

Couples in Conflict: Ending the “He Said/She Said” Game

by Ron Gibbs

She: “You never listen to me!”

He: “Yes, I do!”

Power struggles, miscommunication, judgment, blame – isn’t this the stuff relationships are made of? Not according to Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a process founded by Marshall Rosenberg and taught worldwide, whereby compassionate connection is restored between couples through the use of some simple communication techniques.

If you and your partner are experiencing conflict, here are four key components of the NVC process to help put your relationship back on track:

Example: Thomas has been away all day. When he gets home, he walks into the living room, plops down on the couch, barely notices Beth, and turns on the TV. Beth is furious. Why is he so rude? Can’t he at least say hello? She hates being ignored.

1. **Observations**—Pretend a video camera is recording an action, and report what that action is without judging or blaming.

When Thomas walked into the room, and didn’t speak to Beth, instead of saying, “You’re so rude! What’s wrong with you?” which would be a judgment about Thomas’ behavior, using the NVC model, Beth would first say, “When you walked in the room, I didn’t hear you say hello to me.” This would be a simple observation that anyone could agree with.

2. **Feelings**—Identify and express what you’re feeling.

People confuse feelings with thoughts. “When someone says, “I feel like,” or “I feel that,” what follows is a thought, not a feeling. Anger, hurt, fear, and love* are examples of feelings. Beth might say, “When you walked in, I didn’t hear you say hello. I feel hurt.”

3. **Needs**—Express the need that you have that is not being met.

Our needs include our core values and deepest longings – what is most alive in us – such as our need for support, intimacy, respect, or acknowledgment. Beth might say, “When you walked in, I didn’t hear you say hello. I feel hurt because my need for recognition wasn’t met.”



4. **Requests**—State a request of your partner to help you meet your unmet need that is positive, specific and doable.

Beth might say, “When you walked in, I didn’t hear you say hello. I am hurting because my need for recognition wasn’t met. Next time, would you say hello and ask me how my day went before turning on the TV?”

Beth might add a connecting request such as, “Thomas, would you tell me what comes up for you when you hear me say these things to you?”

Don’t phrase a request in the negative. For example, if you want your partner to stop drinking, don’t say: ‘I want you to stop drinking.’ That’s not really doable. Instead say: ‘When I see you drinking a bottle of wine every night [observation], I feel scared [feeling]. I’m wanting to protect our relationship [need], and I’d like to know if you’d be willing to call AA tomorrow?’ [positive, specific and doable request].

Note the difference between a request and a demand. If your partner chooses not to fulfill your request and you punish him, it wasn’t a request, it was a demand.

While it’s inevitable that conflict is going to arise whenever you put your heart on the line, use these simple communication techniques, and you’ll begin to bring your relationship to calmer ground.

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*Anger is a complex emotion, a signal that our needs are not being met. It is usually made up of two parts, hurt and/or fear, and judgment. Love may be either a feeling or a need.

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