

## THE RELATIONSHIP REVOLUTION

“Healthy Relationships 101 provides a rare glimpse of the potential that lies within all of us to have healthy and fulfilling relationships with everyone. It couldn’t be more timely.”

— **Deepak Chopra**, Author, Lecturer

“Healthy Relationships 101 embodies an extraordinarily effective approach to maintaining thriving and fulfilling relationships. It helps develop our critical thinking in order to have more understanding, respect and empathy.”

— **Stephan Rechtschaffen, M.D.**, Co - Founder of *The Omega Institute*

“Of all the subjects in the curricula of educational institutions from kindergarten through graduate schools, social institutions from religious communities, as well as corporations, relationship education is the missing component, yet universally valued. This book not only addresses this fact but has done something about it by teaching this subject in schools and organizations. Hopefully, essential relationship skills will be common knowledge as a result of this work.”

— **Harville Hendrix, Ph.D** and **Helen Lakelly, Ph.D**, Authors

If you want to become good at a sport, an instrument, or a language, what do you do? Practice! In this book, you will discover an effective way to practice and cultivate essential relationship skills, such as listening empathically and expressing needs and feelings without blame and judgment. These are practices that sustain healthy, thriving, fulfilling, and meaningful relationships that can flourish with everyone in your life.

Michael Jaszcz is the Executive Director of The Relationship Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit on the forefront of Social and Emotional Learning that introduces their curriculum, Healthy Relationships 101 in classes, teacher trainings, and parent workshops in schools in New York City and nationally.

The Relationship Foundation is on the forefront of an emerging national movement, the Trauma-Informed School approach. This groundbreaking initiative replaces the traditional punitive response with care, compassion and understanding.

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HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS 101



# HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS 101

Relationships Don't Have to be So Difficult

MICHAEL JASZCZ

“Given that we’ve discovered how to send a man to the moon but haven’t figured out how to get along any better than we do among ourselves, nothing is more important in these times than that we learn how to form and maintain quality relationships. *Healthy Relationships 101* provides tools that all of us need in order to bond in meaningful and healthy ways with others. Especially for our young people, this is truly a much-needed gift.”

— **Marianne Williamson**, Presidential Candidate

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Relationships Don't Have to be So Difficult

**M I C H A E L J A S C Z**

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## DEDICATION

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To my parents, Shirley and Benjamin,  
who did the best they could with what  
they learned about parenting from  
Grandma and Grandpa, who were born  
when the light bulb was relatively new.

Wherever you may be, I send my  
love, gratitude, and respect.

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## PREFACE

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This book is about the state of relationships in our society and how greater awareness and effective communication can be achieved in any relationship. It's based on my experience coaching couples and teaching relationship education in New York City high schools, which I've been doing since 2007. It also includes a bit about my journey to find my sense of purpose; something I always yearned for but that somehow eluded me.

Let me begin with my story, and then I'll bring you into the classrooms of New York City, where you'll see that young people, as well as the adults who care for them, are ready to embrace the kind of change our society needs.

I was born in the middle of what was known as "The Great Appalachian Storm." This storm was a large, extratropical cyclone that tore through the eastern United States, causing significant winds, heavy rains, and blizzard conditions. In all, the storm created what today would be an estimated \$670 million in damage. Maybe the weather foretold the blizzard of the uncertainty and confusion in which I was to live for much of my life.

Growing up in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, at the height of the Baby Boom was a unique experience. Unlike many people who have fond memories of their childhood, I pretty much grew up in a fog. I lived in a semidetached house with my parents and my younger sister. My mother used to remind me that, even in nursery school, I was described as incorrigible. Why was I "incorrigible?" I can recall being very restless, but at a young age, you do not have the vocabulary to identify such a state. I doubt my need for bonding and nurturing in my early childhood was

fulfilled. What I do know is that I didn't enjoy the consequences of my behavior and the punishment that came with it.

When my sister came along, the limited attention I was getting previously was now focused on her. Naturally, she became the enemy. I didn't consciously think this, but I knew I was in competition with her for my parents' affection. My strategy for dealing with this pain was to torture her and try to eliminate her from the game of love. Of course, there was no game. There was just pain; the pain of yearning to be seen, to be held, to be loved.

My sister and I have never been close. I picked on her and pushed her away when my friends came to visit. Even though we became friendly during our college years, I still believe my earlier behavior left a scar on her psyche. After she graduated, the friendship faded, and our interaction mostly centered on dealing with our mother. She had become a widow when I was nineteen and my sister was sixteen.

My mother had lost her life partner long before she expected him to depart. This loss left her emotionally raw, perhaps even unstable. Her mourning, especially her moaning at night, often kept my sister awake, and my sister is someone who doesn't like to have her sleep interrupted. I had no way of knowing that my sister had a need for empathy. In fact, empathy wasn't even in my vocabulary.

The time after our father passed away was a very stressful period for my sister, but she managed to get through it and graduate from high school with honors. During her last two years at home, I had no idea what she was going through. I think some bitterness may have developed because I was away at school, and I didn't have to put up with the stress she was encountering while living with our grieving mother.

My sister graduated from college, and she went on to become a social worker, working with the blind in Chicago. Later, she

worked with people with Down syndrome. As Chicago was a little too chilly for her, she moved to “where the heat is on”: Tucson, Arizona. There she continued to be of service to others, this time as a registered nurse in a psychiatric ward in the veterans’ hospital. Her vocational path has been one of service.

Things got worse between my sister and I when we moved our mother into a Tucson retirement home. In brief, Mom’s mental health rapidly declined. She had to be moved from one facility to another, and all of this fell on my sister’s shoulders. Once again, she had to deal with our mother alone, and I was about as far away as one can be—New York City. A few years after she arrived in Tucson, my mother passed away, and since then my sister and I have gradually begun to support each other more, which I attribute to the skill-set you will read about in Chapter 4.

Unlike my sister, it took me more time to find my direction and purpose in life. I always wanted to make a contribution to others, but wasn’t sure how to go about it. After college, I thought I should find a way to be self-sufficient in terms of simple survival skills, so instead of looking for a job with my degree, I became a carpenter’s apprentice. After learning how to build, I then worked in refrigeration and air conditioning and learned a bit about plumbing. Then, I worked in film production for eight years. I didn’t have a vision for a film I wanted to make, so I moved on once again. In the mid-’90s, toward the end of my film career, I wound up working in film production on the island of Maui in Hawaii, but work was scarce, so I ended up exploring the island for a few months. I made several overnight trips to the inside of the crater of the volcano Haleakala. There, I got the notion to go to Bali, and away I went on my next adventure. While in Bali, I wound up in some remote villages, where I discovered local artists hand-painting sarongs so beautiful that I had to bring some back to New York. I put them out at a street fair, and the response was so enthusiastic that I decided to start

importing them and did that for several more years. I got value out of carpentry, film production, and building an importing company from scratch, but still it seemed as though I hadn’t found my calling.

Then, in 2001, I started looking into the work of authors who were writing and speaking about relationships. As I was moved by the possibility of how relationships could be more satisfying than I’d known them to be, I knew I had found my passion. It was to help others with their relationships.

For the next six years, I studied and worked as a relationship coach, and in 2007 I was invited to speak about relationship dynamics at a New York City high school. The presentation went so well that I was asked to teach Relationship Ed as a component of health ed in that school. In the chapters to follow, I explain how what I began at one school has continued at dozens of other schools, and developed into a program called *Healthy Relationships 101*. This program introduces relationship skills and practices that are being enthusiastically delivered to New York City high schools to both children and adults.

Over the years, I’ve seen the possibility that any relationship has the potential to grow stronger and more satisfying. I’m driven by the desire to contribute to the well-being of others, and now, I’m able to do so every day. I’m grateful to have this opportunity. Join me on this journey and, in the chapters to follow, see how relationships of every kind can prosper and thrive in ways you may have never imagined.

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## INTRODUCTION

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Are there certain issues that have kept you from having the kind of relationships you most desire? This book addresses key issues that hinder care, consideration, and compassion in any relationship. We'll look at self-awareness and the way we communicate, both of which play crucial roles in shaping how we connect with others.

Self-awareness is a major factor in building healthy relationships, as it helps you identify behavior patterns that either enhance or obstruct your interactions with others. The combination of self-awareness and practicing communication skills will help bring greater satisfaction and meaning to all your relationships. Among other things, The Relationship Foundation's fundamental approach helps to develop

- Critical Thinking
- Empathic Listening
- Effective and Respectful Communication

The intention of this book is to provide you, the reader, with tools that will help you cultivate and strengthen all your relationships. I will provide information about relationships drawn from personal insights working with adults in my coaching practice, as well as with high school students and teachers through our Healthy Relationships 101 classes and workshops.

Before each chapter, you'll see journal entries written by New York City high school students who participated in our Healthy Relationships 101 program. Students had an assignment to keep a journal—not an “Oh my god, nobody can look at my journal” type of journal, but rather an investigative assignment on how they perceive relationships in their lives and in their culture. In one

school, an English teacher saw the excitement students had when writing about relationships, so she excused her SAT literacy prep students to attend the Healthy Relationships 101 sessions. Clearly, this was a subject that inspired students, some of whom were normally resistant, to work on their writing skills. Let's face it—many students are more interested in writing about relationships than the War of 1812.

In some of the journal entries, students reported what they observed going on in their culture, while in other entries, they reported insights they had gained into their own lives. As we explored relationship dynamics, their understanding of the world around them began to evolve. This assignment gave them an opportunity to examine and understand their needs and feelings and reflect on the many factors that influence one's perception of any relationship.

We include journal entries that pertain to each chapter as they were originally written, but without the students' names. No matter what your age, I believe you'll find that some of these entries will remind you of the kinds of thoughts and feelings you wish you could have articulated when you were growing up, as well as in the years that followed. In the world of relationships today, the more we use our critical thinking, the better we can navigate the challenges in our lives.

These entries illustrate the impact of the communication skill set we teach in Healthy Relationships 101, which we also introduce when working with teachers and parents. I have a great passion for translating this work into an easy-to-understand approach that I believe will inspire you to review and refine your outlook on all your relationships.

If you seek to deepen your most valued relationships, be they with a significant other, family, friends, or colleagues, this book will support you in understanding and enhancing these connections with greater ease and harmony and offer a fresh outlook on

the world of relationships in which we all live.

Every relationship needs nurturing. This book is for parents to have better relationships with their children; it's for educators to have better relationships with their students; it's to create more harmony at work; it's for anyone in a significant other relationship and for anyone who wants to be in one. It's never too late to have more certainty and clarity in the world of relationships. Relationships don't have to be so difficult. Really, they don't.



## Entry #9

A song that I wrote, "Drift Slowly" has a lot of emotion ~~the~~ in it. Between the flow of the music and lyrics my story is told. While I wrote this song, I was thinking about how I may have hurt people who are close to me. So I want to let them know the truth within me.

Lyrics: The water from my eyes, ~~the~~ it was never meant to drown you. The fire in my soul, it was never meant to burn you. The dagger in my tongue, never meant to strike, and when I push you away, I'm asking you to hold on tighter everyday.

"A song that I wrote, 'Drift Slowly,' has a lot of emotion in it. Between the flow of the music and lyrics my story is told. While I wrote this song, I was thinking about how I may have hurt people who are close to me. So I want to let them know the truth within me.

