

The Surprising Purpose of *Anger*



*A Q&A Session with
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In *The Surprising Purpose of Anger* Marshall Rosenberg shares his unique perspective on the role anger can play in our life. He challenges us to shift from the idea that anger is something to be suppressed. Instead, anger is a gift, challenging us to connect to the unmet needs that have triggered this reaction. Rosenberg reveals common misconceptions about anger and points out that our anger is the product of thinking. A discussion of anger easily supports a better understanding of Nonviolent Communication because it touches on so many key NVC distinctions. Living from your heart, making judgment free observations, getting clear about your feelings and needs, making clear requests, and supporting life-enriching connections all relate to how we respond to anger.

A Brief Introduction to NVC

NVC evolved out of an intense interest I have in two questions. First, I wanted to better understand what happens to human beings that leads some of us to behave violently and exploitatively. And

secondly, I wanted to better understand what kind of education serves us in the attempt to remain compassionate—which I believe is our nature—even when others are behaving violently or exploitatively.

I've found in my exploration into these two questions that three factors are very important in understanding why some of us respond violently—and some of us compassionately—in similar situations. These three are:

- First, the language that we have been educated to use.
- Second, how we have been taught to think and communicate.
- Third, the specific strategies we learned to influence ourselves and others.

I have found that these three factors play a large role in determining whether we're going to be able to respond compassionately or violently in situations. I have integrated the type of language, the kinds of thinking, and the forms of communication that strengthen our ability to willingly contribute to our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of others, into this process that I call Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

NVC focuses attention on whether people's needs are being fulfilled, and if not, what can be done to fulfill these needs. It shows us how to express ourselves in ways that increase the likelihood others will willingly contribute to our well being. It also shows us how to receive the messages of others in ways that increase the likelihood that we will willingly contribute to their wellbeing.

Anger and NVC

When it comes to managing anger, NVC shows us how to use anger as an alarm that tells us we are thinking in ways that are not likely to get our needs met, and are more likely to get us involved in interactions that are not going to be very constructive for anyone. Our training stresses that *it is dangerous to think of anger as something to be repressed, or as something bad*. When we tend to identify anger as a result of something wrong with us, then our tendency is to want to repress it and not deal with anger. That use of anger, to repress and deny it, often leads us to express it in ways that can be very dangerous to ourselves and others.

Think of how many times you've read in the newspapers about serial killers and how they are described by others who have known them. A rather typical way they are described is: "He was always such a nice person. I never heard him raise his voice. He never seemed to be angry at anyone."

So in NVC we are interested in using the anger in ways that help us to get at the needs that are not being fulfilled within ourselves, that are at the root of our anger.

Many of the groups I work with around the world have witnessed the consequences of teaching that anger is something to be repressed. These groups have witnessed that when we teach that anger should be avoided, it can be used to oppress people by getting them to tolerate whatever is happening to them. However, I also have reservations about how, in response to that concern, some have advocated cultivating or "venting" of anger without understanding its roots and transforming it. Some studies have indicated that anger management programs that simply encourage participants to vent anger by, for example, beating pillows, etc., simply push the anger closer to the surface and in fact leave the participants more susceptible to express their anger later in ways that are dangerous to themselves and others.

So what we want to do as we use NVC to manage anger is to go more deeply into it, to see what is going on within us when we are angry, to be able to get at the need—which is the root of anger—and then fulfill that need. For teaching purposes I sometimes refer to anger as similar to the warning light on the dashboard of a car—it's giving you useful information about what the engine needs. You wouldn't want to hide or disconnect or ignore it. You'd want to slow down the car and figure out what the light's trying to tell you.

It Works Even If Only One Person Applies It

It has been my experience that if I can keep my attention on anger as a warning, no matter how the other person is communicating, we remain connected. In other words, it works, even if only one person applies it.

It's not too hard then to keep the focus in this direction. It *can* be scary because it always requires vulnerability on our part just to

nakedly say how we are and what we would like. And it can flow fairly well when both parties are trained in this process, but almost everyone that I work with is attempting to establish this flow of communication with someone who is not likely to ever come to workshops to learn how to do this. So it's very important that this process work with anyone, whether they have been trained to communicate this way or not.

One thing we certainly stress in our intensive training is how to stay with this process regardless of how other people communicate. Now, in one sense anger is a fun way to dive more deeply into NVC even if you are starting with this process for the first time. When you're angry, it brings many aspects of the NVC process into sharp focus, helping you see the difference between NVC and other forms of communication.

The NVC approach involves several steps. I will go over these steps in part by using an example of a young man in a prison in Sweden. I was working with this man in a prisoner training session, showing the participants how NVC can be used to manage their anger.

Steps to Handling Our Anger

The First and Second Steps

The first step in handling our anger using NVC is to be conscious that *the stimulus, or trigger, of our anger is not the cause of our anger*. That is to say that it isn't simply what people do that makes us angry, but it's something within us that responds to what they do that is really the cause of the anger. This requires us to be able to separate the trigger from the cause.

In the situation with the prisoner in Sweden, the very day that we were focusing on anger, it turned out that he had a lot of anger in relationship to the prison authorities. So he was very glad to have us there to help him deal with anger on that day.

I asked him what it was that the prison authorities had done that was the stimulus of his anger. He answered, "I made a request of them three weeks ago, and they still haven't