

The Magic Question

What if, the next time you are troubled by someone's behavior, you could ask a magic question that would help you connect with that person, instead of reacting with criticism and complaint? If your child is misbehaving, if your spouse slams a door, or if your work colleague has not completed an assignment, try taking a deep breath and gently asking, "What do you need?".

Marianne Williamson, in *Return to Love: Reflections on A Course in Miracles* (NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., p. 86), observes that every communication or action is either an expression of love or a cry for love. Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication programs assume that all behavior is driven by needs, although that may not be what we think at first. We often jump to the assumption that misbehavior is driven by negative impulses – such as selfishness, anger, or laziness - that must be squelched. Sometimes we make negative character judgments about the person acting out. Such reactions to behavior that troubles us may end up hurting the relationship and actually worsening the behavior. However, when we assume that some unmet need – for love, for safety, for connection, perhaps - is causing the behavior and when we speak with kindness and empathy, we can at least avoid making the situation worse. Often the real need is not what it appears to be at first, but something deeper.

The Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) program and materials (<https://www.steppublishers.com/>) include a chart illustrating how your reactions can help you interpret what a child may be seeking and what would be an effective response. Such assessments might work well in any relationship. For example, if you are annoyed by someone's behavior, he or she is likely seeking attention, and you might do well to ignore the behavior while finding ways to be attentive to the person when he or she is not acting out. If you feel angry, the person may be seeking power and control over you. Instead of reacting with resistance, stay calm and refuse to fight. If you feel hurt and your impulse is to retaliate, you might wonder instead if the person is seeking revenge for some real or imagined injury. If you feel despair and hopelessness, the person may be trying to reduce your perceived expectations. In any case, step back and try to understand what is going on in the other. Try empathic questions to draw out information, such as, "Are you feeling lonely because I have been so busy lately?" or "Are you disappointed by something that happened or didn't happen?" or "Are you discouraged because the assignment seems too hard?" Even if you guess wrong, your attempt to understand rather than judge is more likely to get a connecting response.

In an even more striking example of the power of this approach, Wayland Myers, has written an article titled "An Attempt to Define a Nonviolent Communication Approach to Addictive Behaviors." He describes how to approach someone whose behavior concerns you with curiosity and compassion rather than criticism, contempt, and attempts to control. By asking what needs the harmful behavior meets, you may connect with the other person, rather than putting him or her on the defensive. This conversation must include, of course, clear expression of your own unmet needs – perhaps for safety, trust, understanding, or freedom from worry (<http://www.waylandmyers.com/3.html>). You might reference the "Needs Inventory" posted by The Center for Nonviolent Communication (<https://www.cnvc.org/Training/needs-inventory>) in order to consider a wide range of possible needs that might be in play.

In any situation, when you feel the impulse to react, you would do well to stop and ask yourself the Magic Question: "What do I need?" And then the discerning question, "Is what I am

about to say or do going to help me meet that need?" And finally, "What else could I say or do that is more likely to get my needs met?" Often it helps to have someone else ask you these questions.

Chances are the other person may not even know what unmet needs are prompting the feelings that lead to the offensive or troubling behavior, just as you may not be aware of your own. Your interest and concern and willingness to listen, as well as your openness about expressing your own unmet needs may open the door to constructive dialogue and discovery. Whatever the outcome, being willing to consider the unmet needs behind behavior can be healing and redemptive.

Resources for Learning More About Nonviolent Communication

CNVC.ORG – Visit this website and click on "How to Use This Site" to find scheduled training events, certified trainers, organizations, practice groups and more.

Connection: A Self-Care Approach to Conflict Management, by Bonnie R. Fraser (2010). 480-278-3702, bonnie@connectionselfcare.com. The author clearly presents the basic concepts of Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication model, with examples and exercises that effectively facilitate understanding and skill development. She emphasizes 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 www.connectionselfcare.com for sample pages and exercises.

Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life, 3rd Edition: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships, by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015). This clear and straight-forward text shows how to break through 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. A Companion Workbook available at the website provides discussion questions and exercises for individual or group study. You can also order related books addressing a variety of topics for parents, teachers, community leaders, and others. (www.nonviolentcommunication.com).

NVCTRaining.COM – This website offers both free and fee-based resources, tools, webinars, and teleconferences. Free resources include Weekly NVC Reflections, NVC Training Videos, and Online Classes. See also <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/aboutnvc/aboutnvc.htm>

Jane P. Ives, United Methodist Marriage and Family Ministries Consultant (1/31/2018)

10 Quaker Lane, Portland, ME 04103, 207-797-8930, Janepives@gmail.com

Copyright United Methodist Discipleship Ministries, www.umcdiscipleship.org - Used by Permission