such a dilemma, parents might opt to acknowledge their children's needs and find a strategy that incorporates the needs of both parties. "OK, honey,

how about you play five more minutes and then come to the table so we can have dinner together?"

Receiving the message that our needs don't matter doesn't only happen in childhood. Once during a team meeting at work, I was cold and asked, "Would anyone mind if I turn on the heater?" The director looked at me and said, in what seemed to me an angry tone of voice, "It's not cold." Period. No acknowledgement or accommodation of my needs whatsoever. No wonder we come to view our needs as toxic and disconnect from them!

It's essential for clients to gain awareness of their needs in order to build more fulfilling lives. Otherwise, they might try multiple strategies to feel better to no avail. Take, for example, a client I had some time ago, who reported often feeling sad. When she did, she would go for a run or play lively music and dance to pull out of her sadness. Upon exploration, she discovered two unmet needs: connection with her husband and mourning the deaths of her parents. Uncovering her unmet needs and realizing that they are universal helped her address them. She began attending to these unmet needs, instead of lifting her mood temporarily.

Awareness of Choice We can discuss with clients the universal human need of autonomy and choice. Based on their upbringing, clients often don't realize that they can *choose* to make changes in their lives. They go about their daily routines doing what they "have to do"—a semiconscious assumption that keeps them unhappy. Awareness of needs makes it easier for clients to restructure cognitive distortions, and the realization that they have choice empowers and liberates clients to make changes in their lives.

Dream Relationship Vision Borrowing from the work of Robert Fritz, when the situation calls for it in couples work, I invite each person to create a vision for their relationship. They think about what needs they would like to meet in a couple relationship and the specific ways in which they would like to meet them. I say, "Don't hold back. Dream!" The exercise helps couples recognize the distance between their current place and their desired destination. As Fritz proposes, that recognition creates tension, not stress or anxiety but energetic tension, which calls for resolution. In this way, the tension between their current reality and what they want can, in itself, be a motivator to work toward their dream relationship. It helps them seek fulfillment proactively, rather than resign themselves to dissatisfaction and discontent.

This exercise is also a way for each person to gain clarity about what their partner wants. No guesswork is required. Once they each understand their partner's needs and wishes, the next step is to discuss how they feel about the strategies presented. It's important to clarify that each person can decide whether or not they want to support their partner in the *specific ways* requested. The strategies are not expectations or demands. They are requests subject to discussion.

Dream Life Vision When clients express dissatisfaction with their lives or when they are dealing with a specific issue, I invite them to imagine their dream life using the format of the Dream Relationship Vision above. The vision gives them clarity and motivation by establishing the distance between their current situation and what they desire.

INCREASED COOPERATION

Another benefit of knowing our needs is increased cooperation from others. When we express our needs, we are likely to access people's natural desire to contribute. The likelihood that our needs will be met increases significantly.

Revealing Our Needs When Making a Request Since needs are universal, when we express our needs to our clients and acknowledge their needs, we build a bridge that connects our minds and hearts. When we ask something of our clients, they are more likely to want to support us if they know what our needs are. Here are examples of how a standard request can be converted to an NVC request by making needs explicit:

Standard Requests	**NVC Requests**
Susan, I would like all the group members to be in the room by 6:00, so that we can start the session promptly. Would you agree to arrive 5–10 minutes before 6:00? How would this be for you?	Susan, I would like all the group members to be in the room by 6:00, so that we can start the session promptly. Once we start, quiet helps me focus and really hear people when they speak. For me, being on time is also a way to show <u>respect</u> for everyone in the group. Would you agree to arrive 5–10 minutes before 6:00? How would this be for you?
John, I have not received your payment for the last session. I like receiving payment at the end of each session. Would you be willing to do this? How would this be for you?	John, I have not received your payment for the last session. For <u>ease</u> and <u>peace of mind</u>, I like receiving payment at the end of each session. Would you be willing to do this? How would this be for you?

RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON CARE AND TRUST

Caring about the needs of others as much as our own is a way to live out an important principle of human relations. Nonviolent Communication offers a roadmap to embodying such care in our interactions with others. In doing so, we build trust.

