

The 'stuff' of life: Sharing the Essence of Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

By Rachel Hinks

When it all boils down to it what is the 'stuff' of life? What really matters to us as human beings? What makes us tick?

Perhaps having a chronic illness brings one face to face with these sorts of questions? Having had Lupus (SLE) – a debilitating illness – for 20yrs – i have found there is no escaping a struggle and tussle with meaning when the plans you have for your life become thwarted due to the effects an illness can sometimes have. When you are ill and in pain and unable to touch (let alone grasp) your dreams then that churning and searching for meaning becomes all the more real

Likely it was this continued search for what really matters to me that drew me toward Nonviolent Communication (NVC)– a form of relating to ourselves, others and the world around us, developed by psychologist Marshall Rosenberg, that places value on acknowledging the needs that we all have. A common thread that laces us all together enabling us to relate more compassionately.

All of us as fellow human being share the same universal human needs –for peace, well-being, support, care, freedom, safety, understanding, to contribute, fun, etc...We all have many more needs that each moment make us tick and are, as I see it, the 'stuff' of life. These needs – or values, longings, hopes, desires – are what we live, breathe, act and communicate from. Even when we speak or act in ways that we don't enjoy or we are still only all seeking to meet needs.

Having a chronic illness doesn't alter these desires, but it has an impact. It touches every one of these needs at some time or another. Its impact ripples out, touching the edges of everything that's important to us, that we long and hope for; dream of. It's hard to experience peace when your body's in constant pain; challenging to have a sense of contributing when things you love doing become unreachable; difficult to find understanding of what you are going through when your life becomes so different from the fast paced lives of others.

Recognising and acknowledging what needs we have in any given moment helps create an understanding of where we are coming from.

For instance, instead making judgements towards ourselves, we can see this in a different light by looking at our feelings and needs at that moment.

Saying '*gosh I let someone down again.*' can be transformed, recognising your feelings and needs into '*I'm feeling disappointed and sad as I would love to be more reliable and be part of things that matter to me.*' By recognising the needs we have, there is more of a chance of finding creative ways of meeting them, either fully or in part, or giving ourselves the space to acknowledge loss when they aren't.

When I first encountered NVC I feared that identifying my needs might be 'selfish', or seen as 'needy'. The acknowledgement of needs isn't often encouraged in our society and culture, where a sacrificial selfless giving is often hailed as something to strive towards. No wonder that we become disconnected to our own longings, hopes, desires....

When we start to communicate from a place where we are expressing our needs then it's more likely that they will be met. But sometimes it's hard to recognise our needs. Often we would love others to guess what our needs are and then give us what we want, before we have even worked out what we want! This would be great...but it doesn't often happen!!! If

however we can become more in tune with what we are hoping for and start to express this, then we stand a better chance of being more satisfied.

NVC also provides a way of us hearing others so that we don't get so upset by what they are saying. If we can listen to the needs behind what another is saying then it's less likely that we will experience upset even if their words are challenging to hear. For instance, when the man behind me at the supermarket raised his voice saying 'Can you possibly go any SLOWER?!' my internal response is that 'yes I could go much slower...just not any faster' and a part of me wants to slow down even more, to let him know what it's like having to go at this pace. I'm frustrated and would just love some awareness, understanding and consideration as to why I'm walking slowly. But if I can just hear what needs he might have behind what he's saying – that maybe he has commitments to honour, or he's tired and longing rest—if I can hear these possible needs in the message behind his words then I feel calmer, as I understand all about wishing to honour commitments, or wanting to rest.

NVC doesn't require others to have this awareness of needs. It just takes one person in the situation to look at things through this new lens of seeing their own and others needs, and to reflect this back. For instance in the situation described I could have said to the supermarket man behind me '*are you concerned because you're in a rush and have other commitments you wish to get to and honour*'. My guess here may or may not be accurate, but it has already created a shift in helping him to get in touch with what he might be feeling and needing at that moment.

Of course sometimes we are just too upset by the words or actions of others to be able to see and hear what they might need, in which case we then just stay focused on what our feelings and needs are. NVC isn't about being 'nice'. It doesn't require us to squash our own feelings of frustration / hurt / fear in order to try and be compassionate towards others. It's about being real and authentic. If our energy is with our own feelings and needs then we use that compassion and honesty towards ourselves first.

Recently I joined others for a walk in a wood. My 'walk' was about 100 yds.. I notice it's hard for people to slow down to my pace. But as **they did one** man started spotting orchids and wild garlic, fondly reminiscing how as a boy he and his brother had rubbed the root of wild garlic onto their skin to look like bruises so that they could get some **sympathy** when they arrived home. It left me wondering whether these plants- and memories – his enjoyment of nature and warm recollections - might had been missed had he have been walking at a 'normal' pace..

So my concerns and judgements about 'holding others up' and restricting their enjoyment by 'accommodating me', somehow got transformed when I looked at it through the essence of life, in terms of what needs **of** others had **been** satisfied and how I had in some small way contributed to this. And how others had slowed down and contributed to me by providing companionship. It was for me one of those deeply satisfying moments where everyone gains. A moment in life when the needs of all of us were valued.

For further information

Recommended reading 'Nonviolent Communication: A language of Life' by Marshall Rosenberg