1-Page Summary 1-Page Book Summary of Nonviolent Communication

Nonviolent Communication is a way of interacting with ourselves and others with compassion. We'll start by discussing the philosophy behind Nonviolent Communication and how it differs from "life-alienating communication." Next, we'll learn how to apply the four steps of NVC: observe, identify and state feelings, identify and state needs, and make requests. Then, we'll learn how to use NVC as a listener rather than a speaker. Finally, we'll discuss practical applications of NVC, including practicing self-compassion and resolving conflicts.

What Is Nonviolent Communication?

NVC is about communicating, but it is also a framework for attention. In everyday communication, we often focus on analyzing or making judgments about a situation. For example, "Traffic was terrible today" and "He's always crabby after work" express our interpretation of a situation rather than pure observation. Making judgments like these won't get us what we need and want out of the conversation. NVC helps us refocus on qualities like empathy that help create a genuine human connection. Ultimately, that connection is what helps everyone get what they need from the conversation.

Nonviolent Communication Is Rooted in Compassion

In this context, the words "violent" and "nonviolent" don't just refer to physical conflict. Any communication that causes pain or harm to anyone (including ourselves) is "violent," while any communication that stems from true compassion is "nonviolent." To counter violent communication, focus on a sense of common humanity (instead of getting distracted by strong emotions) because that human connection keeps you grounded in compassion.

- For example, if you focus on your anger when someone insults you, you're likely to communicate violently by hurling an insult right back. But if you focus on the feelings and needs you have in common, you might recognize that insulting you was this person's way of expressing their insecurity and their need for self-esteem. Keeping your attention on that common humanity allows you to tap into empathy (since we've all felt insecure at some point), and empathy makes it easier to respond with compassion.
- This doesn't mean you can't feel strong emotions in NVC—feelings are a core component of this framework—it just means that you don't allow those strong feelings to stop you from communicating in a compassionate way.

For any communication to be truly nonviolent, it has to come from a place of compassion, not from a desire to make another person do what you want them to do. Paradoxically, when done well, NVC is more likely than arguing or traditional mediation to create a satisfying outcome for everyone. In the following sections, you'll learn how to do that both as a speaker and a listener.

What Is Life-Alienating Communication?

In contrast to Nonviolent Communication, "life-alienating communication" describes any form of communication that blocks our ability to focus on our core humanity and establish real connections. Here are some important types:

- **Moralistic judgments.** These include blame, criticism, and diagnoses, which distract us from relating to others with empathy. These judgments stem from the belief that our values are good, and anyone who doesn't share our values is wrong or bad. Moralistic judgments are different from value judgments, which express our beliefs about the world rather than a specific person or group. For example, "violence is bad" is a value judgment; "violent people are evil" is a moralistic judgment.
- **Comparisons.** When you compare yourself to other people, you're really making a moralistic judgment about whether they are "better" or "worse" than you are.
- **Expressing requests as demands.** For example, a parent asking their child to clean up the kitchen is a demand if the child assumes she'll be punished if she doesn't obey. This is life-alienating because it implicitly threatens blame and punishment if the person refuses. The idea that someone "deserves" reward or punishment stems from our judgment of whether they are "good" or "bad."

Compliments Are Life-Alienating

Surprisingly, compliments are also a form of life-alienating communication in NVC because compliments are really a type of judgment. If someone calls you "brilliant" or "talented," they're making a judgment about who you are as a person.

Expressing Appreciation Authentically

Instead of making positive judgments about someone, tell that person how they have specifically improved your life. This requires three pieces of information:

1. What the person did
2. What need their actions fulfilled
3. What positive emotions that fulfillment created
Imagine you've attended a lecture and want to compliment the speaker afterwards. Instead of saying, “You're so brilliant!”, recognize a specific action, the need that action met, and the positive emotions you feel as a result: “When you talked about ways to resolve a conflict, I felt hopeful because your words showed me a new way to connect with my son.”

Receiving Appreciation Authentically

How can you accept appreciation without squirming away? Reframe how you view your accomplishments. Instead of seeing others’ appreciation as a judgment of your worth, think of yourself as a conduit for goodness in that person's life. That way, you can celebrate the fact that you helped connect someone to the wonderful parts of life without fretting about whether or not you are wonderful as a human being.