The opposite is also true. When we care solely about our needs, we evoke distrust and lack of cooperation.

> I was co-leading a nine-day NVC training. I asked a fellow trainer if he wanted to co-facilitate a session with me. "No," he replied, "I don't have enough trust that you care about my needs." I was very surprised. That evening, reflecting on his words, I realized that the day before I had requested that he meet with a participant individually, without asking if this would be amenable to him. The next day I checked my guess with him. Indeed, that's when the disconnect occurred.

Building trust in primary relationships is no different. It is crucial to help clients understand that identifying others' needs is not enough. To build trust, it is necessary that we genuinely care about the needs of others and are willing to relinquish our preferred strategies and find ones that accommodate both parties' needs. When others trust that we care about their needs, it's easier for them to care about ours. This concept is particularly important in couples and family therapy.

NONVIOLENT CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When conflict arises, voicing needs helps transform separation into connection and makes it easier to find solutions that are amenable to both parties. Try this experiment: next time you have a conflict with someone, do your best to understand their feelings and needs in the situation and acknowledge them out loud. Remember, you may not get it right the first time, but keep trying until the other person confirms that you understand their feelings and needs. Then express your feelings and needs and watch the conflict de-escalate magically.

Conflict in relationships is arguably the most common presenting problem in therapy. We can support clients by sharing the concept of clarifying needs in individual, couples, and family therapy, as well as in therapy groups.

The following example illustrates what a talk with an adolescent would sound like if the mother were to acknowledge her son's needs, express her own, and seek a strategy that considers both parties' needs:

> MOTHER: Luke, I get that you're frustrated because you need freedom and trust. You want us to trust that you can take care of yourself and make wise choices. Am I with you on this?
>
> SON: Yeah!
>
> MOTHER: Is it also that you want to have fun and hang out with your friends for a good chunk of time?

SON: Yep.

MOTHER: Anything else?

SON: I'm the only one that has to be home by midnight. All my friends can stay out till 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. I mean, the fun starts at 11:00!

MOTHER: And you want more leeway. You would like to have the same curfew as your friends?

SON: It would help.

MOTHER: Are you ready to hear me now? Or is there more you'd like me to hear?

SON: What?

MOTHER: Are you open to hearing my concerns?

SON: I guess.

MOTHER: I want you to have more freedom and have fun. And, at the same time, I want peace of mind, knowing that you're safe. Would you tell me what you heard me say?

SON: That you don't trust me.

MOTHER: Thank you for telling me what you heard. Let me clarify what I mean. I want you to have freedom and fun, and I want to have peace of mind. Would you tell me that back?

SON: That you want me to have fun and you want peace of mind.

MOTHER: Exactly, thank you. How do you feel hearing this?

SON: I don't know.

MOTHER: Are you frustrated, wanting a solution already?

SON: Yes.

MOTHER: I want a solution that leaves us both feeling satisfied. I want consideration for your needs *and* mine. Any ideas?

SON: I don't know. . .. What if I stay at Chuck's overnight when we hang out at his house? That way, I don't have to drive late at night. You and Mrs. Conway can talk about it.

MOTHER: That's a possibility. Let me give it a little thought on the weekend, when I have more space to think about it. We can talk on Sunday morning. How's that?

SON: Good.

MOTHER: Thank you for staying in the conversation, Luke. I'm relieved that we didn't end up arguing. I'm grateful because I like having harmony between us, and we came up with a solution that might work for both of us.

INCREASED INNER FREEDOM

There are many ways to meet our needs. Awareness of the possibilities enables us to trust in life's many resources and increases confidence. I'd like to share an example of how I was able to meet my needs in an atypical yet fulfilling way.

