

No argument about fair play

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FROM the Parliament House to your house, arguing is a national pastime. Non-violent Communication is a system that helps resolve arguments peacefully.

Arguing can be like being on a faulty telephone line: you say one thing, the other person hears another, there is a lot of static and miscommunication, and before you know it, you're hanging up in an icy silence.

However, Non-violent Communication aims to change the way we relate to each other.

"The way most people have learned to communicate is not very effective in resolving conflict and getting our needs met," says Dorset Campbell-Ross, an NVC trainer.

"The ideal of NVC is to get your own needs met, while also meeting someone else's needs." In simple terms, the NVC system offers a resolution to arguments, where everyone ends up feeling like a winner.

NVC was founded by clinical psychologist Dr Marshall Rosenberg, whose desire to provide an alternative to the racially motivated violence he saw growing up in Detroit, Michigan, drove him to create an entirely new system of conflict resolution.

In 1984, he founded the Centre for Nonviolent Communication and now training in NVC is offered on five continents and 250,000 people learn the technique every year.

It is being used in some of the world's worst trouble spots, including Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, as well as Israel and the Palestinian territories.

But it's not just working on a global level: NVC is helping prevent and resolve conflicts in schools, businesses, healthcare centres and prisons, right through to interpersonal relationships between families, couples, friends and work colleagues.

"NVC replaces our old patterns of being defensive, withdrawing or attacking in the face of judgment and criticism," says Campbell-Ross.

"It focuses on two things: being honest about your feelings in a way that's likely to inspire compassion in others, and listening with empathy."

Stop playing the blame game

But how does it work in a practical sense?

Okay, imagine this scenario: you're hurtling up the highway at 130km per hour with your partner at the wheel, the music is blaring, and your partner is happily singing along.

You start to feel nervous, so you say, "Slow down, you're driving like a bloody idiot!" Your partner may either grudgingly ease the pedal from the metal or become very defensive and continue at a pace.

"I'm a good driver, chill out, will you? You're always on my back about something!"

And what usually ensues is an argument of biblical proportions that leaves both parties feeling angry and upset.

However, people trained in NVC would take a very different approach to the situation using four steps.

The first one is expressing an observation of the situation, as opposed to judging the situation, such as "I notice you're driving 20km over the speed limit".

The second step is expressing your feelings: whether you're hurt, scared, joyful, amused, irritated, or happy about the situation.

In this case, you might say, "When you drive fast it makes me feel scared."

Thirdly, you express your needs that are connected to the feeling that has been identified: "This is compromising my need for safety".

The fourth component is to make a clear request that is easily achievable for the other person, and will make life better: "It would make it easier for me to relax if you drove at the speed limit."

"NVC teaches you to express yourself without the use of good or bad, right or wrong judgements," says Campbell-Ross.

"Instead of fear, blaming and criticising, or trying to prove the other person wrong, there's an emphasis on expressing your own feelings and needs and then asking the other person to help you get those needs met."

How needs can be met

Identifying your needs is the cornerstone of NVC.

As humans we all have universal needs for survival, such as food, shelter and love.

According to NVC trainer Shari Macree, we also share other needs such as the need for fairness, understanding, intimacy, affection, respect, connection and so on.

"Our feelings are the pointers to what things are really important to us at that moment," she says.

For example, says Macree, a golf widow nagging her husband because he spends the whole weekend on the green is likely to be expressing a need for connection with her partner.

"When we become aware of the motives behind our anger and frustration, then we stop blaming the other person, we can make a request and take action to get our needs met," explains Macree.

"We make requests to find out how likely we are to get cooperation." But what if the request falls on deaf ears?

"It's about taking responsibility for your own needs and not being reliant on anyone else," says Macree.

"You can make requests of others to enrich your life, but if they choose not to, you have to take responsibility for meeting your own needs.

"Which means if the golf widow is looking to meet a need for connection and her husband refuses to do that, then she may have to find that need has to met by someone other than her husband."

Make it a win-win argument

But it's not all a one-way street; you also have to take your own ego out of the equation and actually learn to listen to the needs of the other person.

Which is easier said than done, according to Campbell-Ross, because in conflict it's incredibly difficult to listen when you're overly emotional because you are using the right side of the brain, which is connected with emotions, while our rational left side is left floundering.

"In conflict, you're seeing two people focused on their own pain – their own point of view," says Campbell-Ross.

"NVC is getting to a win-win place for both parties. For that to take place, somebody has to step out of his or her pain or at least put it on hold, to hear the other person's point of view.

"Empathy is a learnt skill; giving your full attention to somebody else's feelings and needs, and actually hearing what they have to say, is the greatest gift we can give to others.

"One of the most powerful needs is to contribute to the wellbeing of others," adds Macree. "There's a natural reward in really listening to where the other person is at that moment.

"What NVC teaches you is to hear beyond the other person's story and recognise the need that must be met.

"To really hear what is happening in their heart by taking an active role in their hopes, dreams and pain. When you're giving to others, you're actually giving to yourself.

"It's an invigorating experience, like there's a reason for existence, beyond your own self-gratification.

"And when we give like this, it's more likely the other person will recognise your needs as well and want to help you meet them."

And ultimately isn't that what we all want? Simply to be heard and understood?

Want to learn more?

- For more information about the Center for Nonviolent Communication visit www.cnvc.org
- To learn more about NVC in Australia or find a course, log onto www.nvcaustralia.com
- Both Dorset Campbell-Ross (www.mn8love.com) and Shari Macree (www.fullyalive.com.au) offer training workshops in NVC around Australia.

10 things we can do to contribute to internal, interpersonal, and organisational peace

- (1) Spend some time each day quietly reflecting on how we would like to relate to ourselves and others.
- (2) Remember that all human beings have the same needs.
- (3) Check our intention to see if we are as interested in others getting their needs met as our own.
- (4) When asking someone to do something, check first to see if we are making a request or a demand.
- (5) Instead of saying what we DON'T want someone to do, say what we DO want the person to do.
- (6) Instead of saying what we want someone to BE, say what action we'd like the person to take that we hope will help the person be that way.
- (7) Before agreeing or disagreeing with anyone's opinions, try to tune in to what the person is feeling and needing.
- (8) Instead of saying "No," say what need of ours prevents us from saying "Yes."
- (9) If we are feeling upset, think about what need of ours is not being met, and what we could do to meet it, instead of thinking about what's wrong with others or ourselves.
- (10) Instead of praising someone who did something we like, express our gratitude by telling the person what need of ours that action met.

(Courtesy www.cnvc.org)