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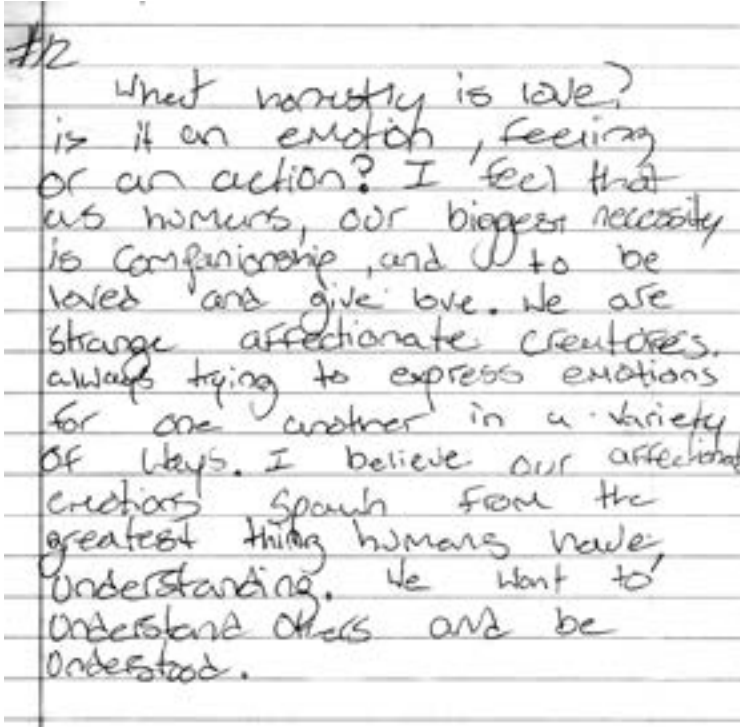
— eleventh grade female student

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## CHAPTER 1

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### Every Relationship Counts



#12  
What honestly is love?  
is it an emotion, feeling  
or an action? I feel that  
as humans, our biggest necessity  
is companionship, and to be  
loved and give love. We are  
strange affectionate creatures,  
always trying to express emotions  
for one another in a variety  
of ways. I believe our affectionate  
creatures spawn from the  
greatest thing humans have:  
understanding. We want to  
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“What honestly is love? Is it an emotion, feeling or an action? I feel that as humans, our biggest necessity is companionship, and to be loved and to give love. We are strange affectionate creatures, always trying to express emotions for one another in a variety of ways. I believe our affectionate emotions spawn from the greatest thing humans have, understanding. We want to understand others and be understood.”

– eleventh grade male student

I used to think I could figure people out relatively well and quickly. After just a few sentences, or even a look, I was able to place people in a box called “My Judgments,” and there they would sit without further consideration. When I began studying relationship dynamics in 2001, it struck me that this outlook was somewhat hollow and that this way of thinking was no longer serving me or the people I was judging. My attitude toward others was broken in every sense of the word, and I realized the urgent need to transform the way I related to everyone in my life. Since then, my perception of relationships has become a constantly evolving process.

Some time ago I read an article in a magazine titled “Born to Cheat.” It was about a woman who was worried she might have inherited the “cheating gene” from her father, who throughout her childhood was known to be unfaithful to her mother. Replicating what she had seen growing up, she often had a boyfriend waiting in the wings. She was no stranger to cheating. Sometimes we unconsciously pick up behaviors from our parents or caretakers and don’t realize it until well into adulthood.

Eventually, this woman met someone with whom she fell in love, and they got engaged. Just before their wedding, she was sent on a writing assignment in Europe where she had a local male assistant. She thought about cheating one last time, but decided against it. She then had an epiphany about her father.

She remembered he had grown up dirt-poor in an orphanage, yet she knew “he was a great deal more than his infideli-

ties.” She goes on to say that he was generous and charming, and he also was an inventor. He invented a processing system that modernized the photography industry. Taking her father’s childhood situation into consideration, she came to an understanding as to why he had cheated:

**“There wasn’t enough love in the world to make up for what he’d missed as a child.”**

In light of this realization, the woman was able to more clearly understand her father’s behavior, and a feeling of compassion for him emerged.

As I read this quote, I am reminded of my own childhood and my father who was a workaholic. He didn’t cheat on my mother, but, in a way, his work was his mistress. I longed for his love. I longed for his attention, but it was fleeting at best. He was generous, good-natured, and a great deal more than his workaholic lifestyle, but he was mostly an absentee father. Reading this woman’s story, it was as though I’d finally met someone whose experience with her father was painfully similar to mine and, at the same time, uniquely different.

I felt a deep longing as I realized that my childhood experience was also one in which there wasn’t enough love. It made me think about how lonely I was growing up, and I wept. I needed a father figure. I needed a mentor. I needed a role model and I needed a friend. The phrase “There wasn’t enough love in the world to make up for what he’d missed as a child” shined a bright light on my painful past. Could my story be one you’ve heard before?

I further came to the realization that I lacked attention from my mother as a child. As the youngest of five children growing up during the Great Depression, I can imagine she lacked in her need for nurturing, too. As all of this became clear to me, I felt a great deal of sadness.

Seeing the pain of my own upbringing, I realized that throughout much of my life I’d been looking for someone to make up

for the love I never had. With this insight, I could now better recognize the role I played in sabotaging some promising relationships. I believe the troubled subconscious voice in the back of my head was often saying, “You can’t trust love. You better get out of this before you get hurt, just like when you were a kid.” Not being able to trust love caused so much of the pain I have felt in my life.

In an effort to heal the pain of my past, I began to intensely study relationship dynamics in 2001. I didn’t want to live the rest of my life without trusting love. In this process, I’ve found my calling, which has involved building a coaching practice and a school program called Healthy Relationships 101.

I happened to come across the “Born to Cheat” article while teaching the Healthy Relationships program at the High School for Health Professions and Human Services in Lower Manhattan. After reading about the woman’s father for whom “there wasn’t enough love in the world to make up for what he’d missed as a child,” I decided to bring this subject up with my students. The following day, I opened the class by sharing the details of the article with them, especially the notion of not trusting love.

I asked the students if any of them knew someone who didn’t trust love. Every student’s hand went up, and so did mine. Now the notion of trusting love and *not* trusting love was out in the open. I then asked the class, “How many of you don’t trust love?” I raised my hand. Once more, all of the students raised theirs. From there, we set out to investigate our past and move into the promise of our present and future, uncovering the potential of love and trust. It was at that moment, that I clearly saw that relationship education was the missing component in our learning process and how the *Healthy Relationships 101* curriculum could benefit and strengthen any relationship.

This book is about healthy relationships, not just for high school and college students, but for people of all ages. I’ve drawn on a variety of subjects and principles that have proven to en-

hance character development of teenagers in New York City high schools, as well as with my adult coaching clients. I often have described this work as everything I wish I'd learned when I was in school.

The material in this book presents an opportunity for you to experience a fundamental shift in your state of consciousness. You will learn how to communicate in a different, more effective way. Putting these principles into practice can change your patterns of thinking, shaping your consciousness into a more empathic, more accepting, and more respectful way of relating. The time has come to raise a pressing question—a question that is vital, not only for the well-being of children, but for adults as well:

**We spend at least 12 years in school preparing for a career. How much time do we spend preparing for a relationship? Any relationship?**

This issue is one that must be addressed regarding the learning process in our education system and beyond. Many adult relationships are deeply troubled, as I've learned from firsthand experience as a relationship coach. Preventative measures, like relationship education, can stop the cycle of miscommunication and misunderstanding. This work is useful not only for educators, but also for couples, friends, families, co-workers, and really, in any situation with anyone, anywhere.

In 2010, I founded a nonprofit called The Relationship Foundation (TRF). Our instructors teach *Healthy Relationships 101*, a relationship education curriculum, mostly in high schools in New York City. The Healthy Relationships 101 program is one of the first, if not the first, programs of its kind to be presented in a high school setting. Several Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs have been given to Kindergarten to eighth grade students, but we were the first to work almost exclusively

with high school and, on occasion, college students.

In my day-to-day life, when I mention my work, people often respond with, “Where were you when I was growing up?!” or, “Kids really need this.” I agree and generally add, “Adults need this, too.” Given the current emphasis on improving test scores in the United States, it has been no easy task to get into the dozens of schools we have worked with so far. However, we remain committed not only to bringing our work to more schools but to creating a movement that will revolutionize how we learn to communicate with others.

This book holds all the best practices The Relationship Foundation has developed through our work in high schools. We hope this book will inspire you to join the many others who believe in the importance of SEL not only for students, but for people of all ages and relationships of every kind.

This question drives me to persevere in bringing this initiative into school systems nationwide:

**What would my life have been like if I had relationship education when I was in school?**

In most schools, there are few opportunities for all students to talk about, write about, or explore relationship issues. School counselors, psychologists, and social workers are simply not able to work with every student in their schools, as there often are but one or two of them for hundreds of students. In some schools, there are a thousand students or more. It's hard to imagine what kids are going through as they cope with the epidemics of bullying, drug abuse, addiction, an endless stream of questionable media messages, and physical, mental, and emotional abuse, not to mention what has become for some an addiction to social media and technology.

My sense of purpose motivates me to do all I can to share information about how we can better understand and value

relationships through caring and conscious communication. All of my studying and training with authors, teachers, and therapists in the relationship field has inspired me to introduce this work into classrooms and at teacher trainings.

The two bodies of work that have most influenced my understanding of relationships are *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D, and *Getting the Love You Want* by Harville Hendrix, Ph.D. I have had the privilege of experiencing firsthand how Hendrix works with couples to show them how to talk with each other with an extraordinarily simple, yet effective process, one that moves them to a more thriving and fulfilling relationship. His work has greatly inspired my couples coaching practice.

These authors have become my mentors and role models, and I refer to their teachings throughout this book. I have seen evidence of their effectiveness of their work and I believe that what you'll read in the following chapters will help all of your relationships to be more satisfying and fulfilling. With this book, I hope to make the information about healthy relationships understandable and more accessible to everyone, everywhere.

Marshall Rosenberg put it this way: "The enormity of suffering on our planet requires more effective ways of distributing much-needed communication skills." The term "nonviolent" is one that has many of us declaring that we are not violent. We associate violence with wars, beatings, and killings, but what about the hurt that's inflicted by the words we say? Wars are violent, but most wars start with violent communication. Fights don't erupt out of nowhere. It is often the things we say to each other that cause conflict. Rosenberg's work, *Nonviolent Communication*, has proven to be one of the most effective approaches to creating ease and harmony in any relationship.

Have you ever been hurt, frustrated, angered, or worried by something someone has done or said to you or about you? Has anyone ever been on the other side of your words that hurt, frus-

trated, angered, or worried them? If your answer is yes and you are ready to make a change, then the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) work may open your eyes to some new possibilities. This communication skill set has become the cornerstone of TRF's work in high schools and has also had a powerful effect on couples with whom I work. One of the first steps of NVC is to practice articulating your needs and feelings without blame or judgment—a much-needed skill for individuals of all ages. Speakers often say, "Learn to stop judging," as though it's as easy as snapping your fingers. It's like being told to bake a cake without a recipe. Within this book, you'll find a recipe with instructions to help you get off the judgment treadmill. Maybe you won't completely get off it, but you'll find that you're judging and blaming less and less frequently, and life will become easier.

