

Editor's Introduction

Sometimes there are moments when empathy has no effect at all on one another. Why? One reason could be that our brains might be less receptive because of unseen forces that affect our nervous system and relationship with others...

An Invitation to Resonance: The Practice of Nonviolent Communication

With Sarah Peyton

Marshall Rosenberg, writing about Nonviolent Communication famously said, "Every action is an attempt to meet needs." Now, in the age when neuroscience has become accessible enough to help us decode everyday life, we can add, "And the needs behind every action might be in reaction to unseen nervous systems." In other words, the things that people do sometimes have very little to do with us, and much more to do with the other nervous systems that they are carrying within them. This can include externals, like a stressed boss, or internals, like the mother that we have brought inside ourselves from long familiarity (because our brains model themselves on the brains we are closest to.)

So, when a parent is very stern and unforgiving with a child, the parent may actually not have needs in relationship to the child, instead, the parent may be longing for the strategy of gaining their own internalized mother's or father's respect through their rigidity.

Or a partner who is jealous and wants the strategy of utter control over their spouse is not actually in relationship with the spouse, but is rather in relationship with something far more ancient: their original attachment with a parent.

These two examples are more extreme than our usual experiences of relationships, but begin to point toward what makes a daily practice of NVC confusing: those moments when empathy doesn't have an effect at all.

This is one of the reasons that self-responsibility and self-empathy processes can be so indispensable in our practice: no one else can tell us that we are in relationship with the past. We will only discover this for ourselves if we pay attention to what happens when we make needs guesses for ourselves, and when we stay honest with ourselves.

Here is a radical proposal: if we are grownups, free and physically unharmed, and we ever believe that another person is at fault for how we feel (or that we are defective in some way), it is very likely that we are in relationship with an absent nervous system.

It is easier to trace the trail of our own and others' nervous systems when we have a working understanding of the way our bodies absolutely respond to questions of safety and belonging. When we know we are safe and that we matter, we are at our best. Our bodies are relaxed, our systems run on oxygen, and our immune systems are optimized to protect us from disease and viruses.

Under stress, everything changes. We start to run on adrenaline and cortisol. The way we use our brain changes, too. We have a tendency to blame others or ourselves, compare, criticize, find fault, and once we feel hopeless or ashamed, we give up. This means that whenever we are stressed, we aren't thinking clearly.

Here is another radical proposal: if simple empathy doesn't bring us back to the sense that we matter and belong, then our thinking is compromised, and something else is at play. Could it be someone's invisible nervous system that we are carrying with us, and that is not letting us be free to experience relief?

As we understand this perpetual pressure, we can begin to ask ourselves, "If this is not my stress, not my judgment, not my rigidity, not my depression, but that of someone who has been important to me, whose is it?" This question may allow us to start a new kind of self-empathy practice, one that widens out to make guesses for the pain of past generations, and brings a new kind of freedom and ease with it.