

The Third Step

The third step involves looking for the need that is the root of our anger. This is built on the assumption that we get angry because our needs are not getting met. The problem is that we're not in touch with our needs. Instead of being directly connected to our need, we go up to our head and start thinking of what's wrong with other people for not meeting our needs. The judgments we make of other people—which cause of our anger—are really *alienated expressions of unmet needs*.

Judgments

Over the years, I have come to see that these kinds of judgments of others that make us angry are not only alienated expressions of our needs, but at times they look to me like they are suicidal, tragic expressions of our needs. Instead of going to our heart to get connected to what we need and are not getting, we direct our attention to judging what is wrong with other people for not meeting our needs. When we do this, a couple of things are likely to happen.

First, our needs are not likely to get met, because when we verbally judge other people as wrong in some way, these judgments usually create more defensiveness than learning or connection. At the very least, they don't create much cooperation. Even if people do things we would like them to do after we have judged them as wrong or lazy or irresponsible, they will take these actions with an energy that we will pay for. We will pay for it because when we are angry as a result of judging people—and we express these judgments to them either verbally or through our nonverbal behavior—they pick up that we are judging them as wrong in some way. Even if people then do what we would like them to do, they are likely to be motivated more out of fear of being punished, fear of being judged, out of their guilt or shame, than out of compassion in relation to our needs.

When we are using NVC, we remain conscious at all times that it's as important why people do what we would like them to do, as it is that they do it. So we are conscious that we only want people to do things willingly, and not do things because they think they're going to be punished, blamed, "guilted," or shamed if they don't.

Developing a Literacy of Needs

This practice requires that we develop a literacy and a consciousness of our needs. With a greater vocabulary of needs, we are able to more easily get in touch with the needs behind the judgments that are making us angry. For it's when we can clearly express our needs that others have a much greater likelihood of responding compassionately to whatever it is we would like.

Let's go back to the case of the prisoner from Sweden. After we had identified the judgments he was making that were creating his anger, I asked him to look behind the judgments and tell me what needs of his were not getting met. These unmet needs were actually being expressed through the judgments he was making of the prison officials.

This wasn't easy for him to do because when people are trained to think in terms of wrongness of others, they are often blind to what they themselves need. They often have very little vocabulary for describing their needs. It requires shifting attention away from judging outward, to looking inward and seeing what the need is. But with some help, he was finally able to get in touch with his need and he said: "Well, my need is to be able to take care of myself when I get out of prison by being able to get work. So the request that I was making of the prison officials was for training to meet that need. If I don't get that training, I'm not going to be able to take care of myself economically when I get out of prison, and I'm going to end up back in here."

Then I said to the prisoner, "Now that you're in touch with your need, how are you feeling?" He said, "I'm scared." So when we are directly connected to our need, we are *never* angry any more. The anger hasn't been repressed; the anger has been transformed into need-serving feelings.

The basic function of feelings is to serve our needs. The word *emotion* basically means to move us out, to mobilize us to meet our needs. So when we have a need for some nourishment, we have a feeling that we label as hunger, and that sensation stimulates us to move about to get our need for food taken care of. If we just felt comfortable each time we had a need for nourishment, we could starve, because we wouldn't be mobilized to get our need met.

This is the natural function of emotions, to stimulate us to get our needs met. But anger is stimulated by a diversion. We are not in touch with the needs that would naturally motivate us to want to get our needs met. The anger is created, as I've said, by thinking about the wrongness of others, which transfers this energy away from seeking to get the need met, into an energy designed to blame and punish other people.

After I pointed out to the prisoner the difference between getting in touch with his needs and the feelings that he had, he was then aware of his fear. He could see that the anger was because of the thinking about the wrongness of others. I then asked the prisoner, "Do you think you're more likely to get your needs met if, when you go in to talk to the prison officials, you are connected to your needs and the fear, or if you are up in your head judging them and angry?"

And he could see very clearly that he was much more likely to get his needs met if he were to be communicating from a position of connection to his needs, rather than separated from his needs and thinking of others in ways that implied wrongness. At the moment that he had this insight into what a different world he would be living in when he was in touch with his needs as opposed to judging others, he looked down at the floor and had about as sad a look on his face as I can recall any person ever having had. And I asked him, "What's going on?"

He said, "I can't talk about it right now." Later that day, he helped me understand what was going on in him. He came to me and said: "Marshall, I wish you could have taught me two years ago about anger what you taught me this morning. I wouldn't have had to kill my best friend."

Tragically, two years before, his best friend had done some things and he felt great rage in response to his judgments about what his friend had done. But instead of being conscious of what his needs were behind all of that, he really thought it was his friend that made him angry, and in a tragic interaction ended up killing the friend.