If someone asks you if you're in a relationship, what is your response? One would expect to hear either "yes" or "no," but quite often, I hear people who are involved with someone say, "I'm not sure; it's complicated. I'm trying to figure it out." Why does the question "Are you in a relationship?" almost always suggest having one with a significant other? Perhaps it's because we're social creatures, and there's a tremendous emphasis on finding the ideal partner—our "soul mate." We want someone to be there for us, and we also want to be there for someone else. We're driven by this urge, this desire, this pursuit of connection and a sense of unity with another person with whom we can establish a lasting bond. It's been said that "to be known" is one of the deepest longings of the human experience.

Many single people put pressure on themselves to find "the one" and, in the process, building meaningful relationships with friends, family, and coworkers can fall by the wayside. We might not feel so lonely if we consider the importance of a close circle of friends. Any friendship can play a part in fulfilling the need for closeness, love, support, and intimacy.

Given how much relationship struggle we see, not only with

couples, but also in the workplace, with friends, and with families, it's important to acknowledge the urgency of learning how to establish healthy relationships.

My experience teaching in New York City high schools, as well as working with couples, has shown me that relationships don't have to be so difficult. If high school students can transform their relationships, there's hope for us all.

Join me for a closer look at how SEL is the next step in creating more harmony, clarity, and connection with everyone in our lives.

Let's explore *Healthy Relationships 101*. In this book, we will cover the following topics—and much more:

- A groundbreaking communication skill set (*NVC*)
- Empathy and the art of listening
- How our childhood affects us in the present
- Understanding and healing childhood trauma
- Bullying prevention for people of all ages
- The influence of the media
- Self-esteem and body image
- Preventing cycles of abuse
- The effect of cell phones, the Internet, and social media on relationships

Studying these subjects has already produced extraordinary results in the classroom. It's helped students develop their critical thinking skills and a much greater sense of self-awareness and sensitivity. The same has occurred with couples in my coaching practice, helping them broaden their outlook on what it means to be in a relationship. For example, with couples, especially if they have children, I often remind them that children are like sponges, and “your relationship is bigger than the two of you.”

TRF teaches a communication skill set that shows high school students how to express their needs and feelings without blaming others. This piece had the greatest impact in the schools, colleges,

and organizations we've gone into. While we consider many other subjects important for developing healthy relationships, good communication is widely recognized as the most essential element in human interaction—but what exactly is “good” communication? What's “good” for one person might not be “good” for another; thus, we say “effective” communication is where the greatest connection can be achieved.

Teachers and parents struggle to answer the question: why are some children disruptive, uncooperative, disrespectful, and even destructive? We've found that many of these behaviors stem from what is known as Adverse Childhood Experiences. Also known as the ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences—which we detail in Chapter 6—can cause toxic stress and disrupt brain chemistry. A young person with multiple ACEs can't effectively learn while dealing with these challenges.

Regardless of your age, this book contains tools and information to help you navigate the high-speed changes of today's society and culture. I sincerely hope that whatever age you may be—and when does anyone stop learning?—you'll be inspired by what we cover in this book.

Read the chapters in this book in sequence, or skip around and see what resonates with you. Each chapter stands on its own and can be connected to the rest of the book. Either way, I'd ask you to consider two things as you read. First, how do you think this information would make a difference in the lives of students everywhere? Second, how might it make a difference in *your* life?

In writing this book, it's my great hope that there will be something in these pages that will inspire or help you to have more fulfilling relationships with everyone in your life.

I believe it's an essential part of the human experience to have relationships that are thriving and fulfilling. If you think you could use some guidance and support to achieve this success, then what this book holds may resonate with you.

An effective communication skill set that cultivates and sustains healthy relationships is the missing component in our

learning process. No matter what your age, *Healthy Relationships 101* has universal appeal. In the words of one Harlem school teacher, “This work has the potential to be life-changing, and it definitely changed my life.” I hope you have the same experience as you read this book.

## CHAPTER 2

## Relationship Education

THE MISSING COMPONENT IN OUR  
LEARNING PROCESS

While on the train the other day, I was standing next to an older guy and the train was crowded. The man then began to clean his ears out with his finger. The train jolted and he touched my hand with his dirty hand. Normally, I would have reacted and said something to the man but instead I took a deep breath and said nothing.

I ran home and washed my hands and realized that the man ~~was~~ had a need for safety. He didn't want to fall down. This doesn't mean I am okay with what happened; he still shouldn't have been cleaning his ears on the train, but I do understand that his intention was not to gross me out.

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How did Healthy Relationships 101 wind up in New York City high schools? In 2007, I was working with a client who was an administrator at a highly regarded public high school. I'd been doing relationship coaching with him for about a year after his marriage had dissolved. I'll spare you the details of the bitterness that he and so many others feel in the aftermath of an unsatisfying relationship. As we worked together, however, he slowly began to consider being in a relationship once again. Amazed at the change in his own outlook, he asked if I would speak to a group of 11th grade boys at his high school. I agreed without hesitation; I couldn't imagine saying no. Then I thought, “What am I going to say?!”

Despite my apprehension, in December 2007, I found myself standing in front of a classroom of fifteen- and sixteen-year-old male students; there were about twenty-five students in the room. The administrator who invited me was sitting in the back as an observer. I started to speak with them about relationship dynamics. After a few minutes, I could see they weren't paying close attention, and it seemed as if I were losing them from the outset.

I'm not quite sure what went through my mind at that moment, but I found myself abruptly standing up and, like a drill sergeant, barking out, “Now listen up!” Suddenly, there was silence in the room. I continued, “I'm going to tell you about how



relationships work—what they are, who you are, how to communicate effectively in any relationship. And if you think what you’ve seen growing up in our society is normal, it’s not.” Speaking this way was blunt and quite out of character for me, but, when the class was over, the boys filed out slowly. Some shook my hand, while others nodded a silent thank you.

It seemed as though the presentation had gone well, but I was left to wonder if anything I said had gotten through. Apparently, it had. That same day, the administrator who was observing the class sent an email to the principal saying

**“I haven’t seen a group of boys transformed inside of 42 minutes in my 10 years at this school.”**

He then suggested to the principal that I teach Relationship Education at the school as a component of health education. He asked me if I wanted to continue working with the school, and I said yes. I couldn’t say no to helping high school kids have better relationships. I knew I had to do this, and I trusted that I would figure out how once I got started.

In March 2008, I was given an appointment to meet with the school’s principal. When I arrived for the meeting, the administrator took me aside, and said, “The principal’s schedule is overwhelming. She might give you five minutes.” I said five minutes would do. I met with her, and five minutes turned into an hour. She took me to lunch, and after sharing some thoughts about her marriage, she looked at me and said, “My teachers need this.” Here was a high school principal suggesting this program was not only for teenagers, but for adults as well. I realized that my years of relationship coaching had given me insights into relationships of all kinds—and that I had a valuable service to offer.

It took two more months for me to be scheduled to teach—this time, with a group of sophomore boys and girls. I gave sever-

al more classes during the last two weeks of school, and Healthy Relationships 101 was born. This territory was new for me.

It seemed like I was flying by the seat of my pants, but I could see in the students’ eyes, hear in their voices, and see in their writing that this subject meant a great deal to them. As I read through the students’ evaluations of my classes, it was clear to me that this school was just the beginning.

When fall came, I went back to the same school to work with the entire sophomore class. There was one catch: the school didn’t have a line in its budget for Relationship Education. Nonetheless, there was no doubt in my mind that I’d teach. I could see that more young minds were being transformed each time I went into a classroom, so I decided to move ahead for the time being on a volunteer basis.

I was driven by the thought: how might my own life have been different if I’d had Relationship Education when I was in school?

Word spread once I came back to the school, and teachers came looking for me to teach Relationship Ed in their health education classes. After many heartfelt conversations with teachers, I realized that they not only saw an opportunity to bring a new subject into the classroom, but they also were looking for more clarity in their own relationships, both professional and personal. I’m thankful for the input and guidance I received from numerous teachers with whom I worked who recognized the importance of bringing Relationship Ed into the classroom. I am also grateful for the opportunity to have personally coached several of the teachers who recognized the value of the material for their own relationships as well.

I finished an entire year in that school on a volunteer basis, and even with the results of the program, the administration couldn’t find the funds to have me further develop this program in their school. My savings were dwindling. So, in the summer of 2009, I worked with a group of volunteers to organize all of my lessons into a curriculum and began reaching out to other schools in the

city, hoping to find a school or schools that would pay for the program. After what I'd experienced in the first school, I thought surely other high schools in the city would welcome this project with open arms and put a line in their budget for us. Throughout the fall, TRF kept contacting more schools and continued fine-tuning the curriculum. I was about to discover that, while character development was important to educators, it was not a subject that took priority, at least where their budgets were concerned.

Having no takers the first few months of the 2009–10 school year, I became discouraged, as it seemed that no school was interested in paying for this program. Then, in an interesting twist of fate, one of the volunteers, Meghan, made a connection that would propel the initiative forward in an unexpected way. As she was waiting for the bus on a snowy December day in 2009, she struck up a conversation with another woman waiting for the same bus. It turned out this woman, Becky Kuhn, was teaching an English class about love and romance in classical literature at a high school a few blocks away from our office. Meghan told me that Becky was interested in learning about our program and thought it might be a good fit for her class.

A few weeks later, I met with Becky to explain the program in detail. We had immediate rapport and for several hours discussed the different aspects of the Healthy Relationships 101 program. At the end of our conversation, she said, “I definitely want to bring you into the classroom, but there’s just one thing...” You guessed it: there was no funding available.

Since my goal was to get the program into more schools to establish our reputation, I agreed to come in for two weeks to teach with her and set up lesson plans that she could use for the rest of the semester. As I worked with Becky, *Healthy Relationships 101* began emerging as a curriculum. During those first two weeks, we saw such a dramatic shift in the students’ behavior that I

agreed to come in for one more week. During that week, the students’ response to the work was so enthusiastic that I decided to stay for six more weeks. Continuing to teach the subject was an opportunity to further develop the work, as well as a chance to collaborate with Becky, a certified public school teacher.

As the weeks went on, we reached out several times to the school principal to share and discuss our progress. When we finally met with him, we gave him samples of the essays the students had written about relationship issues. As he read one of the compositions, he said, “This is really remarkable; I want you to meet all of my APs [assistant principals].” He had his office assistant arrange for a meeting to take place after spring break. We left the office with optimism and hope that the program would expand and my work would finally receive funding. We eagerly awaited the end of spring break.

After teaching for nearly ten weeks, the day for our meeting with the assistant principals finally arrived. The APs were so excited about the work they actually started to argue about which class it should be incorporated into. The AP of English wanted it in her classes, the AP of health wanted it in hers, and they all thought it should be in ninth grade advisory. I wanted to stay at the school and finish the semester with Becky, but the AP of finance said, “I just spent our last dollar this morning.” There would be no funding for my work after all. Should I stay or should I go? I decided to stay and finish the semester with Becky and our students. We were teaching together in two classes, both of which had thirty students.

We collected samples of students’ writing from the journaling assignments we gave them, in which they recorded their perceptions of relationships and how they saw relationships portrayed in the media. Many of the journal entries you will see throughout the book were written in this class. As you read the innate wisdom of these young adults, I think you will understand why I was compelled to continue collaborating.

I taught with Becky for a total of five months, and we saw remarkable changes in the self-expression and the ability of some of our most troubled students to communicate with greater critical thinking, empathy, and respect. When the school year was over, Becky had been fully immersed in the program and was eager to join the board of advisors of The Relationship Foundation. As I moved on to work with other schools, Becky continued sharing what we had developed, teaching at several other New York City schools.

