

NVC Non-violent Communication: An Invitation to Understanding

The theme for this edition of the Athens Wellness Directory is water. Ironically, as I sit to write this article on Marshall Rosenberg's, "Nonviolent Communication", I am filled with Presence as I watch the sun setting over our ocean birthplace. Amazing how every year as many times as possible I, among myriads of others, am drawn to the big water. Instantly I feel connected to the majority part of me. I am 90% comprised of water, the elemental home to emotions. Physics make clearer what Spirit tries to tell us. We are a feeling species, speaking in so many ways besides verbally, communicating through the frequencies of our energy; fluid beings with emotions as our language. Important, yet often neglected is this way of speaking.

Many of us have attempted to speak our truths without complete understanding of our emotional flora and fauna. Cultural programming has given us faulty maps or misguided information about why or how to express what we feel. The consequent ramifications have been largely destructive.

Conflict happens over miscommunications in an attempt to decipher and communicate our emotions that we ourselves have not been taught to understand. To exacerbate this, if the communication does not result in a felt understanding from another (which is often the case), the initial feeling goes unrequited. Over and over this cycle can

continue until we feel an overwhelm of negative emotion and possibly alienation from ourselves or others.

Seeing Emotions as Gifts

Fortunately, Rosenberg calls us back with an invitation to understanding, first, our emotions, but as indicators to something greater. He lays out clear steps that ask the question of what we are feeling in response to something in our environment. Eloquently put, he calls our emotions "gifts" as they serve to take care of us by pointing to a greater need that we have. Through this unfolding yet simple process we can discover the beauty of our water, or emotions, as signals to met or unmet needs, thus setting us up to make appropriate requests of ourselves or others. And when we navigate this vitally brilliant language of our souls this way, the result is Divine Connectivity. In fact, Rosenberg cites connection with the Divine, ourselves, and others as the ultimate goal of NVC. Best described it is a way to "let people know what is alive in us, [showing] us how to connect with what is alive in other people". He does this in a practice of a four-step process.

Personally, it is my experience that out of the many attempts that I have made to create peace in my life, NVC continues to bring me closest to fruition. Especially in a time of war at home, in schools, abroad, etc. it is my hope that readers will resonate with the ideas brought forth in this article and seek a fuller understanding of Nonviolent Communication. As for the ocean that lies in front of me now, I see it more clearly than ever as a reminder of how earnestly we search for our greater meaning and the interconnectedness of us all. NVC is a way of doing just that!

Holly Johnson, LCSW

Founder and Therapist for Pathways Counseling, specializing in traditional and alternative practices for healing and spiritual growth. See her listings under counseling and psychotherapy.

4 Steps of Honest Self-Expression

The self-expression process described in the NVC model consists of four steps:


1. To observe without evaluation, judgement, or analysis
2. To look for feelings behind words that are expressed
3. To look for unmet needs, connected to these feelings; evaluating which needs are not (yet) being met instead of evaluating actions in "right" and "wrong"
4. Make a request how another person could enrich life.

Essential in this is that the other person is to be left free to honour or decline the request.

In this recipe, offering an observation serves to give the listener a reference as to the subject. Offering a feeling (uncontaminated by interpretation and blame) tends to increase connection. Offering a need provides connection and meaning. Finally, a request offers clarity as to what the speaker wants.

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Making the Connection with Body-mind Therapy

"The body is merely the visibility of the soul, the psyche; and the soul is the psychological experience of the body. So it is one and the same thing." -C. G. Jung

Re-connecting Body, Mind, & Heart

I cried during my first yoga class. I was reclining in a pose that stretched the top of my thigh; the instructor spoke of how much the quadriceps muscles do for us—they climb stairs, walk on concrete, and power the legs. Mine were doing much more than this since they pounded 20 miles of pavement each week and compulsively lifted weights in the gym, feeding my obsession with exercise and staying thin. My legs revealed all of this to me as I attempted to surrender to the discomfort of the yoga pose. While the instructor spoke of compassion and gratitude for legs and muscles and body, I became painfully aware of how I was at war with my body...how I used exercise to disconnect from myself. This was the beginning of a lifelong journey of reconnecting my body, mind, and heart.

During movement, such as yoga, dance, or martial arts, people often express an experience of "presence," explained by psychologist D. W. Krueger as the connection of the left and right brain hemispheres. Talk therapy is useful for a client to "understand" his/herself, but not always the key for a person to make a deep internal connection between mind and body as well as hemispheres of the brain. Where talk therapy is limited, body-mind therapy offers an alternative to enable a deep internal connection, which can ignite lasting transformation. Body-mind therapy comes in many forms—the Alexander Technique, the Feldenkrais Method, Body-Mind Centering, Hakomi, Psychodrama, Core Energetics, Psychomotor Therapy and Gestalt Therapy to name a few.

Mind-Body Unity

"Our most refined thoughts and best actions, our greatest joys and deepest sorrows use the body as a yardstick. The mind had to be first about the body or it could not have been." -Antonio Damasio (Descartes' Error)

The intellect can be deceiving. We can trick ourselves into thinking that everything is okay when that is not true beyond the surface. But the body never lies. Beliefs, memories, and emotions are stored in the very cells and tissues of the body. As we look to the body's wisdom for healing, we access deeper truths.

