

Identifying and Expressing Feelings

The first component of NVC is to observe without evaluating; the second component is to express how we are feeling. Psychoanalyst Rollo May suggests that “the mature person becomes able to differentiate feelings into as many nuances, strong and passionate experiences, or delicate and sensitive ones as in the different passages of music in a symphony.” For many of us, however, our feelings are, as May would describe it, “limited like notes in a bugle call.”

The Heavy Cost of Unexpressed Feelings

Our repertoire of words for calling people names is often larger than our vocabulary of words to clearly describe our emotional states. I went through twenty-one years of American schools and can't recall anyone in all that time ever asking me how I felt. Feelings were simply not considered important. What was valued was "the right way to think"—as defined by those who held positions of rank and authority. We are trained to be "other-directed" rather than to be in contact with ourselves. We learn to be "up in our head," wondering, "What is it that others think is right for me to say and do?"

An interaction I had with a teacher when I was about nine years old demonstrates how alienation from our feelings can begin. I once hid myself in a classroom after school because some boys were waiting outside to beat me up. A teacher spotted me and asked me to leave the school. When I explained I was afraid to go, she declared, "Big boys don't get frightened." A few years later I received further reinforcement through my participation in athletics. It was typical for coaches to value athletes willing to "give their all" and continue playing no matter how much physical pain they were in. I learned the lesson so well I once continued playing baseball for a month with an untreated broken wrist.

At an NVC workshop, a college student spoke about being kept awake by a roommate who played the stereo late at night and loudly. When asked to express what he felt when this happened, the student replied, "I feel that it isn't right to play music so loud at night." I pointed out that when he followed the word *feel* with the word *that*, he was expressing an opinion but not revealing his feelings. Asked to try again to express his feelings, he responded, "I feel, when people do something like that, it's a personality disturbance." I explained that this was still an opinion rather than a feeling. He paused thoughtfully, and then announced with vehemence, "I have no feelings about it whatsoever!"

This student obviously had strong feelings. Unfortunately, he didn't know how to become aware of his feelings, let alone express them. This difficulty in identifying and expressing feelings is common, and in my experience, especially so among lawyers, engineers, police officers, corporate managers, and career military personnel—people whose professional codes discourage them from manifesting emotions. For families, the toll is severe when members are unable to communicate emotions. Country singer Reba McEntire wrote a song after her

father's death, and titled it "The Greatest Man I Never Knew." In so doing, she undoubtedly expressed the sentiments of many people who were never able to establish the emotional connection they would have liked with their fathers.

I regularly hear statements like, "I wouldn't want you to get the wrong idea—I'm married to a wonderful man—but I never know what he is feeling." One such dissatisfied woman brought her spouse to a workshop, during which she told him, "I feel like I'm married to a wall." The husband then did an excellent imitation of a wall: he sat mute and immobile. Exasperated, she turned to me and exclaimed, "See! This is what happens all the time. He sits and says nothing. It's just like living with a wall."

"It sounds to me like you are feeling lonely and wanting more emotional contact with your husband," I responded. When she agreed, I tried to show how statements such as "I feel like I'm living with a wall" are unlikely to bring her feelings and desires to her husband's attention. In fact, they are more likely to be heard as criticism than as invitations to connect with our feelings. Furthermore, such statements often lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. A husband, for example, hears himself criticized for behaving like a wall; he is hurt and discouraged and doesn't respond, thereby confirming his wife's image of him as a wall.

The benefits of strengthening our feelings vocabulary are evident not only in intimate relationships but also in the professional world. I was once hired to consult with members of a technological department of a large Swiss corporation; they were troubled by the discovery that workers in other departments were avoiding them. When asked, employees from other departments responded, "We hate going there to consult with those people. It's like talking to a bunch of machines!" The problem abated when I spent time with the members of the technological department, encouraging them to express more of their humanness in their communications with co-workers.

In another instance, I was working with hospital administrators who were anxious about a forthcoming meeting with the hospital's physicians. The administrators were eager to have me demonstrate how they might use NVC when approaching the physicians for support for a project that had only recently been turned down by a vote of 17 to 1.

Assuming the voice of an administrator in a role-playing session, I opened with, "I'm feeling frightened to be bringing up this issue." I chose to start this way because I sensed how frightened the administrators were as they prepared to confront the physicians on this topic again. Before I could continue, one of the administrators stopped me to protest, "You're being unrealistic! We could never

tell the physicians that we were frightened.”

When I asked why an admission of fear seemed so impossible, he replied without hesitation, “If we admitted we’re frightened, then they would just pick us to pieces!” His answer didn’t surprise me; I have often heard people say they cannot imagine ever expressing feelings at their workplace. I was pleased to learn, however, that one of the administrators did decide to risk expressing his vulnerability at the dreaded meeting. Departing from his customary manner of appearing strictly logical, rational, and unemotional, he chose to state his feelings together with his reasons for wanting the physicians to change their position. He noticed how differently the physicians responded to him. In the end he was amazed and relieved when, instead of “picking him to pieces,” the physicians reversed their previous position and voted 17 to 1 to support the project instead. This dramatic turn-around helped the administrators realize and appreciate the potential impact of expressing vulnerability—even in the workplace.