During the semester at the High School for Health Professions and Human Services, Becky and I were so inspired that we went to another local school and held a relationship workshop. We were pleased by the reception we received from teachers who saw the importance of relationship education.

Becky has often expressed her appreciation for the relationship skills that, in her words, “have totally changed my perception of the world and my relationships.” She expressed how this work has made her a more compassionate and understanding person. When the principles of this work are put into practice, the results can be quite astonishing, and even heartwarming. If you use these principles, I can promise you a deeper self-understanding that will translate into more meaningful relationships.

I know from firsthand experience that students want to talk about relationships and develop an outlook that will allow them to build a foundation that cultivates and sustains fulfilling relationships with everyone in their lives. The classes have produced essays, art projects, and journal entries, with students expressing their desire to better understand not just romantic relationships, but all relationships. I see—and am moved by—their commitment to making sense of the confusion in which many are engulfed. They want to talk about relationships with intelligence, honesty, and maturity. It’s in school where most children spend the majority of their formative years, yet there is precious little

formal instruction or dialogue on this vital subject. As I said in Chapter 1,

**We spend at least 12 years in school preparing for a career. How much time do we spend preparing for a relationship? Any relationship?**

What’s been born out of teaching this work is what gets me up in the morning. Not a day goes by when the work I’m doing doesn’t surface in a conversation. I’ve now spoken about this work with thousands of people, and almost everyone agrees there is an urgent need for Relationship Education.

The dynamics of relationships pervade our everyday lives, but often there’s little opportunity to discuss them openly and honestly. Who doesn’t want to better understand their relationships and have them be more satisfying? We talk about relationships all the time, but often it’s with complaint, criticism, judgment, or sarcasm. By shining a light on how and why we behave in some relationships and by introducing a different way of communicating, we can nurture existing relationships and develop new ones so they have an opportunity to grow and thrive.

There are more than seven billion people on the planet, and everyone has a different story. Through my work, I came to realize how distinct and complex we all are. I began to have more respect, empathy, and understanding for everyone. This realization shifted my conditioned judgments of others, and I began to see the needs behind their behavior, including my own. My outlook has shifted from ongoing judgment to seeing the lives of others as having value, even if I may not agree with their behavior. Everyone has suffered, and everyone seeks to heal and overcome the pain from their past, as well as their present. Regardless of one’s background, there is information in this book that will resonate with everyone, everywhere.

Of all the students with whom I worked, there was one in particular who was the most skeptical, even cynical, about the relationship work. His name was Van. Van's questioning of the material often bordered on sarcasm. I learned quickly that you can't push the study of healthy relationships on anyone; people have to want it. I allowed Van and the other students to express their opinions without pressuring them to see things differently. Over the months I taught in Van's class, his attitude gradually started changing to one of more inquiry and self-reflection.

One day during class I sat down at Van's table with four other students to listen in on their discussion of a particular point. As I was listening, Van turned to me and said, "Mr. J, if we can have this kind of peace at home and at school, how much longer do you think it will be before we have world peace?"

When he said this I felt a tingling sensation, that feeling you get when something extraordinary has happened. Moved by his inquiry, I turned to him and said, "I think it could happen pretty soon."

This example of a seventeen-year-old's newfound optimism told me that change is indeed possible. My conversation with Van is just one of many unforgettable moments I've experienced in teaching *Healthy Relationships 101*.

Let's face it—More & more women are becoming independent in the 21st Century, and this may be quite intimidating for many men. Back then, it was known that men are, or at least should be the main providers, and women should be dependent on their husband. But now, there has been a shift. Many women are earning big salaries and landing highly respectable positions. Statistics prove it: 32.4% of women out-earn their husbands, and 28% of women in partner households earn at least \$5,000 more than their partners.

This may cause ego problems for the men. Their mentality is set to support, and when you don't need to provide, you may feel degraded or self-conscious about your earnings. Certain men just can't handle dating a woman with deep pockets, since from their early childhood they were taught to be self-sufficient. Since times have changed men are forced to accept these social changes

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## CHAPTER 3

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### Relationships

#### THE HISTORY BEHIND THE MYSTERY

How do we learn about relationships? Who instructs us? How we approach relationships today often depends on the relationships we had growing up, especially the ones with our families. When you're three or five or seven years old, you don't know if what you're seeing at home is healthy. How could we possibly know what healthy relationships look like when all we know is what we observe at home? Even more unrealistic for most children is having any sense of what they would like to consciously carry with them and replicate in their adulthood.

I often ask people, "Are there similar aspects of your parents' behavior showing up in your own life?" If we stop and think about it, are there repetitive patterns? If there are, what can we do? How do we take a look at these patterns without judgment, without blame, and see what changes would be in our best interest? Change isn't about looking for other people to change—it's about changing our own point of view, which also means changing how we communicate with others and how we look at ourselves.

The first step we can take toward changing our behavior is to consider this question: why do we think and act the way we do in the first place? Before I go any further, I would like to elaborate a little bit on my own upbringing.

About fifteen years ago, I began a journey of relationship inquiry. It began by examining what I learned about relationships from my father, who died when I was nineteen. A few years before he

passed away, the two of us were taking a walk through the quiet streets of my hometown, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, after a family gathering. We came upon an apartment building, and my dad brought it to my attention. He pointed to the building and told me that, before he met my mother, he went out with a divorcée who lived there. That was all he said. I didn't have a response. Up to that point, I had never imagined that my dad had spent time with a woman other than my mother. In fact, as I think back on this moment, I suppose I felt rather uncomfortable and taken aback that my father would so casually mention another woman. The subject of relationships simply didn't come up in our family, let alone any relationships my parents might have had before they met.

That was the extent of what I learned about my father's relationship history. Because the subject was so unknown to me, I had no idea what to say and, really, no idea what to think. If my father really had a relationship with someone who lived in that apartment building, what happened? When did it start? When did it end? Was it a fling? Did it break his heart or her heart, or were they both hurt? Did my mom know about it? Of course, I wasn't thinking these thoughts. I simply went blank, as I had no point of reference for inquiring what he wanted to convey when he told me about "the divorcée." And in the mid-'60s, as I understood it, divorce was still looked upon as shameful.

Needless to say, as a child I didn't learn a lot about relationships from my parents. I rarely saw them interact, partly because my dad was almost constantly at work. My main understanding of relationships came from what I saw on long hours spent in front of the TV. I learned about relationships from shows such as "Leave It to Beaver," a popular sitcom that ran from 1957 to 1963. It never crossed my mind for a moment that Ward, the father, would have ever been with anyone but June, the mother. I figured they met in seventh grade, became

boyfriend and girlfriend, married after graduation, moved to a house in the suburbs, and had two wonderful boys, Wally and Theodore, a.k.a. “The Beaver.” I thought this trajectory of relationships was normal. I was scarcely aware of any reality beyond what I saw on television.

On these kind of shows, there was muted affection, nothing controversial, and problems were always solved in thirty minutes. Other TV shows of that era, such as “Father Knows Best” and “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet” also set the standard for the “American dream” family where life was basically happy and issues were never so complicated that they couldn’t somehow be brought to a rapid resolution. I saw that family life was just swell. As I got older, it became evident that those staged relationships were a reflection of what most people were hoping life would look like, but usually didn’t. My life was certainly nothing like the ones presented on TV shows.

By my late teens, I had discovered that in real life, pain, confusion, and misunderstanding were all too often part of the picture—and that these aspects were “dealt with” either by punishing silence or, at the other end of the spectrum, aggressive and even violent behavior, almost always out of public view.

Case in point: I remember, at my fifth high school reunion, I met up with a classmate who had a seemingly perfect life. She was popular, a member of the student council, and dated a football player. At the reunion, we had an opportunity to catch up. In our conversation, she opened up about having grown up in a household with domestic violence. I was speechless when I heard this, because all these years, I thought she was living the ideal life: safe, secure, and happy. *What was happening to my world? How could something like this be true?* I was beginning to see that behind the facade of what I thought was an ideal life, things weren’t always as they seemed.

That said, I would like to expand on the relationship between my mother and father. For years, I blamed my parents for the

effects of the neglect I experienced and the fact that there was practically no instruction for me on how to be in any relationship. I have come to realize, however, that neither of my parents is to blame for my lack of relationship education. My parents didn’t do anything “wrong.” You might ask how I went from “My life is so messed up because my parents weren’t there for me” to “I don’t have to blame them for anything.”

There were times over the years when I went to therapy. In the sessions, I somehow blamed everything that was troubling me on Mom and Dad. As I said earlier, Dad was a workaholic, and Mom seemed to be disconnected, especially from me. I had this lingering sense of despair that I was somehow damaged goods because of them. Then one day I asked myself,

### **“Who instructed my parents?”**

Immediately, I had a flash of insight: I realized my grandparents were born when the light bulb was relatively new. Relationships back then were about survival; dating was much more formal, and married life was a far cry from what it is today. People married to meet their needs for belonging, community, stability, and security. The bottom line was to survive as best they could through cooperation and rigidly defined roles. The man’s responsibility was only to work and put food on the table, while the woman dealt with domestic duties and responsibilities. I imagine my grandparents had virtually no vocabulary with which to communicate their needs and feelings to each other—or to my parents. Their priorities were to make sure there would be enough food at the end of the day and, depending on the region, to make sure there was enough wood to keep warm.

### **My grandparents were born when the light bulb was relatively new. What could they have known?**

The life expectancy was forty-two when my grandparents were born. No one wrote a book describing what relationships would look like in a hundred years and how we could cultivate and sustain any relationship for fifty, sixty, seventy years or longer, whether it be with a friend, family member, wife, husband, co-worker, or anyone. No one imagined we'd live as long as we do today. My grandparents were heirs to a legacy of a simple life when men and women were deeply rooted in fixed roles. These roles of providing for and protecting the family did not engender a wide range of emotional expression for men.

Barely a century ago, in most cultures, men were expected to go into battle at any moment, and this role required a disposition of stillness, presence, and detachment. Knowing you could be called into service on short notice had conditioned men to be prepared to face death, a state that required them to be emotionally removed. Those men who showed little emotion were acknowledged for their battle readiness.

Nobody was particularly excited about facing death or the prospect of never seeing their family, friends, or village again. To not be ready to face death—to be emotionally uncomfortable with the warrior's role—was, in some societies, a fate worse than death. Inherent in the social fabric and conditioning of many cultures was the suppression of feelings, especially for men. Why is this? They had to be ever-prepared both for battle as well as for hunting wild and dangerous animals. Women were often faced with the prospect of losing their partner and raising their children alone. Since the dawn of civilization, needs and feelings have been discounted, even discarded, for the sake of survival.

Society has changed drastically in the last fifty to one hundred years, but there has been little time to digest how rapidly these transformations have come about and to take stock of where we find ourselves today. Knowing about the relationship legacy passed down to my grandparents made me realize: what could

they possibly have taught my parents about having a healthy relationship?

I really don't remember my parents speaking to each other, although I know they did. I don't remember them being affectionate in front of me or my sister. How could they have known the importance of touch—with each other and with their children? They might have thought it was something you shouldn't do in front of the kids or even with them. I have to wonder if my dad thought hugging was inappropriate because, in his cultural past, men didn't display much physical affection toward other men. I certainly didn't see Tonto and the Lone Ranger hugging, but male bonding is another subject altogether. Did my role models on television—Ward and June Cleaver—express affection physically? I don't remember, but I imagine it was fairly lukewarm. Whether it was Ward and June or my parents, I simply didn't have a reference for physical affection.