For example, instead of focusing on whether you're talented enough to “deserve” someone's compliment on your skill as a musician, focus on the fact that music itself is life-enriching. When someone compliments your skill, they're really thanking you for bringing music into their life.

Empathic Expression

These sections focus in depth on the four steps of expressive NVC: observing, identifying feelings, identifying needs, and making requests.

**Step 1: Observe Without Evaluating**

One fundamental component of NVC is separating observation (“I feel afraid”) from evaluation (“That is scary”) because **evaluative language is a form of moralistic judgment.** This is deceptively difficult because the English language relies on labels and generalizations (for example, “You're always late”), which are inherently judgmental. But like any skill, you can get better with practice.

Being fully objective is difficult and not always possible or even desirable (for example, when you have strong moral objections to someone's behavior). In those situations, it's still possible to use NVC as long as your language separates the observation from the evaluation. Do this by referencing specific behaviors you observed rather than using a convenient label—like “John used two racial slurs in our conversation yesterday” rather than “John is a racist.”

**Step 2: Identify and Express Feelings**

After making an observation (without attaching an evaluation to it), the next step of NVC is to identify and express your feelings. Feelings refer to internal physical and emotional states, not judgments or interpretations of external events. That may sound obvious, but it's easier than many people realize to conflate feelings with thoughts.

As a general rule, **if the words “I think” can replace the words “I feel,” then whatever is being expressed isn't really a feeling.** For example, “I feel I did a good job” isn't expressing a feeling because you can change it to “I think I did a good job” without altering the meaning.

**Take Responsibility for Feelings**

Once you identify what you're feeling, it's important to identify why you're feeling it. When our needs aren't met, we often instinctively place the blame on our circumstances with expressions like “He drives me nuts” or “You disappointed me.” But in reality, it's the way we react to our circumstances that determines how we feel, not the circumstances themselves.

This doesn't mean our feelings aren't justified or that we can simply choose to feel happy instead of miserable. It just means we acknowledge that our feelings stem from our own needs and expectations and not from the actions of others.

One way to express your feelings without blaming others is to stick to a simple “I feel [emotion]” template. Be sure to state your actual emotions, not your thoughts about a situation.

**Step 3: Connect Feelings to Needs**

To give people guidance on how to respond when you express your feelings, you need to connect the feelings to your underlying needs. Hearing the needs underneath your feelings helps other people empathize with you because most human needs are universal.

Every feeling arises from a particular need that is or isn't being met. Identifying the need underlying a certain feeling helps you get clear on what your goals are for this communication, but it's not always easy to identify these needs. For reference, here is a list of universal needs:

- **Autonomy** (the right to choose your own goals and values in life)
- **Celebration** (to celebrate happy life events and to mourn our losses)
Step 4: Make Specific Requests

If you want others to meet your needs, it’s more helpful to request what you do want them to do than what you don’t want them to do. Making negative requests (like “Don’t do that” or “I’d like you to stop interrupting me”) gives the listener very little information about what you’re actually requesting. For example, if you ask someone to stop interrupting you, you probably mean you want them to listen to what you have to say before adding their own thoughts. If they respond by tuning you out and checking their phone while you’re speaking, they’ve technically complied with your request not to interrupt—but neither of you is getting what you really wanted.

Requests should also be specific. For example, if you ask someone for “help,” they’ll respond based on their interpretation of “help,” which may not be what you had in mind.

Avoid making requests that are actually demands. In a true request, there is no coercion or manipulation—the listener is free to say “no” without fear of repercussions.

After making requests, make sure the person understands those requests the way you intended by asking them to reflect back what you’ve said in their own words.

Example: Expressing Concern Using NVC

To put all this together, imagine you’ve just discovered a pack of cigarettes in your teenage daughter’s car. To express your concerns nonviolently, you’d work through the four steps:

1. Observe. “Honey, I saw a pack of cigarettes in your car.”
2. Identify and express feelings. “I’m feeling very worried about you smoking…”
3. Connect feelings to needs. “…because I need to keep you safe.”
4. Make specific requests. “Can we talk together about the health risks of smoking?”