> My husband and I didn't have children. For years, I mourned this situation. One day, talking to Marshall Rosenberg, he said "Myra, why do you want to have a child?" I replied, "Because I want to have someone in my life who is very close and who I can love, understand, and support." He said, "You don't need a biological child to meet those needs." He was right.
>
> Now I have just such a chosen family: a beloved daughter, a son-in-law, and a granddaughter. I met my daughter at church 17 years ago, and we became very close. She calls me her spiritual mother. We talk once a week about matters of the heart. When I have faced great challenges, she has been a rock to me. I experience my son-in-law as caring and attentive. He invites me to their house frequently, cooks my favorite meals, and asks me to stay overnight. My granddaughter, currently 20, is a fun companion with whom I have enjoyed good food, the fine arts, and travel over the years. There are multiple ways to meet our needs. How liberating!
>
> In addition, the realization that there are multiple ways to meet our needs has contributed to a sense of peace after my husband died. He met my needs for love and intimacy abundantly, but when he passed away, I was aware that he was not the only person in the world who could meet those needs. This understanding was a source of fortitude and calm. For more on this, see my grief model, Impermanence: A path to mourning losses in life (Appendix 1).

When we don't realize that there are multiple ways to meet a need, we become afraid and attached to our old, familiar strategies. This is one reason why people stay in destructive relationships. When people become aware that there are multiple ways to meet their needs, they are more free.

INCREASED EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING

All of our actions are attempts to meet needs. With this realization in mind, we are able to understand the actions of others, however baffling, and transform our judgments into empathic understanding. In NVC, we say that capturing and acknowledging the speaker's feelings creates 10% of the connection. The other 90% comes from understanding and acknowledging their needs. In ET, we aim for that same powerful connection with our clients, understanding their layers of meaning. When we as therapists have judgments about our clients' actions, identifying and connecting with the needs they are trying to meet is one way to restore unconditional acceptance.

INCREASED CONFIDENCE

Clarity about our needs is a powerful way to increase confidence in our actions. The following is another example of a situation from my own life.

> Many years ago, I worked in a social service agency that I liked very much. Gradually my supervisor, a dear person to me, began to increase his expectations of me until my stress level was so high that I was losing sleep, unable to concentrate, and making mistakes while driving. One day, when he assigned me one more project, I said I couldn't do it and explained why. Clear about my need for self-care, I answered with conviction and without guilt, shame, or fear. Coming to an impasse, we asked a vice president to mediate. As it turned out, the vice president could understand my supervisor's point of view but not mine.
>
> So, there I was, facing two people who held my livelihood in their hands. What to do? I listened empathically, explored other strategies to have the project done, but still would not agree to do it myself. That strength came from the clarity of my need. I knew that even if I was threatened with dismissal, I still needed to prioritize my health. That awareness empowered me to stand firm when it was difficult, rather than succumb to pressure and possibly become ill. Plus, burnout does not make for effective therapy work.
>
> The end of the story is that I protected my health. My relationship with my supervisor was tense for a couple of weeks, but we recovered. After this conflict, I remained happily employed at the agency for several years.

Learning to recognize, embrace, and meet their needs is one of the most empowering concepts we can share with clients.

> For several years, I led a group for Latina women in violent relationships. When they were able to recognize their needs and realize that everybody in the world has the same needs, they gained confidence and strength. Here are some of their insights:
>
> > "Ah, I'm not selfish to want to go out for coffee with my friends. I need to have fun!"
> >
> > "I used to feel guilty coming to the group because my husband doesn't like it. I don't anymore. Now, I tell him, 'I need support, I'll be back at 8:15' and leave."
> >
> > "Since we did the exercise about how we contribute to our families, I feel good about myself. I give a lot, and I want recognition."
> >
> > "I thought it was my duty to have sex when he wanted, so I made myself available and then got depressed. Not anymore. I decide about my body. I have a choice."
>
> At the same time, the women in the group learned to acknowledge their partners' needs, which, not surprisingly, *increased their safety in the relationship*.
>
> > "Last night, my husband got mad that dinner wasn't ready when he came home and started yelling. I said, 'I get that you're hungry; I'll make you a snack. And I need respect. Would you please lower your voice?'"

> When these women became clear about and embraced their inherent needs for safety, respect, having a voice, care, consideration, and autonomy, they no longer tolerated mistreatment. Most of the women I worked with reclaimed their dignity. They made radical changes in their relationships or separated from their partners.

People who are aware of, and *connected* to, their needs are freer. They don't give in to the demands of others easily.