As I said, my father worked a lot; I mostly remember him gone at work. I imagine my mother was caught by surprise as to how her new life was unfolding when she found herself raising my sister and me mostly alone. I have referred to my mother as an emotional astronaut, as I have, at times, described her as orbiting my life. Today, I can say this in an affectionate way, because I now realize she was doing the best she could given whatever relationship skills she had received from her parents, not to mention the rigid roles of the society in which she grew up.

### **The End of Blaming Mom and Dad**

Understanding the context of my parents' lives gave me a sense of closure and allowed me to release the blame I held for my parents—and gave me the opportunity to address my issues from a new perspective. Blame or no blame, I was starved for love and affection. Strange as it may sound, this sense of deprivation is



what I was knew, and my life is one example of how early childhood experiences can affect your outlook on relationships.

To illustrate this point, many of the women I've dated or been involved with throughout my life seemed, after a fairly short time, to become distant and disconnected, just like—you guessed it—my mother. Being with someone who became distant and disconnected was familiar to me; it's how I grew up.

Of course, in the beginning of any romantic relationship, the chemicals and hormones kick in as we're "falling in love" with this new person in our life. Let me ask a question: what happens when you fall? You get hurt. I've come up with a new phrase about romantic relationships: "I want to *rise* in love."

The little things that occur at the beginning of a romantic relationship that normally might bother us seem insignificant when we're in love. At first we're on cloud nine, but gradually, as the chemicals wear off, habitual and conditioned behaviors appear. They often don't show up in public. Over the years, I couldn't help but notice couples being affectionate, and I wondered why I didn't have the same in my life.

With little insight into my past and why my relationships rarely seemed to work out, resentment began to build. I felt confused about why the women in my life, one after the other, would distance themselves from me. I didn't know how to address this pattern, and the relationships, more often than not, would come to a disappointing end.

Now, as I look back on all the years of despair and disillusionment, I also take stock of all the people I'd assumed were happy together. As time went on, I came to understand that many of them had experienced struggles within their relationships but didn't reveal them publicly, or perhaps even privately.

I've lost count of the number of times I've run into someone who I remembered as being in a stable relationship, yet years down the road would say things like "It never really worked out" or "We were always fighting." I began to understand that what

I saw in public was not always reality. I was reminded of something a colleague mentioned to me: some people "stage" their relationships to portray an ideal image and keep their troubles hidden—just like the actors on the sitcoms I used to watch.

My personal story reveals the deprivation of nurturing and attention I experienced. On the other end of the spectrum, there are people who experience "smotherly" love—parents who micromanage in hopes of controlling their children's lives for the better. While they mean well, helicopter parenting often leads to alienation. Often, these children have a strong need for space and freedom later in life. If you have parents who are controlling, micromanaging, or hovering, what might happen when you meet someone whose needs for attention are more than you can handle? Psychologists have identified a pattern in many couples in which one partner wants more intimacy than the other, in many cases leading to relationship strain. We will look at how to understand and address such issues as we continue.

### **The Power of Healthy Relationships**

There seem to be many things in our conditioning that act as barriers to having healthy relationships. Many people have reached the point of "Why bother?" I say, "Don't give up."

A study published by *Psychological Science* indicates that having a loving relationship can lessen the negative effects of stress. James Coan, a neuroscientist at the University of Virginia, conducted experiments in which he administered a mild electric shock to the ankle of the partners in thriving, committed relationships. Tests registered the individual's anxiety level before the shocks, as well as their discomfort level during the shocks. Coan then repeated the shocks while the person being shocked held their partner's hand.

Even though both tests were conducted with the same electrical charge, the second round of testing produced a significantly lower neural response throughout the brain. Coan concluded that for

someone in a healthy relationship, holding their partner's hand results in a decrease in their response to stress, lowers their blood pressure, and mitigates the impact of physical pain.<sup>1</sup>

Bianca Acevedo and Arthur Aron of Stony Brook University found similar results with a group of married couples who considered themselves still in love with each other. Both the wife and the husband had brain scans in which one of them looked at a picture of his or her partner. The scans showed that their reward centers lit up; similar results were found for those who were in newer relationships. When researchers looked at parts of the brain associated with fear and anxiety, however, the couples who had been married longer exhibited more calm in those regions, in contrast to the newlyweds.<sup>2</sup>

Healthy relationships in couples don't just produce psychological benefits—the physical ones are significant as well. Numerous studies, including one by Louis Cozolino, have demonstrated a correlation between immune function and stress hormones.<sup>3</sup> Couples in a loving relationship have better health overall and a resistance to stress, while those in troubled relationships have decreased immune function.

The question at hand is how we can have healthy relationships in the 21st century. How are we going to recognize our cultural and historical conditioning, see its influence, and develop relationships based on a new approach? I would suggest that by learning how and why we develop our current views of relationships, we will more readily be able make changes for the better.

We can create healthier views of relationships that resonate with how we actually feel rather than what we have been conditioned to feel. We also can begin to better understand why our partners, family, and friends do and say the things they do—and see how we can offer them support to have their own relationships be more satisfying.

Journal 11:

I got into an argument with my mother last night and for once, used my feelings list in my own arguments. I looked to see at my feelings: aggravated, stressed out, conflicted, detached and mortified. Yeah I felt all this but why? did I have a reason to be? What did my mom feel? fearful, apathetic, heartbroken. I reviewed her argument and understood. I talked to her explaining that I actually took the time to do something productive and understand her view. I decided to put this into use and keep it.

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– eleventh grade male student

## CHAPTER 4

### Nonviolent Communication

#### A COMMUNICATION SKILL SET FOR THE MODERN ERA

“The single toughest, most dangerous opponent I’d ever faced—the one that truly hurt me the most, causing me to spend 30 years of my life behind bars—was my own anger and fear. I write these words now, as a gray-haired old man, hoping to God (before you suffer what I’ve suffered) that it will cause you to listen and learn Nonviolent Communication.

**It will teach you how to recognize anger before it becomes violence and how to understand, deal with, and take control of the rage you may feel.”**

– a prisoner writing to fellow inmates

Our relationships can sometimes feel like a prison. One way to get out of this prison is to learn how to express our needs and feelings without blame and judgment and to listen empathically. We are affected by our conditioned behaviors, such as judging, blaming, and shaming, which block our ability to connect more fully with the people in our lives. However, there’s a way out of this dilemma. Through the practice of the extraordinary communication skill set, Nonviolent Communication (NVC), I have seen a level of transformation in the classrooms where we’ve taught, with couples I’ve coached, and in my own life. To quote one high

school teacher from the Harlem Children’s Zone with whom I taught, “This work has the potential to be life altering and it has definitely changed my life.”

Given the level of suffering on our planet, there’s a crucial need for communication skills that allow us to connect with others with more understanding, respect, and sensitivity. In this chapter, I will present the key principles and processes of NVC. Perhaps it will change your life.

It took me years of struggling to try—often unsuccessfully—to relate to people and to myself in a way that was more empathic and respectful. NVC has made that possible. The cornerstone of my coaching practice and our high school program is the Nonviolent Communication skill set, also known as Compassionate Communication. Marshall Rosenberg is the author of *Nonviolent Communication*, and his approach to interpersonal communication is the only work I’ve ever found that has made complete sense to me.

**Do you consider yourself a violent person?  
Most people don’t.**

Most of us assume we are not violent. We associate violence with physical actions, like fighting, beating, killing, and war. However, violence also comes in other forms. Have you ever experienced a judgment or a criticism as hurtful? The words that many of us use on a daily basis can be a kind of verbal aggression. Verbal violence is inflicted so frequently that many of us are unaware we’re affected by it.

It may seem odd to think of our communication as violent unless it’s a heated exchange with screaming and yelling. Even then, we tend not to label it as “violent.” Yet violent communication is more than yelling and screaming; it is criticism, sarcasm, snide remarks, insults, and put downs. Often, we don’t realize the harm our words can inflict even if we

think what we’re saying is in jest. “Making fun” of someone is not fun; “making fun” can be hurtful.

Whether intentionally or not, many of us have caused hurt to someone with our words, and we, in turn, have also been hurt. The phrase “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is not only misleading but misguided. To use it to “console” someone who has been verbally insulted, criticized, or put down can be confusing to them or cause even more distress.

Sometimes the hurt is not deliberate, such as when someone says, “I was only joking.” Sometimes the hurt, joking, or not, leads to resentment. Resentment can build to a point when one day, a friendship is lost, a marriage ends, or a business relationship suffers. It can even lead to physical violence.

We don’t have to look far to see that violence and violent communication are a very real part of our daily lives. It’s in our newspapers, the books we read, our TV shows and movies, and our music. In *Nonviolent Communication*, Rosenberg states,

The relationship between language and violence is the subject of psychology professor O. J. Harvey’s research at the University of Colorado. He took random samples of pieces of literature from many countries around the world and tabulated the frequency of words that classify and judge people. His study shows a high correlation between frequent use of such words and frequency of aggressive incidents.

In 75 percent of cable and network programming that American children are most likely to be watching, the hero either kills people or beats them up. This violence typically constitutes the “climax” of the show. Viewers, having been taught that bad guys deserve to be punished and take pleasure in watching this violence.<sup>1</sup>

Taking these studies into consideration, we can't help but wonder: *What steps can be taken to counteract these influences?*

In an effort to counteract my own conditioning, for decades, I attended seminars, workshops, and programs geared toward self-improvement. The number one point emphasized over and over was the importance of good communication. At each event, I picked up useful information, but nothing seemed to shift my ingrained patterns of either confronting or defending when faced with criticism. I was not able to take control of my anger, resentment, and disappointment in a way that brought me closer to those in my life. In retrospect, I can see that many of my past relationships didn't endure as a result of my inability to deal with challenging situations without having those episodes spiral down into conflict.

You might ask, "How am I supposed to stay cool, calm, and collected when I have feelings of anger, resentment, and disappointment?" NVC answers that question and provides a way to use language in which all parties are respected. This chapter will show how you, too, can be a part of a movement to think and speak with more care, clarity, and compassion, not only with others, but with yourself as well. I have seen Nonviolent Communication reduce the difficulty in how we speak and behave with each other. I have seen it work with couples I coach, as well as with students and teachers in my high school program. To learn a new skill requires effort, but most of all there must be a willingness to change. Having this willingness can make all the difference.

When I started to introduce NVC to high school students and my coaching clients, the response was extraordinary. The majority of the students and clients I've worked with have said that, of all the subjects we covered, Nonviolent Communication had the greatest impact on them. This feedback

encouraged me to keep presenting this work, which has established greater respect and positive self-expression in the lives of New York City's high school students and teachers. I believe that this concept can be applied throughout society and even the world. If New York City students can learn this, anybody can.