I'm not implying that every time we get angry we hurt somebody or kill them. But I am suggesting that every time we are angry, we are disconnected from our needs. We are up in our

head thinking about the situation in a way that is going to make it very hard for us to get our needs met.

This is a very important step that I have just outlined: To be conscious of the thinking that is creating our anger. And as I said, the prisoner at first was totally oblivious to all of the thoughts that were going on within him that made him angry. The reason for this is that our thoughts go on very rapidly. Many of our thoughts go so quickly through our head that we are not even aware that they are there, and it really looks to us as though it was the stimulus that was the cause of our anger.

I have outlined three steps in managing our anger using NVC:

- 1) Identify the stimulus for our anger, without confusing it with the evaluation.
- 2) Identify the internal image or judgment that is making us angry.
- 3) Transform this judgmental image into the need that it is expressing; in other words, bring our full attention to the need that is behind the judgment.

These three steps are done internally—we're not saying anything out loud. We're simply becoming aware that our anger is not caused by what the other person has done, but by our judgment, and then we are looking for the need behind the judgment.

The Fourth Step

The fourth step involves what we would actually say out loud to the other person after we have transformed our anger into other feelings by getting in touch with the need behind the judgment.

The fourth step includes saying to the other person four pieces of information. First, we reveal to them the stimulus: what they have done that is in conflict with our needs being fulfilled. Secondly, we express how we are feeling. Notice we are not repressing the anger. The anger has been transformed into a feeling such as sad, hurt, scared, frustrated, or the like. And then we follow up our expression of our feelings with the needs of ours that are not being fulfilled.

And now we add to those three pieces of information *a clear, present request of what we want from the other person* in relationship to our feelings and unmet needs.

So in the situation with the prisoner, the fourth step on his part would be to go to the prison officials and say something like this: "I made a request three weeks ago. I still haven't heard from you, and I'm feeling scared because I have a need to be able to earn a living when I leave this prison, and I'm afraid that without the training, I was requesting it would be very hard for me to make a living. So I'd like you to tell me what is preventing you from responding to my request."

Notice that for the prisoner to communicate this required a lot of work on his part. He needed to be conscious of what was going on in him. He needed some help getting connected to his needs. In this situation he had me to help him, but in our training we show people how to do all of this for themselves.

When we're stimulated by another person and find ourselves starting to get angry, we need to manage that anger in the following ways.

If we're sufficiently trained in getting in touch with the need behind the judgments, we can take a deep breath and very rapidly go through the process that I led the prisoner through. In other words, as soon as we catch ourselves getting angry, we take a deep breath, stop, look inside, and ask ourselves quickly, "What am I telling myself that's making me so angry?" We quickly get in touch with the need that is behind that judgment. When we're in touch with the need we will feel in our body a shift away from anger to other kinds of feelings, and when we're at that point we can open our mouths and say to the other person what we're observing, feeling, needing, and make our requests.

This process takes practice. With sufficient practice, this process can be done in a matter of seconds. Perhaps we're fortunate enough to have friends around who can help us to get conscious about what's going on within us. If not, or until we are sufficiently trained, we can always take a time out. We can say to the person, "Time out. I need to do some work on myself right now because I'm afraid that anything I say is going to get in the way of both of us getting our needs met." At this point, we can

go off by ourselves to get in touch with the needs behind our judgments that are making us angry. We can then go back into the situation.

Once we've practiced enough to handle our anger in this way, it's very often to our advantage to also show some empathic understanding of what was going on in the other person to lead them to behave as they did. If we're able to connect to this *before* we express ourselves, the advantage can be even greater.

If we're to be able to manage our anger when it comes up in the way that I'm outlining, a key part of it is this ability to both identify the judgment making us angry, and to quickly transform it into the need that is behind the judgment. We can develop our ability to do this quickly enough to do it in real situations if we can practice identifying judgments and translating them into needs.

An exercise I'd recommend is to list the kind of judgments that are likely to go on inside of you when you are angry. You might want to think of the most recent time that you have gotten angry, and ask yourself and write down what you were telling yourself that was making you angry.

When you have made an inventory of the kind of things you tell yourself in different situations that make you angry, you might then go back over this list and ask yourself, "What was I needing that was being expressed through that judgment?" And the more time we spend making these translations from judgments into needs, the more it will help us follow these procedures for expressing anger more quickly in real-life situations.

Punishment and Anger

I would like to add to this discussion of anger the concept of punishment. The kind of thinking that leads us to be angry is thinking that implies that people deserve to suffer for what they've done. In other words, I'm talking about the moralistic judgments we make of other people that imply wrongness, irresponsibility, or inappropriateness. At their root, all of these kinds of judgments imply that people shouldn't have done what they did, and they deserve some form of condemnation or punishment for doing it.