SEEMINGLY CONFLICTING NEEDS

At times, needs seem to be in opposition, as if one would have to choose between fulfilling one need over another. However, needs are never inherently in conflict; what can clash are the strategies we take to meet our needs. It's important to realize that needs don't conflict so that, when clients find themselves in a dilemma, we support them in finding ways to meet all the needs that are alive in the situation. Resigning themselves to live with unmet needs often represents a failure of imagination. An intuitive exploration can yield strategies that fulfill all the needs at play in a satisfying way.

Sometimes, upon deep soul searching, a client may choose to forego the fulfillment of one need in favor of another. In this case, they would grieve the pain of the unmet need and come to peace with their decision. For instance, let's say that a client has chosen a religious life that calls for celibacy. She makes a conscious choice to forego her need for sexual expression in favor of her need for integrity. Notice, however, that sexual expression and integrity are not inherently in conflict. Both can coexist and be fulfilled harmoniously, generally. It is in the client's lifestyle choice that the conflict arises. The client could choose to leave the religious life, have a partner, and find another way to live out her religious beliefs. Alternatively, she could choose to stay in religious life and forego sexual expression. Either choice would call for mourning that can ultimately lead to peace. Married clients who fall in love with someone outside the marriage can find themselves in a similar predicament.

NEEDS VS. STRATEGIES

Strategies refer to the actions we take in order to meet our needs. It's important to separate needs from strategies because mixing the two results in making demands of others, which is likely to reduce their desire to support us.

We express needs in the abstract, without any reference to a person taking a specific action. For example: "I need connection" versus "I need you to stay home with me tonight." Connection is a need. Spending time with another person is one strategy to meet that need, but it is not the only one. Having this clarity helps us interact with others in ways that free them from the notion that they "have to" meet our needs. It also helps us be open to new ways to meet our needs.

In the therapeutic setting, being aware of this distinction helps us respond to clients in a way that supports their inner freedom. In the examples below, notice the difference between statements that mix needs with strategies and those that keep the two separate.

Mixing Needs with Strategies	**Separating Needs from Strategies**
You need her to listen to you with empathy.	You need empathy and you wish she could listen to you empathically.
You need him to connect with you.	You need connection. I'm guessing you would like him to tell you about his day during dinner, for example.
You need your daughter to cooperate and do her chores.	You need cooperation. You want your daughter to do her chores.

When we mix needs with strategies as in the statements on the left, the likelihood that our needs will be met decreases. The other person will likely hear that they have to comply and will probably want to protect their autonomy by refusing. Remember, as I explained in the Introduction, needs are nouns, not adjectives or verbs. For practice, separate needs from strategies by expressing each in separate sentence.

EXERCISE: NEEDS VS. STRATEGIES

Select the sentences that separate needs from strategies.

1. You need connection. I'm guessing you'd like to see her once a week.
2. You've said this before, and you need him to understand you.
3. I hear that you need touch and affection. I'm guessing you'd like him to hug and kiss you every day.
4. You need your supervisor to show respect for the staff.

5. I need consideration for my time. Would you agree to call me the day before when you're not going to come to the session?
6. I need help. Would you like to co-facilitate the group for children with ADHD?
7. You can't do it all alone. You need your family to cooperate.
8. You need honesty, and you want her to tell you exactly what happened.
9. I need dependability. Would you let me know ahead of time when your plans change?
10. You need respect for your autonomy. You wish she would ask, instead of telling you what to do?

Answers: 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10.

EXERCISE: UNDERSTANDING FEELINGS AND NEED

For each client statement below, try to guess the underlying feelings and needs. Respond tentatively, not declaratively, to allow the client to confirm or correct your understanding. In session, you would indicate the tentativeness of your response with your tone of voice or by framing it as a question.

1. I don't want to live anymore. I'm done with life.
2. I lost my job. I don't know what I'm going to do to pay my bills.
3. He is so inconsiderate!
4. Our house was burglarized on Wednesday.
5. I don't want to take antidepressants because they have side effects.
6. I got the promotion!
7. The receptionist was rude to me!
8. I get up in the morning, and an hour later I'm tired. I can't do anything!
9. I found out that my wife is cheating on me. I never thought she would do something like that.
10. I hit my daughter. I feel so bad.

The following are my responses to this exercise.

