

Module 3

Elements of Nonviolent Communication

Words hold power that can be used to instigate or neutralize any given experience. They can be used as weapons – either offense or defense. We need to be aware of the energy that our language, our words, hold and use them for the greater good.

Thais Mazur and Wendy Wood (Do Not Harm: Mindful Engagement for a World in Crisis)

After understanding on what is nonviolent communication it would be useful to know about different elements which constitutes nonviolent communication. In Module 3 & 4 we will explore the different elements using examples and scenarios so that we have greater clarity.

As we embark upon this journey, please try to reflect and think of your own situations and explore on how you can make these elements an integral part of your daily practice.

i. Nonviolent Communication means complete lack of violence in the way we communicate with others.

This includes both verbal and nonverbal communication. Several times, knowingly or unknowingly, we become violent and the words, without realizing, we use may hurt others. When we are violent in our communication, we tend to humiliate others and there is every possibility that the other person could also be violent with us. Violence in communication leads to communication breakdown and trust deficit; it sows the seeds of conflict. So, the next time, you are communicating with anyone consciously think of whether your message is hurting others or not.

ii. We should learn to communicate with ourselves and self-introspect.

In today's world, we are living amidst lot of negativities. Besides, with surfeit of digital technologies, most of us do not have time for ourselves. Just reflect on your daily habits.

- a) How many hours in a day do you end up browsing your smartphone?
- b) What is your daily intake of social media diet?

If each one of start calculating, we will find most of us spend substantial part of our time texting or spending time in the social media. The reality is that most of

us end up sparing very little time for ourselves. Very rarely we get time to communicate with ourselves!!!

This leads us to an important question: When was the last time you met yourself?

Please reflect on this for a while.

Here are some benefits of communicating with oneself:

We must remember that communication with others starts with 'intrapersonal' communication or communication with oneself. We always try to know on what we want to say before we actually say to the other person. Our intrapersonal communication is important as it helps examine our attitudes, beliefs and values. We must remember that our intrapersonal communication occurs in two different modes – our self-talks and our inner dialogues.

When we start communicating with ourselves, we will develop patience and before arguing with others, we will start reflecting. We can practice nonviolent communication by observing our inner self and deeply listening to our self-talk and inner dialogues. This will help us to look for creative solutions of our feelings and needs and also on how we connect with others. If our self-talk and inner dialogues are destructive or violent, we could end up being aggressive in our dialogues with others. It can also make us stressful. Hence, the challenge before all of us is to ensure constructive self-talks and inner dialogues.

In the context of constructive intrapersonal communication, it is important to learn on how to self-introspect. It is important as most of the times we shy away from self-introspection.

To sum up, Swami Vivekananda reminds us: *There is, however, one great danger in human nature, viz, that man never examines himself. He thinks he is quite as fit to be on the throne as the king.*

iii. Use of appropriate and positive language

Words and the manner they are used is significant. Words can be described as medicine – they can cure or heal but if used improperly we will become unhealthy. Constant use of violent words will disturb our mental balance and we will end up becoming stressful.

Use of appropriate language and words that are positive in nature are keys to nonviolent communication. It should also be noted that words may have different

meanings and interpretations in different cultures. We must remember that through language and communication we can see the heart of a people. It means that language makes it possible to express feelings, emotions, views, ideas, opinions, perceptions as well as judgement about people, objects, places, things, information and situations.

Inappropriate use of language and words can contribute to conflicts while use of nonviolent expressions can help in resolution of conflicts. An eminent scholar had aptly said, "Language is the key to the heart of a people". Language is hence a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires.

While you read this section, think of the last time when you had a tiff with your friend and you ended up using inappropriate language. Could you have used some different words which wouldn't have hurt your friend?

If we reflect closely, we will realize that many a times we use words and language that suffocate others. But we can still express our feelings by using different phrases and language. It all boils down on the words that we are using in our communication and the style of our delivery.

Here is an interesting example one is tempted to share.

Sometime back the author was with a senior friend. He wanted his driver to take a courier packet. He called his driver and asked his driver if he was available. The driver came. He then politely asked him if by taking the courier packet he would not be burdened. Defenceless by this true approach of nonviolent communication, the driver promptly responded that he would not be burdened by taking the courier packet.

The senior friend could have ordered the driver as he was the boss. But instead he relied on using nonviolent communication. Such approaches strengthen relationships and mutual respect.

Again, think of a scenario where you want certain things from an acquaintance. If you are using aggressive language it may put off that person. However, if you use positive nonviolent communication, you could end up succeeding in getting your request fulfilled.