### **Are you a needy person? There's no such thing!**

In our society, people are criticized for being "needy." The word "needs" has, at times, been given a bad rap. It's time to change that once and for all. With a significant other, you might have a need for acceptance, affection, appreciation, care, closeness, intimacy, nurturing, and partnership. How about support and warmth? Imagine if when two people, shortly after beginning to date, were able to articulate those needs; might we see the creation of many more lasting bonds? If you are a person who can express your needs clearly, and without blame or judgment, it opens up a whole new level of communication. In business, you might have a need for competence, effectiveness, efficiency, and progress. Those needs don't make you needy; those needs, when met, allow for progress and growth. Imagine if in the work place people could share those needs and focus on collaboration rather than blame and criticism. Who wouldn't want to work in an environment like that? With friends and family, you may have a need for respect, peace of mind, connection, and harmony. Having a vocabulary of needs helps us further our individual growth and the growth of others. In this chapter, we will look at how to express our needs and the associated feelings which will create and opportunity for greater awareness, understanding, and self-expression. I hope this chapter will meet your needs for discovery, learning, and inspiration.

## So, What Is NVC?

NVC is, among many other things, a conflict-prevention process that focuses on learning how to observe, rather than judge. It's a way to articulate our needs and feelings and to make requests rather than demands. You may have heard of conflict resolution, which helps bring those divided by dispute into dialogue. Non-violent Communication can not only resolve conflict, it can also prevent it.

NVC can be applied to virtually every relationship, with schools, family life, significant others, organizations and institutions, and diplomatic and business negotiations.

## The Four-Part Nonviolent Communication Process

- Observations
- Feelings
- Needs
- Requests

This process is sometimes shortened to OFNR to help us more easily remember the four main components of NVC. Each component of NVC is a powerful learning tool. Though some practitioners of NVC focus on observation followed by identifying feelings to determine their needs, in my work, I have found it useful to focus on needs before feelings. Deciding what is most effective, no matter what approach you take, is a win-win. To quote Marshall Rosenberg, it is essential to acknowledge “the needs behind our feelings.”<sup>2</sup>

### 1) Observation vs. Evaluation

The first step in achieving effective communication is to become aware of whether we are making an observation or an evaluation/judgment. When we observe, we're simply stating the facts of what we're seeing. When we evaluate, on the other hand, we're adding our judgment and analysis to what we are experiencing. Do you tend to make judgments about people as you go through your day? I know I do. When we express an evaluation to or about another person, it can be received as a judgment, and they are likely to hear it as criticism and either shut down, defend, or strike back.

Studying and practicing the process of NVC reworks limited perceptions and ingrained behavior patterns that take us from criticism and judgment to more compassion and awareness.

### 2) Needs: A New Vocabulary

*Every feeling arises from a need, and our needs—be they met or unmet—affect how we feel.*

What are needs? Do you need a car? Or is a car a **strategy** that meets your needs for movement and efficiency? It also may meet your need for progress and safety. It's okay to say that you need a car, but if you identify the underlying needs, you may see there is a variety of strategies to meet them.

If you're a teacher, do you need your students to be quiet during class? Is quietness during class a need? Or do you have a need for respect, learning, and competence? Having students be quiet is a strategy to meet those needs; being quiet is not a need. Strategies are different from needs. The phrase “I need you to be on time” does not express a need; it's a demand. What about the phrase “I need to be in control of things around here”? Again, control is a **strategy**, not a need. A **strategy** is an action taken by an individual in an effort to fulfill a need. You may want

to control things in hopes that your needs for support, stability, competence, and effectiveness will be met.

On the next page, you see a list of universal human needs. This list can help you define the needs that you most value. If you look on the left column, under “Connection,” many of those are needs we have with a significant other or with friends and family and can include acceptance, affection, care, closeness, love, and support. If you look at the middle columns, “Play,” “Peace,” and “Physical Well-being,” many of the needs listed are not only about needs in other relationships, but also allow for self-care. Look at “Physical Well-being”: air, food, water, rest, shelter. Taking physical well-being into consideration, what do you call someone who doesn’t have any needs? Dead! If a person have no needs, they’re dead. ***Therefore, needs are about life!*** Thus, practicing NVC can enhance your quality of life.

We know all of these words; we don’t have to read one book after another on how to express what we value with clarity and ease. NVC clearly spells it out. If you want to get good at a sport, what do you do? If you want to get good at a language, what do you do? If you want to get good at playing a musical instrument, or singing, what do you do? Practice. Who ever heard of practicing relationships? NVC is a way of doing exactly that.

**Everything anyone does, has done or will do is an attempt to meet a need.**

The Needs List on the next page helps us to define what needs are most important to us and how they guide our actions and impact our relationships. For example, what needs might you be meeting in reading this book? Does reading this book meet your needs for learning, awareness, and understanding? Perhaps it meets your need for clarity and discovery.

Knowing how to define which needs are most important to you and to see other people as people with needs and feelings opens

## NEEDS

Connection

Acceptance  
Affection  
Appreciation  
Authenticity  
Belonging  
Care  
Closeness  
Communication  
Community  
Companionship  
Compassion  
Consideration  
Empathy  
Friendship  
Inclusion  
Inspiration  
Integrity  
Intimacy  
Love  
Nurturing  
Partnership  
Presence  
Respect  
Self-respect  
Security  
Self-acceptance  
Self-care  
Shared reality  
Stability  
Support  
Trust  
Understanding  
Warmth

Play

Adventure  
Excitement  
Fun  
Humor  
Joy  
Relaxation  
Stimulation

Peace

Acceptance  
Balance  
Beauty  
Ease  
Harmony  
Order  
Peace of mind  
Space

PhysicalWell-being

Air  
Care  
Comfort  
Food  
Rest/sleep  
Safety (protection)  
Shelter  
Touch  
Water

Meaning

Awareness  
Celebration  
Challenge  
Clarity  
Competence  
Consciousness  
Contribution  
Creativity  
Discovery  
Efficiency  
Effectiveness  
Growth  
Integration  
Integrity  
Learning  
Movement  
Participation  
Presence  
Progress  
Purpose  
Self-expression  
Stimulation  
Understanding

Autonomy

Choice  
Dignity  
Freedom  
Independence  
Self-expression  
Space  
Spontaneity

the door to a new kind of awareness and more ease and harmony.

To illustrate this point, I'm going to tell you about an experience I had in spring 2012 that changed my life forever. I was teaching at a high school in Jackson Heights, Queens. The school had limited resources for supplies, so for the journaling assignment I took it upon myself to buy fifty-five notebooks for an unusually large class I had. I live in the East Village in downtown Manhattan, and I had to go on three different subway lines in order to get to the school. I arrived at my stop on a clear and sunny day, carrying the two bags of notebooks and my shoulder bag as I exited the train. Unlike most trains in New York City, which are underground, this train in Queens was elevated.

I began my descent down a long flight of stairs that led to the sidewalk. About halfway down the steps, I noticed a woman slowly coming up on the other side. Then I saw a woman on the sidewalk entering the stairway. She seemed to have a hurried expression as she looked up. If she made a dash to go around the slow-moving woman, I would have had to stop short. I remember thinking, *Don't do it*; however, she shot past the slow-moving woman, and I had to come to an abrupt halt in order to avoid a collision. In the past, my instinctive reaction might have been to make a critical remark; I might have even given her a New York piece of mind. However, in this incident, after having had to stop against my will, two words came to mind: *thoughtless and inconsiderate*.

Yet as I stepped onto the sidewalk, I found the thoughts I had to be quite different than usual. Here's what arose in my mind: *I wonder what that woman's needs were? Was she on her way to the hospital to see a relative who had but a short time to live? Perhaps she was rushing to see her aunt, who throughout her life had met her needs for love, affection and acceptance.* Was she really thoughtless and inconsiderate, or did she simply have a **strategy** to meet her needs that I didn't appreciate?

In that moment, a switch was flipped in the way I perceived my fellow human. There was a shift in my neuropathways, and it finally became part of my thinking to see people as people with needs and feelings rather than as my judgments. I don't necessarily appreciate everyone's **strategy** to meet their needs; however, I no longer had to judge them. I can if I want to, but I now have the option to see things differently. Learning NVC gave me an opportunity to think and speak differently, and I believe this shift is in my best interest, as well as the best interest of those with whom I relate. I can say without hesitation that Nonviolent Communication has made my life easier and more harmonious. If someone says or does something that irritates me, I can consider the fact that I can't possibly know exactly who they are. I don't know what's really going on in their life. I don't know if they are a Mother Teresa sister or somebody who is widely known for questionable behavior.

I didn't know what this woman's needs were, and I didn't have to know. At that moment, I realized that everyone has needs and feelings, as well as strategies to meet their needs. I found myself thinking, *Maybe she was going to see her aunt, or maybe she's a doctor who was in a rush to save someone's life.* I don't even remember what she looked like; I only remember that something happened to my thinking process, and I was grateful for it.

In that moment, I experienced a shift in the way I perceived my fellow humans. They were no longer my judgments, but people with needs and feelings. Based on current neuroscience research, I have to believe that in that moment there had been a change in my thinking patterns. I know this change was due to the work I had done studying and teaching NVC. I felt a sense of relief as, in a way, I was no longer a prisoner of my habitual thinking. It was a revolution in the way I normally thought and behaved. As I walked to the school, I realized I no longer had to carry the residue of situations in which I would usually be judging. I was eager to recount this story to my students.



I'll never forget this incident because, in that moment, it became clear to me that it was my choice to see the world as a world of people with needs and feelings whose behaviors and strategies I did not always appreciate. I no longer had to live in a world boxed in by my judgments. In teaching and practicing NVC, I had entered a world of people with needs and feelings—what a relief.

### 3) Feelings

How do we know if our needs are being met? By tuning in to how we feel. For many of us, our vocabulary of feelings is very limited. I can remember countless times in my life when I've been upset by something and said, "I don't know exactly what's going on, but I'm really upset about this." Usually, things were either good or things were not bad. Good and bad had pretty much been my range of feelings before I began to study NVC. How did I build a vocabulary of feelings? How did I learn to express those feelings with clarity and without assigning blame?

With the Feelings List, we now have a vocabulary that informs us as to whether our needs are met or not met.

As we build our literacy of feelings, we see how each one is connected to a need. Before we take a look at the range of feelings, "good" or "bad," consider this story.

A long time ago, there was an old man and his son. They had a small farm and only one horse to pull their plow. One day, the son left the gate open too long and the horse ran away. The next day, the neighbors came by and said, "It's too bad that your horse ran away!"

The farmer replied, "I don't know if it's good or if

it's bad, but I know my horse is gone."

The next day, the horse came back with four other wild horses. They came into the corral and the son closed the gate. Now, they had five horses.

The neighbors stopped by and said, "It's so great, you now have five horses!"

The farmer replied, "I don't know if it's good or bad, but I have five horses."

One day, the old man's son was trying to tame one of the horses when it reared up and struck on his leg, and he was left partially disabled.

The neighbors came by and said "Oh, that's too bad; your son is crippled!"

The father said, "I don't know if it's good or bad, but my son is injured."

The next day, soldiers came into town to take all of the able-bodied men off to war.<sup>4</sup>

What is good? What is bad? How often are we quick to judge and label situations and people? NVC shows us how to suspend judgment and see things from another perspective.

