

Self- Awareness and Empathy: Keys to Loving Relationships

Whether in conversation or conflict with another person, getting clear about our own feelings and needs is the first key to successful communication and relationship building. If we are not self-aware, but allow reactivity to direct our words and actions, we may communicate something hurtful and damage the relationship. Anger, for example, is an important sign that something needs attention or correction, but is often a reaction to deeper feelings of fear, hurt, or guilt. If we are not aware of our real needs, anger may cause us to blame and attack, driving away the very persons from whom we may need or want something. If we tend to be competitive and have a strong need to be right, we may feel compelled to try to prove the other person wrong, behavior that hurts both persons and relationships.

The second key to effective communication and harmonious relationships is empathy for the other person's feelings and needs, as well as for one's own. You do not need to agree with someone to practice empathic conversation, to guess at what he or she might be feeling, and to offer understanding and compassion. An expression of empathy will often soften the other person's feelings because when we feel understood, even by those who disagree with us, we can more easily let go of trying to prove our point. When we react defensively, casting ourselves in the role of victim, we automatically cast the other in the role of villain. He or she will then try to evade the role of villain and may even try to claim greater victimization. Instead of solving the problem, you may end up trying to prove who is the most victimized. Underlying those feelings are real needs –more autonomy, more appreciation, more attention), but making your partner the villain is not likely to get those needs met.¹

Eckhart Tolle describes the human experience of the “pain body,” which can rise up in us in response to something that happens or may seem to appear out of the blue.² He emphasizes the importance of not identifying with the “pain body,” but acknowledging that it is something that happens to us, not who we are. If we can step back and view that pain objectively, we may be able to minimize its power over us. Owning that I am feeling hurt and lonely, or perhaps afraid of being abandoned, frees me from the compulsion to blame and attack. I can take time to think through what I need and consider how best to ask for it. When attacked by another person, empathy allows us to consider that maybe he or she is upset by something that may or may not have anything to do with us. If we can then be kind and curious, we may be able to connect with that person in a way that is healing and productive.

Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (see resources, below) offers a process for learning to recognize what is happening within ourselves. The first step is to identify objectively the triggering event. Then by getting in touch with our thoughts about it, we can assess whether our reactions are relevant or based on some misinterpretation of the event. Thinking differently about something often changes our feelings. When we focus on the unfairness of someone's words to or treatment of us, we feed our anger and resentment. When we consider that the behavior might not be about us after all, we allow ourselves to try to understand what the other person might be experiencing. By asking ourselves what we need and asking others what they need, we increase the likelihood of a conversation that will bring us closer together, rather than driving us apart.

Learning to assess our inner state of mind at any given time, as well as understanding our emotional and behavioral patterns and tendencies, is essential to living harmoniously with others. By intentionally responding with empathy, instead of just reacting, we can nurture peace in our relationships and community and world and fulfill the second commandment Jesus gave us, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Luke 10:27)

¹Katie and Gay Hendricks, www.heartsintrueharmony.com July 10, 2016 enewsletter <http://www.heartsintrueharmony.com/m/email/nl/the-fight-no-couple-ever-wins.html?s=12931&e=1&cid=HXZZZV&lid=1&sbid=kkYt>

²Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (Dutton/Penguin Group, 2005), Chapters 5, 6

RESOURCES FOR DEVELOPING SELF-AWARENESS AND EMPATHY ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

Hearts in Harmony (Dr. Katie and Dr. Gay Hendricks) <http://www.heartsintrueharmony.com/> These authors/presenters share particularly helpful insights on how the ability to love ourselves empowers us to love others. Subscribing to their e-newsletter will bring you fascinating articles, also posted on the website, with new insights on how relationships work and how to nurture love and connection.

Non-Violent Communication, PuddleDancer Press, PO Box 231129, Encinitas, CA 92023-1129, 858-759-6963, www.nonviolentcommunication.com. Non-violent Communication programs, developed by Marshall Rosenberg in the 1960's, teach people of all ages, genders, ethnicity, and background a more effective way to communicate. Separating observation from evaluation, taking responsibility for our feelings, making requests instead of demands, and listening empathically are skills that can enhance any relationship. Certified trainers now teach those skills all over the world. At the above website, you can sign up for an e-newsletter and other free resources, read articles about NVC, and purchase books (including a basic text and companion workbook for group study and a variety of smaller books specifically addressed to parents, teachers, community leaders, etc.) Visit www.cnvc.org/en/trainingca for more information, schedules of upcoming events, free introductory tools, and contact information for certified trainers. For information about telecourses, visit www.nvctraining.com

READING LIST

Connection: A Self-Care Approach to Conflict Management, by Bonnie R. Fraser, (2010), 480-278-3702, bonnie@connectionselfcare.com, www.connectionselfcare.com. The author clearly presents the basic concepts of Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication, with examples and exercises that effectively facilitate understanding and skill development. She emphasizes throughout the importance of active self-care and self-awareness in order to improve our communication and conflict management. This text would serve well for group or individual study. Visit the website for sample pages and exercises.

Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life (in earlier editions "...Language of Compassion"), by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 1999). This clear and straightforward text shows how to break patterns of thinking that lead to arguments and anger and how to communicate with mutual respect and understanding. The skills (separating observation from evaluation, taking responsibility for our feelings, making requests instead of demands, and listening empathically) can enhance any relationship. This book works well with groups of individuals whether single or married. A Companion Workbook available at www.nonviolentcommunication.com provides discussion questions and exercises for individual or group study, and various related books for parents, teachers, community leaders, etc., address specific topics.

*See also various articles on love and marriage, parenting, and communication in general at www.marriagelovepower.net (click on *Best Practices and Recommended Resources*) or search by title or topic at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>*

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