

# Increasing Your Capacity to Feel

Eric Bowers

Two of the most supportive things parents can do for their children are healing their own attachment trauma (thereby further developing their own neural pathways for emotional regulation and secure attachment) and reclaiming disowned parts. The more that parents do these two things, the wider their windows of tolerance will be for big emotions, intense experiences, and difficult situations, and the more they will be able to be present, attuned, and responsive to and differentiated from their children. They will use both hemispheres of their brains more and more effectively and thus support their children to do the same. No communication or relationship model or technique will be effective if parents relate to their children when activated by their own implicit memories. Their unconscious memories need to be integrated in a healthy way—that is, the attachment trauma needs to be healed—for the parents to effectively attune to their children. This is not only true for parents; healing attachment trauma and widening your window of tolerance is very beneficial for all relationships, be they familial, romantic, platonic, or professional.

I teach and practice Nonviolent Communication (NVC) because it has particular communication tools and processes that can support the development of secure or earned secure attachment. However, the NVC tools and processes for *interpersonal* communication are not very effective if they are expressed when your own amygdala has taken over and you are well into fight/flight or freeze. NVC has other tools and processes to use for your inner work of integrating painful implicit memories that become triggered in relationships. When those who use NVC do not first attend to the inner work of integrating their own attachment trauma and painful implicit memories, it will be very difficult for them to hold the NVC intention of connection when communicating with others.

*Window of tolerance* is a term that refers to how much intensity the amygdala can tolerate before sounding the alarm bell. Once you leave your window of tolerance, you leave your regulated state and move into fight/flight or freeze. You also lose your connection to your middle prefrontal cortex. Without a strong connection to your middle prefrontal cortex, you lose the ability to regulate your emotions, to attune with others, and to offer resonant empathy to others. Resonant empathy is a powerful tool for connecting with and helping others, but you are not able give it to others if you need it for yourself and are not able to access it.

What you need when you have left your window of tolerance is someone else's regulated brain and middle prefrontal cortex to lean on. You may also require a pause to self-regulate. When you have shifted into fight/flight or freeze and have lost connection to your middle prefrontal cortex, someone else can help you come back to your window of tolerance by giving you resonant empathy or some other kind of resonant support. This can only happen if they can remain regulated and within their own window of tolerance while helping you.

The practice of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) includes a powerful process for offering empathy to ourselves and to others. When NVC empathy is done well it can be particularly effective at supporting emotional regulation in the right hemisphere of the brain, because it focuses on feelings and needs. It is a simple approach in theory, but sometimes quite difficult in practice. It can be challenging to implement because most of us did not grow up with support for expressing feelings and needs (many of us did not even learn a vocabulary for feelings and needs), nor did we learn how to offer empathy to others. Most of us are familiar

with left-hemisphere processes for helping, such as giving advice, analyzing, and educating. We are also more accustomed to judging, blaming, labelling and other left-hemisphere means of making sense of and responding to conflict.

NVC is a process that teaches you to integrate and regulate difficult experiences. It assists the left hemisphere to make clear observations free of judgments, labels and evaluations. It helps the right hemisphere to regulate feelings and needs. NVC then allows the left hemisphere to solve problems and find strategies to meet all needs. Furthermore, because regulating feelings and needs keeps the middle prefrontal cortex activated, we can empathize with others and maximize connection before problem solving. Solutions that are found after the amygdala is calmed and connection is established are much more likely to be implemented effectively and willingly than solutions that are implemented or imposed without connection.