1. I'm guessing you're tired of hurting and you want out. You want relief and peace?
2. I'm hearing that you're very worried about the bills. You need basic security.
3. Are you angry, needing consideration and care?
4. I'm guessing you're scared because you lost a sense of safety in your own house. Is this how you feel?

5. I'm hearing that you're concerned because you want to protect your overall health and well-being. You don't want to fix one thing and harm another?
6. I'm guessing that you're thrilled that you have the recognition you have wanted for so long.
7. I'm hearing you're angry because you need to be treated with respect. Is this how you feel?
8. Are you discouraged, needing energy and vitality to function and get through the day?
9. I'm guessing you're devastated at the lack of honesty and respect for the marriage. And you're disappointed because you trusted her. Is this how you feel?
10. I'm hearing that you're feeling regretful because you want to relate to your daughter with respect and care. Is that it?

Take It to Your Practice

What needs does your therapy practice meet for you? What needs are not being met? What strategies could you try to tend to the unmet needs?

Invitation for Reflection

Cognitive distortions can lead to debilitating feelings. What could be the problem of addressing such distortions without identifying the underlying unmet needs?

SUMMARY

Needs are the conditions that human beings require in order to be fulfilled and to thrive. By recognizing our needs, we are empowered to build more fulfilling lives. Expressing our needs and acknowledging and caring about the needs of others increases cooperation and makes conflict resolution easier. Recognizing that there are multiple ways to meet our needs increases inner freedom. Understanding that beneath every action is an attempt to meet needs increases empathy and acceptance and helps us capture clients' various layers of meaning. Grounded in needs, we become more confident about our actions. Needs are abstract; they don't allude to specific persons or actions. Strategies are the concrete actions we take or would like others to take to meet our needs.

CHAPTER 5

Requests

He who treats as equals those who are far below him in strength really makes them a gift of the quality of human beings of which fate has deprived them. As far as it is possible for a creature, he reproduces the original generosity of the Creator with regard to them.

SIMONE WEIL

We have reviewed the first three components of the NVC process: observations, feelings, and needs. Now we turn our attention to the fourth component, which is in the territory of action. Requests are the actions we ask another person to take, *if they are willing*, in order to meet our needs. They are proposed strategies. When making requests, we are prepared to hear "no" for an answer and respond with empathy, then guess the other person's needs and propose a strategy that incorporates their needs and ours.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A REQUEST

NVC requests are concrete and doable, expressed in positive-action language, and to be fulfilled in the present. Let's explore these elements one at a time.

Concrete and Doable

Concrete requests include definitive actions the other person can take. Their specificity provides clarity about what we are asking. Compare the vague statements on the left with their more concrete counterparts on the right.

Vague Requests	**Concrete Requests**
I want to be heard. Would you be willing to listen while I explain today's activity?	I want to be heard. Would you be willing to set your phones aside while I explain today's activity?

Would you be willing to give me some support regarding the older adults' group?	Would you be willing to meet with me for 45 minutes to talk about some challenges I'm facing in the older adults' group?

Positive-Action Language

We express what we would like someone to do, not what we want them to stop doing. When we tell people to stop doing something, we stimulate resistance; they protect their autonomy almost automatically. The following negative-action requests on the left are reframed on the right using positive-action language.

Negative-Action Language	Positive-Action Language
Would you be willing to quit drinking?	Would you be willing to talk about what needs of yours are met when you drink?
Would you be willing to stop yelling? I'm concerned about the children in the waiting area.	Would you be willing to lower your voice? I'm concerned about the children in the waiting area.

Fulfillable in the Present

When we make a request, we ask the other person to take an action they can do right now, as opposed to asking that they do something in the future. Often people resist committing to future actions because this curtails their freedom. At times, we may want to ask the other person to do something in the future. The way to bring our request to the present is by asking "*Would you agree* (right now) to do thus-and-such in the future?" We are asking the other person to agree to our request in the present.

To illustrate this concept, imagine that someone is making the following requests of you. Notice whether you experience any difference in your desire to agree to the requests when it is reframed as something that can be fulfilled in the present:

Fulfillable in the Future	Fulfillable in the Present
In the future, would you call me when you're going to be late?	Would you agree to call me when you're going to be late?
In the future, would you ask me if you can take a toy from the play therapy room with you?	Would you agree to ask me if you can take a toy from the play therapy room with you?