Empathic Listening

Now, you can apply that same approach to listening empathically when others share their observations, feelings, and needs. In a typical conversation, it’s easy to drift into mentally preparing a response or coming up with solutions while the other person is talking. On the other hand, empathic listening involves staying present in the conversation and resisting the temptation to argue, give advice, or try to “fix” the situation.

The NVC Approach to Empathy

Just like in expressive communication, when we use NVC to listen to others, we focus on four things: observations, feelings, needs, and requests. People always express their feelings and needs when they communicate, so try to focus on listening for those...

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Here’s a preview of the rest of Shortform’s Nonviolent Communication summary:

Nonviolent Communication Summary Chapters 1-2, 14: Nonviolent Communication vs. Life-Alienating Communication

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a way of interacting with other people and ourselves with empathy and compassion. The author, Marshall B. Rosenberg, was drawn to the idea of encouraging compassion after witnessing the deadly 1943 Detroit race
riots as a child. He founded the Center for Nonviolent Communication, a nonprofit organization that trains community leaders in NVC.

In the first few chapters of this summary, we'll discuss the philosophy behind Nonviolent Communication and how it differs from "life-alienating communication." In Chapters 3-6, we'll learn how to apply the four steps of NVC: observe, identify and state feelings, identify and state needs, and make requests. Then, in Chapters 7-8, we'll learn how to use NVC as a listener rather than a speaker. Finally, we'll discuss practical applications of NVC, including practicing self-compassion, resolving conflicts, and expressing anger.

**What Is Nonviolent Communication?**

The purpose of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is to foster authentic connections with ourselves and others. These connections have to start with compassion, which NVC naturally creates. You can use NVC in almost any relationship or environment, including in families, schools, governments, businesses, and personal relationships.

NVC is about communicating, but it is also a framework for attention. In communicating, we often fixate on unhelpful things (like judgment and defensiveness), but these behaviors won't get us what we need and want out of the conversation. Nonviolent Communication helps us refocus on what will.

In this context, the words "violent" and "nonviolent" don't just refer to physical conflict. Any communication that causes pain or harm to anyone (including ourselves) is "violent," while any communication that stems from true compassion is "nonviolent." **On a philosophical level, the core idea of NVC is to keep your attention focused on a sense of common humanity when you communicate (instead of getting distracted by strong emotions) because that human connection keeps you grounded in compassion.**

For...

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**Shortform Exercise: Show Appreciation Without Compliments**

The NVC approach to appreciation might feel foreign if you're used to relying on compliments. Let's practice expressing appreciation without those judgments.

Think of the last time someone in your life did something that directly benefited you. For example, maybe your coworker brought you a cup of coffee or your spouse cleaned up the kitchen. What positive labels (like “helpful” or “generous”) come to mind to describe that person?

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**Nonviolent Communication Summary Chapters 3-6: The Four Steps of Expressive Nonviolent Communication**

Now we'll focus in depth on the four steps of expressive Nonviolent Communication: observing, identifying feelings, identifying needs, and making requests.

**Step 1: Observe Without Evaluating**

One fundamental component of NVC is separating observation ("I feel afraid") from evaluation ("That is scary"). The philosopher J. Krishnamurti calls this "the highest form of human intelligence," perhaps because it is so difficult to do. Our brains are natural storytellers, so we often don't even notice when we make evaluations based on what we see, hear, and feel. But evaluative language is a form of moralistic judgment that can easily alienate others by reducing them to a label rather than making a human connection.

Being fully objective is difficult and not always possible or even desirable (for example, when you have strong moral objections
to someone's behavior). In those situations, it's still possible to use NVC as long as your language separates the observation from the evaluation. To do this, reference specific behaviors you observe—like "John used two racial slurs in our conversation yesterday" rather than "John is a racist." Whether or not the label is warranted doesn't matter if the goal is to have a productive conversation about the issue rather than an argument.