The brain and body can work together to accentuate or reduce any state of the body-mind. It is believed that if we focus on changing a cognitive thought pattern, then the state of the body will change. For example, if a person has anxiety, he/she might begin to recognize and restructure thought processes through the common "self talk" technique. Repeatedly changing a message that anxiety is bad to "it's okay; I'm just overstressed. I don't have to get anxious" will eventually shift all the components of the feedback loop.

The body-mind unity suggests that focusing on the bodily sensations with equal integrity as thought can also help a client shift. When we bring awareness to the bodily sensations of anxiety, we allow them to complete their necessary physiological cycle, causing an internal change. According to Susan Aposhyan, Psychotherapist and author of *Body-Mind Psychotherapy*, "The mutual interaction of feedback between brain centers and body systems can begin anywhere." Transformation can begin in the brain or in the body. Using simple physical movement, or breath as a therapeutic tool can actually facilitate significant change in one's state of body-mind.

Body-Mind Therapy

During a session of body-mind therapy, I invite my clients to pay attention to their breath, or how they are feeling, or even to become aware of their posture. As we become mindful of our physical experiences, just as I did during my first yoga class, we can often access deeper issues that are beyond the realm of "talk." This deeper accessing has the ability to offer lasting changes. If I had not been able to connect to the lesson my legs had to teach me, I might still be "running" from my own body, and unaware of the tears that were underneath my obsession.

Body-mind therapy can offer skillful ways for a person to experience integration of body and mind, which can be helpful in managing issues that arise from addiction, anxiety, illness, acute physical pain, depression, family of origin, eating disorders, relationships, and life transitions. Body-mind therapy can be beneficial for anyone who is seeking more balance and inner peace on one's journey.

Anne Ethier

Currently employed by Pathways Counseling, Anne Ethier, MA Psychology is a yoga instructor, dancer, and practitioner who embraces the wisdom of the body. She helps her clients expand their awareness to integrate body and mind. The methods Anne uses are gentle, experiential, often playful, and always revealing. Nothing is imposed.

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Opening to Birth, Opening to Self: A Journey of Transformation

by Anne Ethier

"The basic work of health professionals in general, and of psychotherapists in particular, is to become full human beings and to inspire full human-beingness in other people who feel starved about their lives." --

Chogyam Trungpa, Becoming a Full Human Being

Giving Birth

I have given birth to a lot in my life, including a successful business and a Masters thesis. But recently is the first time that I have given physical birth to my own baby. Little did I know I would also be birthing myself as Mother during labor.

Just before my baby was born, my midwife became an instrument of a life-changing moment for me. She was kneeling in front of me next to the birthing pool that my husband and I were in. I had been in active labor for over 20 hours and I had been awake well over 30 hours. Needless to say I was exhausted and I felt like giving up. I was questioning everything. Fear had taken hold and I had lost my trust in the process and in myself. It was at this time that my midwife looked deep into my eyes with an angelic expression and smiled. She simply said, "We're gonna get this baby out. Just push beyond that point."

She was holding the space of trust when I was unable to. Her belief in me and in the birth process enabled me to pull upon my resources that I didn't know I had and I was able to push "beyond that point" and birth my beautiful baby girl. The gift that she gave me is one I will carry into my new role as mother and will pass on to my daughter—a belief and trust in the process of birth and ultimately life itself. Only seconds before I opened for my baby to be birthed into the gentle water of the birthing pool, I opened to myself as a mother who can trust in life's process. It was a profound moment of birth indeed.

Psychotherapist as midwife - the safety to go deeper. I see my role as psychotherapist very similar to the role my midwife played at my birth. My intention is to help hold compassionate space

with an attitude of curiosity to see what unfolds. My job is to trust in the process for my clients—to trust, as my midwife did, that opening and birthing will happen at just the right time.

I needed so much support and space for my own birthing process while my body and heart discovered how to give birth during each phase of my labor, uncovering layers of fears—learning that it was ok to make primal noise, it was ok to lean into my husband, or ask my midwife for help. All of this built the safety for the next moment of labor—the next opening and dilation for my baby to drop deeper into my pelvis.

As a body-mind therapist, I help build a container for my clients' fears or emotions, or needs so that they too can feel safe enough to "dilate" and open

"There's a part of every living thing that wants to become itself. The tadpole into the frog, the chrysalis into the butterfly, a damaged human being into a whole one. That is spirituality." -Ellen Bass, writer

more deeply into their process. Most of what happens in the therapeutic relationship is building trust and safety.

Like my midwife who trusted more than I knew how so that I could ultimately trust in my own body, I help guide my clients to connect with their own inner wisdom and trust.

The space I offer is about relationship and safety, which takes time and patience. This space is important so that one can open to trust and go deep, opening more to self. What a person gives birth to and how deeply one opens is where the mystery of grace and spirituality flow freely with the therapeutic journey inward.

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