### Good vs. Fulfilled Feelings

When our needs are met, we usually have what in NVC are called “fulfilled feelings.” Some examples are

Happy	Thankful	Love	Amused
Glad	Grateful	Hopeful	Joyful
Content	Moved	Inspired	Peaceful
Delighted	Touched	Relaxed	Optimistic
Excited	Curious	Renewed	Satisfied

### Bad vs. Unfulfilled Feelings

When our needs are not met, we tend to have “unfulfilled feelings.” Some examples are:

Angry	Irritated	Annoyed	Discouraged
Resentful	Sad	Distressed	Frustrated
Bored	Lonely	Overwhelmed	Tense
Confused	Nervous	Restless	Worried
Depressed	Anxious	Self-conscious	Exhausted

A comprehensive list of feelings is on pages 172 to 173. You will also find the Full Needs List on page 174, so you can easily reference your needs and feelings.

Expressing your needs and feelings gives anyone you are communicating with a much clearer sense of what is actually going on with you.

For instance, if I tell someone I’m “worried,” that might allow them to offer me support. If I simply tell them I feel “bad,” they will have to guess what I am feeling. If I say I feel “relaxed” or “peaceful,” that tells them more than if I simply say I feel “good.”

As we learn to identify our essential needs and the associated feelings, something remarkable happens. We begin to understand ourselves better, take things less personally, and view others as people with needs and feelings as well. People are a lot more alike than they are different. Recognizing this fact frees us from labeling situations and people as good and bad.

Connecting with care and compassion is possible when you build and express a vocabulary of needs and feelings. Being able to articulate your needs can increase your ability to communicate more effectively. Unfortunately, we’ve been conditioned to minimize our feelings by labeling someone who expresses their needs and feelings as too “emotional.”

In NVC, we connect our needs to our feelings. Knowing our needs and feelings serves as a road map to understanding ourselves and other people in a way that gives us more awareness and clarity.

### Non-Feelings

You might ask, “What on earth are non-feelings?” If you look at the list of non-feelings on the next page, you might realize that we use them all the time, especially the word “disrespected.” My clients and students alike almost always have in their vocabulary that they felt “disrespected” by something someone said or did. Disrespect, however, is not a feeling.

Let’s say there is something you don’t like. Saying you feel “disrespected” does not say how you feel. For example, you’re at a party, and a close friend turns their back to you while the two of you are conversing. Did you feel disrespected? You might have felt irritated or annoyed, or perhaps you felt embarrassed or self-conscious. Maybe you felt disappointed or unhappy.

Irritated, angry, and embarrassed are feelings. Disrespected is not a feeling; it’s a judgment. When you say you feel disrespected

by someone, you are actually judging them as someone who disrespects others. Think about it, the phrase “I felt disrespected by you,” says what? You are a disrespector. You can have numerous feelings when disrespect occurs, but saying disrespect is a feeling almost always carries a degree of judgment. It doesn’t say how you actually feel!

Consider some other non-feeling terms and phrases below:

abandoned  
 disrespected  
 misunderstood  
 taken for granted  
 manipulated  
 unwanted  
 pressured  
 let down  
 ignored  
 tricked  
 used

Any sentence that starts with “I feel that you...” or “I feel like you...” is suggesting someone else is responsible for your feelings, which can lead to conflict. For a complete list of “non-feelings,” refer to page 175 in the Appendix in the back of the book.

In all of the cases above, we are expressing what others have done or what we have interpreted them as doing that we think is wrong, rather than simply saying how we feel. There is an element of judgment and blame when we use non-feeling words and expressions. You might say you felt let down by someone who did not contact you to postpone a meeting until the last minute. How did you really feel? Did you feel sad, because you wanted to see them? Were you perhaps feeling angry, frustrated, or annoyed because you had made plans to meet that person

when you had work to do?

If you say you felt let down by someone, you are making a judgment about that person—that they are someone who disappoints others. If, on the other hand, you express your feelings and needs without judgment, that can create an opening to make a request so there can be resolution and clarity going forward. It sounds simple, but it takes awareness and practice to get beyond the pervasiveness of blame, shame, and judgment.

In another example, if someone didn’t pay attention to you for whatever reason, you might say you felt ignored. Ignored is not a feeling. Maybe you felt discouraged because you had a need for consideration and inclusion? NVC can turn us away from inferring or assuming that others’ behavior is wrong and instead guide us toward a more direct, nonjudgmental, and empathic dialogue. We’re not used to thinking and speaking this way. If you go to a performance and something strikes you as funny, you don’t turn to your friend and say, “Are you delighted because that met your need for humor?” No, we don’t speak this way, but as we begin to practice speaking another way, we will have more ease and harmony in our lives. Do you hear a beautiful melody the first time you play an instrument? No. How about the fourth or fifth time? The more you practice, the more the sounds are enjoyable and the more you have the results you desire. It’s the same with NVC. Only with practice does life become more fulfilling and connected.

#### 4) Making Requests

Once we know what we need and how we feel, it is up to us to express what we want another person to do by making a request. Have you ever heard a complaint such as, “You should have known what I was needing or feeling.”?

The phrases on the next page are examples of communicating what we want with judgment. These phrases will be

followed by similar statements made as demands, and those demands will be followed by clear requests of a specific, doable action. Perhaps some of these judgments sound familiar to you:

- Do you think these dishes are going to wash themselves?
- Whose great idea was it to have only one person on the register on a Saturday?
- I can see I'll be the one paying again ...

These remarks can be seen as critical, demanding or judgmental. The term “passive-aggressive” is often used to describe these types of comments. Passive-aggressive comments can be hurtful and often lead to the building of tension.

Here are some examples of demands:

- Do those dishes—and no excuses!
- I want someone put on the register. Now!
- Here's the check. It's your turn to pay!

Expressing requests is an essential element of Nonviolent Communication; however, when we make requests with judgments or demands, others might feel worried or tense, fearing they will be blamed or punished if they don't comply. Do we want people to do things voluntarily or with fear and worry? When we want others to help us with the chores, to empathize with the long wait at the register, or to share the cost of something, how can we express these concerns in a way that encourages consideration, understanding, and freely chosen cooperation?

Here are three examples of how we can express our requests using needs and feelings, which then can be more easily heard as a choice.

- I'm quite tired from work, and I don't have the energy to wash these dishes. Would you be willing to do them

this time? I would like to get some rest.

- I'm feeling frustrated that there is a long line. Is there someone else who could help with check out?
- I'm feeling worried about money at the moment. Would you be open to splitting the bill with me?

It's important to note that just because we make a request, it doesn't always mean we will get the response we want. However, the statement of requests in the context of needs and feelings puts us on the path to more peaceful exchanges without others becoming defensive, anxious, or getting upset about being judged.

When we can hear the needs and feelings behind what people say, then we can begin to break the cycle of judgment, blame, and shame and give everyone an opportunity to get their needs met.

### **Protective Use of Force**

NVC is not only a verbal communication skill set, but it also includes and explains something called “protective use of force.” In a situation involving concern for physical safety, imminent danger, or the unwillingness or inability of the other party to communicate, there might not be time to employ the language of NVC. The idea is to distinguish between protective and punitive uses of force and ensure that protective use of force is used only when other channels of communication are exhausted or simply not possible.

To give you a real-life example of what protective use of force can look like, here's an experience I had a few years ago:

In May of 2012 I was on the New York City Five-Borough Bike Tour with some friends from my hometown of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. After the ride, we stopped to eat at a restau-

rant on Staten Island. After dinner, as we were leaving the restaurant, we saw a woman who had been pushed onto the street, followed by a man who was yelling at her and making threats. Without weighing the pros and cons, I quickly walked over and stood between the man and the woman. I wasn't angry, but I knew I had to step between them. Had he gone toward her, it's quite likely I would have pushed him away. After a few more bouts of shouting at the woman, he *did* back away. A few moments later the police arrived.

Standing between them, I was prepared to use protective force in order to protect another person from harm. In that moment, I wasn't thinking to say, "Excuse me, sir, you shoved this lady into the street. I'm wondering if you're feeling disappointed or angry because you have a need for respect or understanding." Although those may have been his feelings and needs, the man's behavior was so aggressive that there wasn't time to initiate the vocabulary of NVC. Rather, the situation called for the protective use of force.

### **World of Conflict vs. World of Possibility**

This chapter is my sales pitch for more harmony in the world by sharing what I believe could significantly change your life and the lives of those around you.

Once we study NVC, there is potential for transformation of any relationship if we choose to develop our skills to communicate with respect, understanding, and empathy. In studying NVC, I begin by reminding my clients and students that everyone can be seen as a person with needs and feelings. We are all working to communicate our needs and we are all trying to have them met. Learning how to express our needs and feelings in a nonviolent way is like learning how to speak a new language, except we already know all the words.

### **Wants Are Different From Needs**

In the Healthy Relationships 101 classes we teach in schools, we ask students to make a list of what they want in a relationship. Often, they focus on romantic relationships, as many students are dating in high school. Here's a brief list of some common responses about what they want in a relationship:

- Someone who likes to dance.
- Someone who likes my music.
- Someone who's funny.
- Someone who likes to travel.
- Someone who likes foreign films.
- Someone who wants a family.
- Someone who likes literature.

After students complete the "What I Want in a Relationship" exercise, we introduce the NVC Needs List to them. They are often surprised to learn that what we say we want is not always what we need.

Our wants can be limiting, but our needs give us a broader vocabulary to express ourselves. I may want a partner who likes to dance, enjoys foreign films, and likes to travel, but what I am really seeking is someone to meet my needs for companionship, shared reality, and adventure. Wanting a partner who likes foreign films is a strategy to meet the need for shared reality. It's possible for a significant other to meet many of our needs, but not necessarily all of them all the time. For instance, your partner may not be available to travel when you want to, but one of your close friends might be. Thus, your need for growth and adventure can be met with a friend. Your partner may have a preference for comedies, but you are more interested in documentaries. All too often there

is an expectation for our partners to fulfill all our needs. It's helpful to define your needs and the variety of strategies that could get them met. The same goes for friends, family, and coworkers.

I strongly recommend reading Marshall Rosenberg's *Non-violent Communication*. It has made a big difference in my coaching and in The Relationship Foundation's work in schools. The many evaluations I've received from students, teachers, and parents, as well as testimonials from my clients, emphasize how understanding the importance of observation instead of evaluation and expressing needs, feelings, and requests has changed their relationships for the better. There are certified NVC teachers all over the world. There are workshops, practice groups, and meetups. This emerging community is open to all.

To be empathetic means that you can put yourself in someone else's shoes, meaning that you are willing to visualize yourself in a situation similar to one that someone else might have.

“To be empathetic means that you can put yourself in someone else’s shoes, meaning that you are willing to visualize yourself in a situation similar to one that someone else might have”

– tenth grade female student

## EMPATHY– THE ART OF LISTENING

Listed below are what we call “Empathy Blockers,” followed by examples of how to show empathy.

For example, someone says, “I had a really bad day at work.” Some typical responses listed below are often said with the best of intentions, but they can unknowingly create distance and disconnection.

- **One-Upping/Storytelling**  
“You think you had a hard day—let me tell you about mine.”
- **Advising/Fixing**  
“Maybe you should get up earlier.”  
“Maybe you should think about another line of work.”  
“Maybe you should...”
- **Educating**  
“There’s a good book that I think will help you.”
- **Analyzing/Data Gathering**  
“You know, this seems to be a pattern of yours.”
- **Consoling / Sympathy**  
“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m sure you did your best.”
- **Discounting/Shutting Down**  
“Well, you know you should be glad you have a job.”

### Some things we can say to show empathy:

- **“I hear you.”** Said with sincerity, this meets a person’s need to be heard.
- **“Tell me more.”** Said with sincerity, this shows you are really interested.
- **“Wow.”** Said softly, this gives the speaker a sense you are listening
- **“I don’t know what to say right now, but I’m grateful you told me.”**  
When someone is in a difficult situation, this may be all you have to say.