To make this idea more concrete, here is a table of examples. The statements on the left have observations and evaluations mixed together, while the statements on the right express the same ideas but keep observations separate from judgments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Communication</th>
<th>Observation and Evaluation, Mixed</th>
<th>Observation and Evaluation, Separate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using the verb &quot;to be&quot; to express opinions as facts</td>
<td>You're too pessimistic.</td>
<td>When I hear you say, &quot;There's no point,&quot; I think you sound too pessimistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressing opinions as facts (without the &quot;to be&quot; verb)</td>
<td>She definitely won't win this...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Shortform Exercise: Identify Feelings and Needs

Identifying feelings and connecting them to needs takes practice. Try it out now by revisiting a past conversation.

Think of the last time you had a disagreement with someone close to you (this could be a partner, child, friend, or coworker). What were you feeling during that disagreement?

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Shortform Exercise: Practice Making Observations, Not Judgments

Making objective observations instead of judgments about people you disagree with is difficult. Practice this skill by starting with positive judgments you've made.

Think of a person or group that you've made a positive moralistic judgment about recently. (For example, "My son is so smart" or "The U.S. women's national soccer team is the best team in history.") Write that judgment below.

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Nonviolent Communication Summary Chapters 7-8: Empathic Listening

The first six chapters of this book focused on expressing your own observations, feelings, and needs honestly. Now, we can apply that same approach to listening empathically when others share their observations, feelings, and needs. "Empathic listening" requires listening on a deeper level than you may be used to by emptying your mind of preconceived ideas and judgments about the other person or the situation.
Empathic listening is different from a typical conversation, where it's easy to drift into mentally preparing a response or coming up with solutions while the other person is talking. We unconsciously focus on thinking and acting rather than truly listening. On the other hand, empathic listening requires resisting the temptation to argue, give advice, or try to “fix” the situation. In other words, “don't just do something, stand there.”

**Barriers to Empathic Listening**

Most of us are never explicitly taught how to listen with empathy. Listening empathically is hard, even with people we love, because modern culture encourages quick fixes and constant striving rather than empathy and stillness. Allowing someone to feel the full extent of their feelings without offering advice or reassurance requires staying present with someone else's pain without flinching.

On the other end of the spectrum, listening empathically to people you have strong disagreements with can be equally difficult. In that case, empathic listening might require you to listen to hurtful words, accusations, or hatred without being provoked into anger and judgment. Maintaining a focus on hearing someone's feelings and needs underneath layers of insults or bigotry might stretch your capacity for empathy to the breaking point—which is exactly when you need it most.

Rather than connect empathically with someone, we often turn to easier options. Here are some common mistakes people make when responding to someone expressing their feelings and needs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactic</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consoling ...</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**Shortform Exercise: Identify Your Empathy Limits**

Sometimes, you may feel so threatened or upset by someone that you're not able to offer genuine empathy. This exercise will help you make a plan for those situations.

Think of a person or group that violates your values so profoundly that you find them impossible to empathize with. When you've interacted with that person or group in the past, what emotions were you feeling?

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**Shortform Exercise: Empathize With “No”**

If you make a request of someone and they refuse, empathizing with their reasoning can stop you from accidentally turning the request into a demand. Try it out below.

Think of the last time you asked someone to do something and they refused (this could be a child, a friend, an employee, or someone else). Why do you think they refused?

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Nonviolent Communication Summary Chapters 9, 13: Showing Compassion for Yourself

Up to this point, we've explored how to use Nonviolent Communication in dialogue with others. You can also use NVC as a way to approach your own self-talk. Many of us tend towards violent communication filled with judgment and criticism when we speak to ourselves, which makes it even more difficult to relate compassionately to others. Our ability to connect to other people stems from our core humanity and the belief that there is some spark of good in everyone; when we lose sight of our own inherent worthiness, we risk extinguishing that spark in ourselves.

Healing those internal wounds is especially difficult because cultural programming actively discourages talking about feelings and needs. The imperialist roots of the English language play a role as well—we use “needy” as an insult and view anyone who says “I need” or “I feel” as selfish or immature. Over time, we internalize those judgments and learn to distance ourselves from our own needs as much as possible.

Self-Criticism Prevents Learning From Mistakes

Making mistakes is part of being human, but many of us chronically punish ourselves for not being perfect. Over time, that critical self-talk can evolve into debilitating shame that prevents us from showing up authentically for others. Shame is an unproductive emotion that blocks our ability to learn and grow from our mistakes.