The difference between the future and present versions may seem subtle, but it is important. Personally, when I hear the future request, I feel tense and disinclined to agree to it; I hear it as committing to something for life. The present request is easier for me to hear. Would I agree to this request *at this moment*? Yes. I may change my mind tomorrow, but at this moment, I'm willing to say yes.

The concept of NVC requests is especially useful when clients report conflict in primary relationships. Recently, a client of mine said that when he told his wife something important about their relationship, her answer was often "Good to know." He fET frustrated not knowing how to invite open and vulnerable conversation about their issues and asked for a suggestion. I said that after expressing himself vulnerably, he could ask two questions:

1. "Would you tell me what you heard me say? I want to know if I expressed myself clearly." The purpose of this request is to ensure that the client's wife actually heard his intended meaning. If not, this is a chance to clarify it.
2. "How do you feel hearing this?" This question invites the client's wife to express herself vulnerably and is likely to create heart connection.

My client liked the suggestions. I trust that the specificity of these requests can help meet his need for <u>authentic dialogue</u> about sensitive issues in the marriage.

As you can imagine, this is a very useful concept in couples and family therapy. If, during a therapy session, a father tells his adolescent daughter to respect him, she won't know what to do, exactly. However, we can suggest that he ask something concrete, such as "Honey, it would meet my need for <u>respect</u> if you put your phone away while I'm talking to you. Are you willing?"

PREFACE REQUESTS WITH OBSERVATIONS, FEELINGS, AND NEEDS

A request made without offering any context is liable to be heard as a demand. Take this simple request: "Would you be willing to meet at 4:00 next week instead of 5:00?" By

starting instead with an observation or contextual fact and revealing our feelings and needs, we are more likely to be understood for our intention, and the person is more apt to hear a request than a demand:

> Next Thursday, I have a presentation at 7:00 p.m., and I'm a bit nervous about rush hour traffic. For peace of mind, I'd like to leave the office at 5:30, if I can. Would you be willing to meet at 4:00 next week instead of 5:00?

When we want to ask something from clients, it's important to preface it with our feelings and needs to reduce the likelihood that they hear a demand.

Conversely, when we express our feelings and needs without making a request, we may sound as if we are trying to induce guilt and shame. Compare the following expressions and notice how you experience each:

Feelings and Needs without Request	**Feelings and Needs with Request**
You have cancelled three sessions in a row. I'm concerned about your safety in school given what we talked about last time we met, and I want to know what's happening.	You have cancelled three sessions in a row. I'm concerned about your safety in school given what we talked about last time we met, and I want to know what's happening. Would you be willing to meet on Thursday so you can give me an update?

Following the expression of observation, feelings, and needs with a request clarifies our intention.

REQUESTS VS. DEMANDS

In NVC consciousness, when we make a request we are prepared to hear no. If we are not, we are making a demand in disguise. When we hear no, we try to guess the needs preventing the other person from agreeing to our request. Then we are free to make a different request, incorporating both persons' needs, or to ask someone else for the support we need.

When I learned this concept, I suddenly understood why my husband got annoyed when I made "requests" of him. He knew that if he said no, there would be negative consequences, as illustrated in this exchange:

ME: Honey, I'm a little nervous; I need help. Would you be willing to take these packets to the agency where I'm giving a talk tonight? It's 10 minutes from here.

PETER: I can't; I'm running late.

ME: <sarcastically> Thanks a lot.

You see, I asked for help in a sweet tone of voice and included all the NVC elements, but when he said no, I punished him with sarcasm.

Needless to say, the distinction between requests and demands is an invaluable concept to share with couples and parents. It can spare them so much strife! The challenge is that couples and parents are often unwilling to make requests of their partners, let alone their children. They fear that if they ask for what they want instead of demanding it, the other person will say no, and their needs won't be met.