To sum up, it would be pertinent to quote Archbishop Desmond Tutu on the importance of language. He said: "Language is very powerful. Language does not just describe quality. Language creates the reality it describes. We should try to take responsibility of our action, words and feelings and not blame others for these."

iv. Avoiding stereotypes in our communication efforts

Just think of a situation when you find that someone's pocket has been picked in your area. There are a few homeless people around. In all probability, many around would immediately blame these homeless people as pick pockets. More than often we are used to falling into the trap of stereotypes.

An important component of nonviolent communication is avoidance of stereotypes. More than often we fall into the trap of stereotyping individuals without understanding their points dispassionately. We stereotype individuals on the basis of their race, ethnicity, religion, gender, caste, disabilities and many other criteria. We generally make our responses on the basis of the stereotypes which we construct. This is not nonviolent communication.

By categorizing people on the basis of different parameters and putting them into those brackets result in breakdown in communication. So, friends, try to make it a habit of avoiding stereotypes while communicating.

v. Avoid moralistic judgements

Another frequent drawback is how we end up in drawing comparisons between individuals. Avoiding being judgemental is another important component of nonviolent communication. Dale Carnegie, the well-known American writer has aptly said, "Even God doesn't propose to judge a man till his last days, why should you and I?"

Author, teacher and renowned American psychologist Marshall Rosenberg terms such types of judgemental communication as 'life-alienating' communication. In his book, "Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life", he says, "One kind of life-alienating communication is the use of moralistic judgments that imply wrongness or badness on the part of people who don't act in harmony with our values. Such judgments are reflected in language: "The problem with you is that you're too selfish." "She's lazy." "They're prejudiced." "It's inappropriate." Blame, insults, put-downs, labels, criticism, comparisons, and diagnoses are all forms of judgment."

According to Rosenberg, the life-alienating communication is 'a language that is rich with words that classify and dichotomize people and their actions.' Also making comparisons between individuals or groups is another shortcoming in our communication. Making comparisons are a form of judgement.

Think of a classroom situation. We often find teachers making moralistic judgements of their students' potential. They could for instance tell a student on why s/he is not performing in comparison to another student. We could, by using such moralistic judgements end up humiliating people or groups. Also most importantly we could be de-motivating such students and people.

vi. Avoid negative evaluative language

Writer and philosopher, Jiddu Krishnamurti says the highest form of human intelligence is when we observe without evaluating. For most of us it is extremely challenging on how we observe people and their behaviour without evaluating them. How is it possible to observe someone dispassionately without bringing into play our preconceived notions? Nonviolent communication necessitates that we learn to make observation without evaluations using preconceived notions.

For instance, think of yourself as a coach of the school football team. Say one of your players has not scored a goal in 15 matches. As a coach you will most probably scold the player by saying, 'you are repeatedly putting the team down by not scoring any goal, you are not good enough'. This is your negative evaluative statement.

But if you tell the player, 'well you may not have scored in the last 15 matches but I am sure you will do in the next matches'. This may help the player to make renewed attempts to practice harder and feel you still have faith in his ability.

If we are practicing nonviolent communication, we should desist from negative evaluative statements and straight-jacketed generalizations.

vii. Role of mutual respect in communication

Mutual respect is critical element of nonviolent communication. It is the basic building block. If you do not respect others, you cannot expect a meaningful dialogue. Mutual respect requires that we should be aware of the impact of our behaviour and the way we talk on others. By practicing respect towards others during interactions and dialogues, we are being attentive, acknowledging their presence, trying to understand them and their point of views and accepting them.

Also, when we make mutual respect as part of our daily habits, it would be easier for us to use the most appropriate positive language even when we find ourselves in an emotionally charged situation.

Here we are reminded of this apt quote of Albert Einstein: "I speak to everyone in the same way, whether he is the garbage man or the President of the University."

It is so important that we do not look down upon a person just because according to our perception s/he is from lower social strata.

viii. Importance of flexibility and openness in our communication

Flexibility is another important element of our communication process. Much of the problems happen when we refuse to be flexible and we start to believe that whatever we are communicating is correct.

Let's recollect Mahatma Gandhi and the struggle of India's independence. During that time, Gandhi never closed the channels of communication with his adversaries, i.e., the British. He was flexible and open towards all with whom he was communicating. This is an important lesson that we learn from the Gandhian approach to nonviolent communication.

Famous Irish playwright and critic George Bernard Shaw had rightly said, "Progress is impossible without change, and those who cannot change their minds cannot change anything." Being flexible leads us to another important aspect, the capacity to show openness in our communicative abilities.

The Tibetan Buddhist meditation master Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche says: "Openness is not a matter of giving something to someone else, but it means giving up your demand and the basic criteria of the demand ... It is learning to trust in the fact that you do not need to secure your ground, learning to trust in your fundamental richness, that you can afford to be open. This is the open way."

In short, let's try and practice flexibility and openness in our communication efforts.
