

Mindful Communication: Getting out of Conflict and into Cooperation

"You never clean up after yourself. I feel like I'm the only one taking care of things, and you just assume I'll do it."

"That's not true. I'm just not a neat-freak like you. I wish you'd chill out."

So often, when we try to address difficulties in relationships we end up tangled in power struggles of blame and defensiveness that only heighten hostility and stuckness. This can lead us to festering in resentment or giving up on trying to get our needs met. The following suggestions for how to turn this around are based on Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a communication method taught internationally, created by Marshal Rosenberg. If you're struggling to communicate your feelings or to manage conflict with friends, family, partners or others, these principles could help.

The first step is to check in with yourself and your intention. To communicate effectively you need to be coming from an intention to connect, understand and find mutual resolution, as opposed to wanting to 'win', avenge or show someone the error of their ways. If you are hurting, you may need to seek some support and find enough calm within yourself before this is possible.

The four key components for communicating in NVC are: Observations, Feelings, Needs and Requests. Depending on the situation, these don't all have to be included and they can be in any order, but are helpful to refer to and consider.

Example: Sarah and Rachel have been friends for years. They've decided to host a dinner together for a group of mutual acquaintances. Sarah spends the whole day preparing, and is feeling nervous about hosting. Rachel messages to say she's running a bit late. She turns up an hour after the start-time with the dish she prepared, and doesn't apologise or acknowledge her lateness. Sarah is furious, thinking how unfair it is that she's been left to do all the work, let down by her friend without any recognition.

1. **Observations** – Describe the action or situation objectively, without adding judgement or interpretation. Focus on observations specific to time and context and avoid generalisations, such as, e.g. 'you always/never...' When we combine observation with evaluation, others are likely to hear criticism and resist what we are saying. Stating an observation anyone could agree with gives a solid starting point for understanding. It is worth paying attention to your tone of voice also, which can make the difference between someone feeling under attack or able to listen.

Instead of "You left me to do everything!" Sarah might begin: *"When I was preparing on my own and you didn't arrive for our dinner until 8pm..."*

2. **Feelings** – Share your emotions or sensations, free of thought and story. People often confuse feeling and thoughts (e.g., "I feel I didn't get a fair deal" is actually naming a thought). Words used as feelings are also sometimes actually stating evaluations or how we think others are evaluating us (e.g., "I feel inadequate"), or what we think others are doing to us (e.g., "I feel ignored"). Feelings reflect whether we are experiencing our needs as met or unmet. Identifying our feelings can help foster empathy, understanding and connection.

Instead of saying "I felt let down" (which implies an accusatory statement about Rachel's action on Sarah). Sarah could say, *"I felt stressed and angry."*

N.B. Avoid saying "You make me feel..." This gives the other person responsibility for our feelings in a direct way which is usually unhelpful, comes across as blaming and is likely to elicit a defensive response.

3. **Needs** – Link your feelings to your needs. Needs are distinct from 'wants', that is, particular strategies for meeting needs, but rather are universal human needs, such as support, connection, belonging, safety, freedom, self-expression, respect, novelty, relaxation etc.

Sarah might continue. *"I need support and appreciation."*

4. **Requests** – Make a specific and doable request, free of demand. Requests are distinct from demands in that you are open to hearing a response of "no" without then punishing or trying to force the matter. If faced with "no", try to understand what's preventing the person from saying yes and see whether you can find an alternative together. By making a request, you are taking responsibility for your own feelings and needs and helping the other person to know how to meet these, paving the way for resolution. Use clear, positive, concrete action language.

There are various requests Sarah might want to make. She might say, *"I want to know that you appreciate how I feel, and I'd like it if you could tell me what you understand."* Or *"If we plan something in future, I'd like you to be there with me organising it together from the start, equally."*

Sometimes more time may be needed before moving on to this 'solution' step. You might instead seek feedback from the other to create more connection before looking for an action to address the issue. Showing empathy for the other can also really help diffuse defensiveness. Other times, you might start with a request, and not need to name a problem, as such. **Example:** Henry feels sad and annoyed that his brother and him speak so little, where they used to be close. He imagines his brother doesn't care. He reflects on his feelings and needs on his own and the next time they speak, instead of naming this as a problem, he simply says, *"It's really good to catch up. I know we live in different cities and have busy lives but I'd really like to keep in touch more often. How would you feel about planning a regular time to chat?"*

It can take time, thought and practice to communicate in this way, but it can really support finding connection, understanding and resolution. Even if you don't at first get the response you want, you have taken important steps to pave the way forward by diffusing tension, opening up communication and fostering compassion.

Examples of FEELINGS Associated with Unmet Needs

ANGER annoyed furious frustrated hate	DISCONNECTION apathetic bored detached numb	EMBARRASSMENT shame self-conscious mortified	PEACE ease equality harmony inspiration order
AVERSION appalled disgust dislike repulsion	DISQUIET agitated concerned distraught disturbed shocked	Examples of NEEDS	AUTONOMY choice freedom independence space spontaneity authenticity integrity
SADNESS depressed dejected despairing disappointed discouraged hopeless melancholy	CONFUSION ambivalent conflicted perplexed torn	CONNECTION acceptance affection appreciation belonging consideration consistency empathy intimacy mutuality respect safety security support to understand and be understood trust warmth	MEANING challenge clarity contribution creativity discovery efficacy growth hope learning mourning purpose self-expression to matter
YEARNING longing nostalgic pining	FATIGUE burnt out exhausted tired weary	PHYSICAL WELL-BEING Movement rest/sleep safety touch	PLAY joy humor
PAIN anguished devastated grief heartbroken hurting lonely remorseful	FEAR afraid anxious insecure mistrustful panicked terrified worried stressed		