The problem with demanding, as you know, is that it does not meet the other person's need for respect for their autonomy. And it sends the message that their needs don't matter, which makes them less inclined to want to support us. Alternatively, people may submit to a demand out of fear. When they do, they will harbor resentment, their goodwill will diminish, and their self-respect will suffer. No one likes to perceive him or herself as a puppet. So, if we can convey to clients the great advantages of requesting over demanding, they will likely see increased cooperation and harmony in their primary relationships.

At a workshop for mental health professionals, a woman gave a testimonial. She said that she had attended another workshop with me and decided to try the concept of asking instead of demanding that her son do certain things. Her husband was rather skeptical, per report. "He thought it was another odd idea." One morning, as she was hurrying to get ready for work, she told her son: "Honey, I know you want to play, and I'm nervous because it's getting late. I want to be on time. Would you be willing to brush your teeth now?" She said that her son looked at her, said "OK," and proceeded to brush his teeth. "My husband looked at me in disbelief!"

HEARING NO WITHOUT TAKING IT PERSONALLY

Sometimes, when someone says no to a request of ours, we may interpret this as lack of care or we may hear their no as rejection. NVC offers an alternative to these interpretations: it invites us to try to guess and connect with the needs that the other person is trying to meet when saying no. What are they saying yes to?

YOU: Ananda, I'm going to do a group for girls who self-injure, and I have eight registrants. I need help. Would you be willing to co-lead this group with me?

COLLEAGUE: Sorry, I can't.

YOU: Is your plate full already and you want to protect yourself from feeling overwhelmed?

COLLEAGUE: Yes, that's part of it. The other reason is that I'm going to be out of town for two weeks. My father is ill, and I'm going to India to see him.

Hearing no does not mean that we give up or give in. It means that we listen to the other person's needs empathically and continue the dialogue until we can find mutually satisfying solutions.

In therapy, it's hugely important to be able to hear no from our clients. Otherwise, we might subtly or overtly exert power over them.

Many years ago, when I was working with a couple, the husband said some things that concerned me. I expressed my concern for his well-being and suggested that he see a therapist individually. He said no. Flat out. I fET my body tensing up and suspected that my facial expression betrayed my frustration. I took a deep breath, tried to guess and connect with his needs, and moved on. He noticed. When the session ended, he said: "You walk your talk. When you asked me to see a therapist, I could see that you didn't like that I said 'no,' but you didn't push me. You respected my decision. Thank you."

THREE TYPES OF REQUESTS

There are three types of requests we can employ: connection, action, and integrative. Each has a specific goal depending on the stage of the dialogue.

Connection Requests

We make this type of request to keep the dialogue flowing until heart connection takes place. The two classic connection requests are:

1. How do you feel when you hear this?
2. I want to see if I expressed myself clearly. Would you tell me what you heard me say?

Initially, I was reluctant to ask people to tell me what they heard me say for fear that they would interpret the request as doubting their intelligence. Yet I have found that people don't mind, generally. The value of this question is that we can check if the message sent is the message received, particularly when the topic is sensitive. Regardless of whether the other person understood our meaning or not, we thank them for agreeing to our request to tell us what they heard.

I find it useful to share these questions in couples and family therapy, because often one person says something and the other one hears something completely different. The history of the relationship gives rise to interpretations that misconstrue the speaker's meaning.

MOTHER: Honey, when you don't come home at the time that we agreed on, I feel frustrated and nervous, needing consideration. I don't know if you're safe. Would you agree to call me when you're going to be home more than a half hour later than our agreed upon time? Would you tell me what you heard me say?

DAUGHTER: That I'm inconsiderate.

MOTHER: Thank you for telling me what you heard. I'd like you to hear it differently. I need consideration. Would you call me when you're going to be more than a half hour past our agreed upon time? What did you hear me say now?

DAUGHTER: That I should call you if I'm going to be late.

MOTHER: Yes, honey, it would help a lot. How would this be for you?

DAUGHTER: Fine.

MOTHER: Is this a wholehearted yes or not so much?

DAUGHTER: No, fine. I can do that.

MOTHER: Thank you, dear.

Action Request

With connection established, we can ask for what we want. That is, we offer a potential strategy that meets our and the other person's needs. When people ask clearly for what they want, they are more likely to be able to meet their needs.