Expressing our vulnerability can help resolve conflicts.

Finally, let me share a personal incident that taught me the effects of hiding our feelings. I was teaching a course in NVC to a group of inner city students. When I walked into the room the first day, the students, who had been enjoying a lively conversation with each other, became quiet. “Good morning!” I greeted. Silence. I felt very uncomfortable, but was afraid to express it. Instead, I proceeded in my most professional manner: “For this class, we will be studying a process of communication that I hope you will find helpful in your relationships at home and with your friends.”

I continued to present information about NVC, but no one seemed to be listening. One girl, rummaging through her bag, fished out a file and began vigorously filing her nails. Students near the windows glued their faces to the panes as if fascinated by what was going on in the street below. I felt increasingly more uncomfortable, yet continued to say nothing about it. Finally, a student who had certainly more courage than I was demonstrating, piped up, “You just hate being with black people, don’t you?” I was stunned, yet immediately realized how I had contributed to this student’s perception by trying to hide my discomfort.

“I *am* feeling nervous,” I admitted, “but not because you are black. My feelings have to do with my not knowing anyone here and wanting to be

accepted when I came in the room.” My expression of vulnerability had a pronounced effect on the students. They started to ask questions about me, to tell me things about themselves, and to express curiosity about NVC.

Feelings versus Non-Feelings

A common confusion, generated by the English language, is our use of the word *feel* without actually expressing a feeling. For example, in the sentence, “I feel I didn’t get a fair deal,” the words *I feel* could be more accurately replaced with *I think*. In general, feelings are not being clearly expressed when the word *feel* is followed by:

1. Words such as *that*, *like*, *as if*:
“I feel *that* you should know better.”
“I feel *like* a failure.”
“I feel *as if* I’m living with a wall.”
2. The pronouns I, you, he, she, *they*, *it*:
“I feel *I* am constantly on call.”
“I feel *it* is useless.”
3. Names or nouns referring to people: “I feel *Amy* has been pretty responsible.”

“I feel *my boss* is being manipulative.”

Distinguish feelings from thoughts.

Conversely, in the English language, it is not necessary to use the word *feel* at all when we are actually expressing a feeling: we can say, “I’m feeling irritated,” or simply, “I’m irritated.”

Distinguish between what we feel and what we think we are.

In NVC, we distinguish between words that express actual feelings and those that describe *what we think we are*.

1. Description of what we *think* we are: “I feel *inadequate* as a guitar player.”

In this statement, I am assessing my ability as a guitar player, rather than

clearly expressing my feelings.

2. Expressions of actual feelings: “I feel *disappointed* in myself as a guitar player.”

“I feel *impatient* with myself as a guitar player.”

“I feel *frustrated* with myself as a guitar player.”

The actual feeling behind my assessment of myself as “inadequate” could therefore be disappointment, impatience, frustration, or some other emotion.

Likewise, it is helpful to differentiate between words that describe what we think others are doing around us, and words that describe actual feelings. The following are examples of statements that are easily mistaken as expressions of feelings: in fact they reveal more *how we think others are behaving* than what we are actually feeling ourselves.

Distinguish between what we feel and how we think others react or behave toward us.

1. “I feel *unimportant* to the people with whom I work.”

The word *unimportant* describes how I think others are evaluating me, rather than an actual feeling, which in this situation might be “I feel *sad*” or “I feel *discouraged*.”

2. “I feel *misunderstood*.”

Here the word *misunderstood* indicates my assessment of the other person’s level of understanding rather than an actual feeling. In this situation, I may be feeling *anxious* or *annoyed* or some other emotion.

3. “I feel *ignored*.”

Again, this is more of an interpretation of the actions of others than a clear statement of how we are feeling. No doubt there have been times we thought we were being ignored and our feeling was *relief*, because we wanted to be left to ourselves. No doubt there were other times, however, when we felt *hurt* when we thought we were being ignored, because we had wanted to be involved.

Words like *ignored* express how we *interpret others*, rather than how we *feel*. Here is a sampling of such words: abandoned

abused
attacked
betrayed
boxed-in
bullied
cheated
coerced
co-opted
cornered
diminished
distrusted
interrupted
intimidated
let down
manipulated
misunderstood
neglected
overworked
patronized
pressured
provoked
put down
rejected
taken for granted
threatened
unappreciated
unheard
unseen
unsupported
unwanted
used

Building a Vocabulary for Feelings

In expressing our feelings, it helps to use words that refer to specific emotions, rather than words that are vague or general. For example, if we say, “I feel good about that,” the word *good* could mean happy, excited, relieved, or a number of other emotions. Words such as *good* and *bad* prevent the listener from connecting easily with what we might actually be feeling.