It’s true that guilt and shame can sometimes motivate us to change our behavior. We may even see it as simply “tough love.” But even when we have good intentions or are trying to respond more compassionately to other people, shame is a selfish motivation—we do good for others to alleviate our own pain, not out of genuine care for their wellbeing.

Creating a more compassionate internal dialogue begins just like interpersonal NVC—by withholding judgment. Self-judgment is easiest to catch when it takes the form of criticism (like “I can’t believe I did that, I’m so stupid!”). The more insidious form of moralistic self-judgment comes in the form of “should”—as in, “I should have known better” or “I really should...”
Shortform Exercise: Rewrite Your Inner Dialogue

It's not always easy to talk back to your inner critic. Luckily, NVC provides an easy formula to turn those judgments into solutions.

Think of the last time you judged yourself harshly. What was your inner critic saying about you?

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Nonviolent Communication Summary Chapter 11: Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts With NVC

NVC is a helpful tool for any type of communication, but it is especially useful for conflict resolution, mediation, and counseling others. In the author's years of experience applying NVC with all kinds of people and all types of conflicts, he found that almost every conflict can eventually be resolved if everyone commits to following NVC principles.

In this context, “conflict resolution” refers to the process of resolving conflicts between yourself and another person; “mediation” refers to helping others resolve a conflict in which you are not involved.

The Importance of Human Connection in NVC

Establishing a human connection between the people involved in a conflict is the most important part of Nonviolent Communication. Without that connection, none of the other steps will be useful because neither party will be motivated to truly understand the other. In fact, creating a genuine human connection is the true goal of NVC—either party getting what they want is a byproduct of that relationship. To successfully resolve a conflict with NVC, everyone involved must understand and agree to that goal.

The emphasis on human connection differentiates the NVC approach from traditional mediation and conflict resolution techniques. In traditional mediation, the mediator's goal is to get everyone to agree to a single solution. Establishing any kind of genuine connection between the people involved is out of their purview—many mediators even see the NVC approach as a form of psychotherapy, not mediation. In reality, the NVC approach to conflict resolution is much more efficient: Instead of offering solutions first and asking for feedback, NVC focuses on what both parties need and creates solutions that will meet those needs in full.

Conflict Resolution

When the people on both sides of a conflict establish a human connection and a sense of mutual respect, they'll understand that their own needs and the other person's needs are equally important. Therefore, the goal of conflict resolution in NVC is not compromise. In a compromise, neither party's...

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Nonviolent Communication Summary Chapters 10, 12: Expressing Anger and Using Force in NVC

Historically, some groups promoting nonviolence have (consciously or unconsciously) used that approach to silence the anger of people experiencing oppression and unfair treatment. The implicit message was that being angry about being mistreated was part of the problem, so members of oppressed groups should just accept discrimination for the sake of keeping the peace. The irony is that demanding someone repress their feelings is an act of violence in itself. Instead, NVC outlines a way to honor the feeling of anger and express it fully—and in a nonviolent way.

Other People Are the Stimulus, Not the Cause

Just like with any feeling in Nonviolent Communication, fully expressing anger starts by taking responsibility for it. To do that, we have to accept that other people are never the true cause of our anger. Causal language (like in the phrase “He made me angry”) implies that someone's behavior directly created your emotion—in reality, what you feel is the result of how you
interpret that behavior.

To illustrate this, imagine you have a friend over for dinner and they accidentally break a glass. If the glass was expensive or had sentimental value, you might be furious; if it was cheap or brought back unpleasant memories, you might not be bothered. Either way, how you feel about the glass determines whether you get angry—not the broken glass itself.

In the logic of NVC, we unconsciously cause our own anger by making judgments about other people and their behavior. In other words, when you feel angry, you're not reacting to someone's behavior—you're reacting to your own unmet needs, and that person's behavior is just the stimulus that provoked the reaction.

This doesn't mean anger is something you choose to turn on or off depending on the situation. The process of turning an external stimulus into a feeling of anger plays out unconsciously, and that anger often disappears the moment you decide to tune into your needs and emotions instead.

For example, if you were unexpectedly fired from your job, you might rage about how your boss...

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