

We Can Work It Out



Introduction

For over 35 years, I've mediated in a wide variety of conflicts between parents and children, husbands and wives, management and workers, Palestinians and Israelis, Serbians and Croatians, and warring groups in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Burundi, Sri Lanka, and Rwanda. What I've learned from dealing with conflicts at all of these levels is that it is possible to resolve conflicts peacefully, and to everyone's satisfaction. The likelihood of conflicts being resolved in this fulfilling way is significantly increased if a certain quality of human connection can be established between the conflicting parties.

I've developed a process called Nonviolent CommunicationSM, which consists of thought and communication skills that empower us to connect compassionately with others and ourselves. My colleagues and I are extremely pleased with the many different ways that people are using Nonviolent Communication in their personal lives, work settings, and political activities.

In the following pages, I'll be describing how the process of Nonviolent Communication supports efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully. The process can be used either when we ourselves are directly involved in conflict, or when we are mediating the conflicts of others.

When I am called into a conflict resolution, I begin by guiding the participants to a caring and respectful quality of connection among themselves. Only after this connection is present do I engage them in a search for strategies to resolve the conflict. At that time we do not look for *compromise*; rather, we seek to resolve the conflict to everyone's complete satisfaction. To practice this process of conflict resolution, we must completely abandon the goal of *getting people to do what we want*. Instead, we focus on creating the conditions whereby *everyone's needs will be met*.

To further clarify this difference in focus (between getting what we want and getting what everyone wants), let's imagine that someone is behaving in a way that's not fulfilling a need of ours and we make a request that the person behave differently. In my experience, that person will resist what we request if they see us as only interested in getting our own needs met, and if they don't trust that we are equally concerned with meeting *their* needs. Genuine cooperation is inspired when participants trust that their own needs and values will be respectfully addressed. The Nonviolent Communication process is based on respectful practices that foster genuine cooperation.

Using Nonviolent Communication to Resolve Conflicts

The Nonviolent Communication practices that support conflict resolution involve:

- a) expressing our own needs,
- b) sensing the needs of others regardless of how others are expressing themselves,
- c) checking to see if needs are accurately being received,
- d) providing the empathy people need in order to hear the needs of others, and
- e) translating proposed solutions or strategies into positive action language.

Defining and Expressing Needs (Needs Are Not Strategies)

It has been my experience that if we keep our focus on needs, our conflicts tend toward a mutually satisfactory resolution. Keeping our focus on needs, we express our own needs, clearly understand the needs of others, and avoid any language that implies wrongness of the other party. The following are some of the basic human needs we all share:

Autonomy

- to choose one's dreams, goals, and values
- to choose one's plan for fulfilling one's dreams, goals, and values

Celebration

- to celebrate the creation of life and dreams fulfilled
- to celebrate losses: loved ones, dreams, etc. (mourning)

Integrity

- authenticity
- creativity
- meaning
- self-worth

Interdependence

- acceptance
- appreciation
- closeness
- community
- consideration
- contribution to the enrichment of life (to exercise one's power by giving that which contributes to life)
- emotional safety
- empathy
- honesty (the empowering honesty that enables us to learn from our limitations)

- love
- reassurance
- respect
- support
- trust
- understanding
- warmth

Physical Nurturance

- air
- food
- movement, exercise
- protection from life-threatening forms of life: viruses, bacteria, insects, predatory animals, etc.
- rest
- sexual expression
- shelter
- touch
- water

Play

- fun
- laughter

Spiritual Communion

- beauty
- harmony
- inspiration
- order
- peace