The following lists have been compiled to help you increase your power to articulate feelings and clearly describe a whole range of emotional states.

How we are likely to feel when our needs are being met absorbed adventurous affectionate alert

alive

amazed

amused

animated appreciative ardent

aroused astonished blissful breathless buoyant calm

carefree cheerful comfortable complacent composed concerned confident

contented cool

curious dazzled delighted eager

ebullient ecstatic effervescent elated

enchanted encouraged energetic engrossed enlivened enthusiastic excited

exhilarated expansive expectant exultant fascinated free

friendly fulfilled glad

gleeful glorious glowing good-humored grateful gratified happy

helpful hopeful inquisitive inspired intense interested intrigued invigorated

involved joyous, joyful jubilant keyed-up loving

mellow

merry

mirthful moved

optimistic overjoyed overwhelmed peaceful perky

pleasant pleased proud

quiet

radiant rapturous refreshed relaxed relieved satisfied secure

sensitive serene

spellbound splendid stimulated surprised tender

thankful thrilled touched tranquil trusting upbeat
warm
wide-awake wonderful zestful How we are likely to feel when our needs are
not being met afraid
aggravated agitated alarmed aloof
angry
anguished annoyed anxious apathetic apprehensive aroused ashamed beat
bewildered bitter
blah
blue bored brokenhearted chagrined cold
concerned confused cool
cross
dejected depressed despairing despondent detached disaffected disappointed
discouraged disenchanted disgruntled disgusted disheartened dismayed
displeased disquieted distressed disturbed downcast downhearted dull
edgy
embarrassed embittered exasperated exhausted fatigued fearful fidgety forlorn
frightened frustrated furious gloomy
guilty
harried heavy
helpless hesitant horrible horrified hostile hot
humdrum hurt
impatient indifferent intense irate
irked
irritated jealous jittery keyed-up lazy
leery
lethargic listless lonely
mad
mean
miserable mopey
morose
mournful nervous nettled numb
overwhelmed panicky passive perplexed pessimistic puzzled rancorous
reluctant repelled resentful restless sad
scared
sensitive shaky
shocked skeptical sleepy

sorrowful sorry
spiritless startled surprised suspicious tepid
terrified tired
troubled uncomfortable unconcerned uneasy
unglued unhappy unnerved unsteady upset
uptight vexed
weary
wistful withdrawn woeful
worried wretched

Summary

The second component necessary for expressing ourselves is feelings. By developing a vocabulary of feelings that allows us to clearly and specifically name or identify our emotions, we can connect more easily with one another. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable by expressing our feelings can help resolve conflicts. NVC distinguishes the expression of actual feelings from words and statements that describe thoughts, assessments, and interpretations.

Exercise 2

EXPRESSING FEELINGS

If you would like to see whether we're in agreement about the verbal expression of feelings, circle the number in front of each of the following statements in which feelings are verbally expressed.

1. "I feel you don't love me."
2. "I'm sad that you're leaving."
3. "I feel scared when you say that."
4. "When you don't greet me, I feel neglected."
5. "I'm happy that you can come."
6. "You're disgusting."
7. "I feel like hitting you."
8. "I feel misunderstood."
9. "I feel good about what you did for me."
10. "I'm worthless."

Here are my responses for Exercise 2:

1. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "you don't love me" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker thinks the other person is feeling, rather than how the speaker is feeling. Whenever the words *I feel* are followed by the words I, you, he, she, *they*, *it*, *that*, *like*, or *as if*, what follows is generally not what I would consider to be a feeling. An expression of feeling in this case might be: "I'm sad," or "I'm feeling anguished."
2. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed.
3. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed.

4. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "neglected" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker thinks the other person is doing to him or her. An expression of feeling might be: "When you don't greet me at the door, I feel lonely."
5. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed.
6. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "disgusting" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses how the speaker thinks about the other person, rather than how the speaker is feeling. An expression of feeling might be: "I feel disgusted."
7. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "like hitting you" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker imagines doing, rather than how the speaker is feeling. An expression of feeling might be: "I am furious at you."
8. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "misunderstood" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses what the speaker thinks the other person is doing. An expression of feeling in this case might be: "I feel frustrated," or "I feel discouraged."
9. If you circled this number, we're in agreement that a feeling was verbally expressed. However, the word *good* is vague when used to convey a feeling. We can usually express our feelings more clearly by using other words, for example: *relieved*, *gratified*, or *encouraged*.
10. If you circled this number, we're not in agreement. I don't consider "worthless" to be a feeling. To me, it expresses how the speaker thinks about himself or herself, rather than how the speaker is feeling. An expression of feeling in this case might be: "I feel skeptical about my own talents," or "I feel wretched."