I'm longing to spend time as a family. Would you be willing to come home at 6:00 twice a week so we can all have dinner together?

Integrative Requests

Integrative requests follow a refusal. When someone says no to what we asked for, we respond with empathy and then make a different request, incorporating both the other person's needs and ours. When a request is declined, our clients may quickly resort to a demand. But posing integrative requests would increase the likelihood of meeting their needs and protecting harmony in the family.

Yes, I see your point. You have so much work during the high season. What if rather than twice a week, we have dinner as a family once a week for now? How would this be for you?

EXERCISE: NVC REQUESTS

Identify the sentences with requests that are (1) concrete and doable, (2) expressed in positive-action language, and (3) fulfillable in the present moment.

1. I want to be understood.
2. Would you tell me what you heard me say?

3. Would you be willing to bring your son to therapy every week?
4. Would you tell me how therapy is going for you?
5. Would you be willing to stop smoking in the waiting area?
6. Would you be willing to work on building self-confidence?
7. I'd like you to be honest with me about what happened at school yesterday.
8. Would you tell me how you feel about what I just said?
9. Would you agree to be in the group room a few minutes before 7:00?
10. Would you be willing to tell me what needs of yours does drinking meet?

Numbers 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, and 10 are actual NVC requests. No. 1 doesn't make a concrete, actionable request. No. 5 is framed using negative-action language; asking the person to stop doing something is likely to challenge their need for autonomy, and he or she will be less inclined to agree. The request in no. 6 is vague; an NVC request would include specific details (e.g., "Would you be willing to attend a public-speaking workshop to enhance your self-confidence when you do presentations?"). The request for honesty in no. 7 invites an uninformative reply ("I am being honest"); a more concrete request would be: "Would you be willing to tell me how the fight at school started yesterday, and what happened next?"

ASKING FOR WHAT WE WANT

It is not always easy to ask for what we want because of how we were raised to think about requests. Our culture values self-sufficiency, so we try to do things on our own. We may fear that our request will pose a burden to the other person, or, worse, that our needs won't matter to them!

NVC invites us to notice our resistance to asking for what we want and to think of requests as gifts to others. Gifts?! How so? When we make a request, we are giving the person an opportunity to meet a powerful human need: contribution. Helping others is meaningful and gratifying.

> Imagine that you are in a large store and you see a child, approximately four years old, crying. You approach him and he tells you, "I can't find my mommy." You learn that his name is Tony. You take Tony by the hand and reassure him that you'll find his mommy soon. He stops crying. You go to the service desk and ask the attendant to page Tony's mother. You talk to Tony until his mother arrives. When he sees his mom, he runs and hugs her and starts crying again. She thanks you profusely and shakes your hand firmly. Tony and his mom walk away.
>
> How do you feel? I can only imagine the glow inside your chest. Tony gave you a gift—an opportunity to meet your need for contribution. This is what we do when we ask someone for help.

NVC invites us to ask for what we want, unabashedly.

In therapy, we can work with clients to help them ask, ask, ask for what they want, unapologetically, always prepared to hear no without taking it personally, giving up, or giving in. When clients are afraid to ask for what they want, we can endeavor to understand the thoughts and fears that prevent them from doing so.

Take It to Your Practice

When pertinent, help clients formulate NVC requests and explore if they are afraid to ask for what they want.

Invitation to Reflection

Are you able to ask for what you want? If not, what prevents you from doing so?

If you are able to ask for what you want, is it difficult sometimes? For example, with strangers, with close friends, with family members, with supervisors? If so, what makes it difficult?

SUMMARY

NVC requests have three characteristics. They are concrete and doable, expressed in positive-action language, and to be fulfilled in the present. There are three types of requests: connection, action, and integrative. We make connection requests when the topic is sensitive and we want to continue the dialogue until we connect with the other person. We can make action requests readily when the topic is not sensitive. We express integrative requests when the person says no to our action request. Requests are prefaced with our observations, feelings, and needs and are distinct from demands. When we make a request, we are open to hearing no. If we hear no, we first guess and acknowledge the needs that the other person is trying to meet by saying no and then make an integrative request. In therapy, we can help clients ask for what they want to meet their needs and address the reluctance to do so, when present.