## EMPATHY

On the previous page is an empathy exercise we introduce to schools; it is also a game-changer with couples I coach. We call it “Empathy: The Art of Listening.” When we have teachers and parents practice this exercise in pairs, we generally hear some self-conscious giggling. Couples have the same response. When they role-play empathy blocking, the giggling turns to laughter. They’re laughing so much that it is hard to call an end to the exercise. Why is this? They’re experiencing an ingrained social behavior that they have likely not noticed before. Try practicing these examples of empathy blocking with someone, and you’ll experience the laughter, too. After the laughter, the realization sinks in that a key aspect of empathy is simply listening to another person without thinking about what to say in response. If you are determined to become a “good” listener, the way you relate to others can change dramatically.

What really is empathy? The dictionary defines empathy as “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.” This definition, however, can sometimes lead to confusion and misunderstanding. How can you understand the feelings of another person unless they share those feelings with you? Most people do not possess an empathic superpower of comprehending the feelings of others. Learning to empathize with another involves first learning to articulate the range of feelings we all have. We just learned this skill in the NVC chapter.

Ironically, knowing what empathy is not has better helped me understand what empathy is. I now understand a key aspect of empathy as a new way of listening. Our approach to teaching empathy embraces the notion of listening as a bridge

to greater connection.

Who taught us how to listen? Listening wasn’t included in my upbringing, and I don’t remember ever hearing the word at school or at home. For most of my life, I’ve missed out on much of what people were saying. My conditioning was to respond, in any conversation, with my point of view and hope it would either validate my perspective or allow me to give a quick, polite response. We have an impulse to “fill the space,” but that isn’t truly listening.

**Empathy Blockers**

Are you a good listener? I thought I was a good listener until I realized I had no idea what that meant. Learning what empathy is, by learning what empathy is not, was a huge “aha” moment for me. I was then able to sharpen my ability to listen, and then listening as an art finally made sense to me.

Below are some common responses that are often mistaken for listening, but are actually anything but. Holly Humphrey, an associate of Marshall Rosenberg, originally created a list of conversational habits that prevent empathy<sup>1</sup>. This list, which we call Empathy Blockers, is informed by a combination of Holly’s ideas and our exploration of empathy as we built and developed The Relationship Foundation’s curriculum.

Take this often-heard example:

Let’s say my best friend shares this with me, “I had the worst day. I got blamed for something I didn’t do at work, lunch was awful, and traffic was a nightmare.”

Haven’t we all heard someone describe their day like this? When they do, what do many of us say? You might be fa-



miliar with these types of responses:

**a) One-upping:** *You had a hard day? I promise you your day was nothing like mine.*

With a one-upping response, the attention goes to me and my experience. My friend likely had a need to be heard, supported, and understood. My friend is telling me about their day because they likely had a need for empathy and to simply be received. One-upping does not help me to give empathy. I thought I was being empathic, but perhaps not.

**b) Storytelling:** *You know, yesterday I must have had the worst day ever at work....*

One-upping serves as a launching point for storytelling. Once again, it's all about me—my experiences, my thoughts. There is little room for connection when I take the attention away from a person who is sharing what is going on for them.

**c) Advising/fixing:** *Maybe you should pack your lunch. Don't you think the bus would be better than driving?*

Did this person ask for my advice? Giving unrequested advice may suggest I make better choices, not only in my life, but also in theirs. Does it sound as though I am judging the individual?

Advising is one step from talking down to the person who is sharing their thoughts and feelings. This type of response can make someone doubt their feelings. If my friend asked for advice, then I'd be happy to throw in my two cents, but if not, then empathic listening is the way to go.

**d) Educating:** *You know, there's a great book about dealing with*

*managers; you should get it.*

Similar to fixing, educating can be experienced as unrequested advice, thus blocking connection. If my friend doesn't ask for advice, then why am I giving it? When my friend has a bad day, they want to be heard and maybe even talk about it, not instructed to run to the bookstore.

**e) Analyzing:** *You've had a number of days like this. This seems like a pattern of yours. Why do you think this keeps happening to you?*

How much do people enjoy being analyzed? Here, the analyzing implies that they are easy to read and that they like being advised. In analyzing, I am actually throwing in a bit of blame and shame as well, making it clear that I'm the one who knows what they should be doing with their life. I am their friend, not their psychologist. Though I mean well, responses like these can be irritating and create stress in the relationship.

**f) Data gathering:** *When did you actually leave work? Did you have lunch in the cafeteria? Did you take the highway or side streets?*

An aid to analyzing, data gathering is digging for facts as opposed to simply listening. It seems as if I am trying to find the issues that caused my friend's bad day and collect facts that my friend did not see themselves. Again, I am assuming I know more or I know better. If they did not ask me for details, then I don't want to annoy them with fact-checking.

**g) Consoling:** *I'm sure you tried your best.*

Did this person ask for pity? This can seem patronizing.

**h) Sympathy:** *I'm sorry you had a bad day.*

The word empathy is not as commonly used in our society as sympathy. While sympathy can be somewhat comforting to those dealing with very difficult circumstances, in many cases, it may actually prevent us from connecting. What people might sense is that we are viewing them from afar, instead of up close and personal.

**i) Discounting:** *You know, you should be glad you have a job.*

Discounting can sound belittling, a put down of sorts. It can be interpreted as me suggesting that my friend is a complainer, a label that limits their self-expression. It also neither recognizes their needs nor validates their feelings.

**j) Shutting down:** *Cheer up; you don't have to feel so bad.*

While perhaps well-intentioned, does this acknowledge the person's feelings and needs? How does telling my friend *not* to feel their feelings support them? Shutting down can make a person hesitate to express themselves around me.

Do any of these sound familiar? If this isn't how you speak to others, have others spoken to you using empathy blockers? Empathy blockers can be experienced as criticism or blame and often create discomfort while intending to do just the opposite.

**“Don't just do something, stand there.”**

Now that we know what empathy is not, let's take a look at what empathy is. Empathy is crucial to the health of any re-

lationship, but many of us are not quite sure how to express it. The dictionary also defines empathy as “the identification with another's feelings, thoughts, or attitudes.” This definition can be interpreted in many ways. What does it mean to identify with someone else's feelings, thoughts, or attitudes? Empathy is expressed when we are simply listening, which can sometimes mean not doing or saying anything and only *listening*.

To be truly empathic, we have to focus our attention fully on what the other person is communicating, which may not be as hard as it sounds. A proverb describes the art of empathy as “Don't just do something, stand there.”<sup>1</sup> To fully listen empathically requires a kind of unlearning of common responses, as many of us are conditioned to give sympathetic responses so as not to be “impolite.”

What is unlearning? For example, you might be practicing public speaking. You habitually say “um” when you're trying to think of what you'll say next. “Um” is a big no-no in public speaking. How do you stop saying “um”? You practice, practice, and practice until you can speak using few or no “ums.” Empathy is a practice. If after someone says, “I feel sad,” and you say, “Oh! Don't be sad!” you can learn to stop that kind of unintentional empathy blocking.

**Empathic Responses**

As I've come to understand empathy, listening has opened the door to being more present with whoever is sharing. To better support empathic connections, you can learn to respond in a way that meets a person's need for being heard, and fully put the attention on them. As I practice focusing my attention this way, I have been able to curtail my conditioned behavior and truly listen when people speak. I've learned to respond in a way that I believe meets a person's need for being heard. Here is a short list of empathic responses we can give:

- **“I hear you.”** That’s it. Try this simple phrase next time someone is sharing a concern. It’s remarkable how people relax when they know they are being heard. Many of us have experienced great frustration when we think someone is not listening to us, and here is exactly what to say to show you are listening: “I hear you.” This simple phrase is a powerful act of receiving another.

- **“Tell me more”** or **“Is there more to that?”** This prompts a person to continue sharing. It shows that I am interested in their concerns and furthers connection. These phrases keep the focus on the person speaking and they can share more if they so desire.

- **“Wow.”** This response has resonated with me in an interesting way. I generally say it quite softly. Sometimes when the conversation is going on for some time, I’ll interject it gently so it doesn’t interrupt. The person can keep sharing with a subtle acknowledgment that they are being heard. “Wow” can really enhance empathy; give it a try.

- **“Yikes.”** This response can serve the same purpose as “Wow.” I generally use “Yikes” when something difficult is being shared and generally with people with whom I’m more familiar.

**“I hear you,” “Tell me more,” “Wow,” and “Yikes”:** these phrases and words are what I use when responding to others and, as a result, it has become easier for me to achieve connection. What I’ve just described is one approach to listening that has allowed for a greater expression of empathy for myself, my students, and my coaching clients.

It should be noted that it isn’t necessary to incorporate empathy into every conversation. Throughout the day we may

have numerous interactions with others, some may be when a person has a need for empathy. You may have conversations in which you exchange ideas, share your outlook, and debate your point of view. As you better understand empathy and become more comfortable with these listening skills, you’ll begin to instinctively know which situations call for empathic listening.

### **How can I put all of this into practice?**

More often than not in conversation, we stop listening closely to someone after they have just said a few words because we’re eagerly preparing or planning a response. The next time you have a conversation with someone, especially with anyone to whom you are close, notice if your responses are empathy blockers; that is the first step. Very soon you will begin to self-correct, just like any other skill that requires discipline and development. Committing to a practice of empathy achieves the ultimate goal of effective communication and greater connection.

One way to see if you are being empathic is to check in with the person speaking to ask how they are feeling and what they might need. A simple question, such as “How are you feeling about...?”, is a good way to acknowledge the feelings of those around you. Empathy is how we receive another person. How can we receive someone if we are focused on what we want to say? This is where empathy becomes most effective; it helps us suspend our urge to formulate what we think is an “appropriate” response.

The practice of empathy is, in many ways, quite simple. Once it has become integrated into your way of thinking, don’t be surprised when you become known as a good listener. Being a “good” listener supports connection. Practicing empathy is a way to become a really “good” listener.

## Empathy, the Great Connector

Empathy, in its simplest form, is about listening to people's needs and feelings. Once we recognize and begin eliminating empathy blockers that hinder closer contact, we start creating more fulfilling and connected ways of being with others. Empathic listening has strengthened my relationships and reduced conflict. Without empathic listening, conversations can—and often do—go in circles that can annoy all parties involved.

Here's a little not-so-secret secret: if you want to end an exchange that seems to be turning into an argument, all you have to do is quietly say, "I hear you," then hold the silence and see what happens. You've stepped back and become empathic. Expressing empathy and choosing not to argue are not signs of weakness; rather, they meet one's needs for ease, harmony, and peace of mind.

## Self-Empathy

Now that we've covered the basics of empathy, I'd like to explore the subject of self-empathy and how it can help us tune into our own needs and feelings and create self-support.

For example, you may find that you spend way too much time on the Internet instead of attending to work obligations. Have you ever found yourself checking messages, watching videos, playing computer games, or browsing social media when there were other priorities? When realizing how much time has gone by, is your reaction self-directed criticism, such as "Why have I wasted so much time?"

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) encourages the practice of observation as the first step to engaging in self-empathy. When you are aware of a self-critical thought, you can simply ask yourself what you're feeling. Perhaps you feel concerned about the amount of time that has elapsed. Maybe you feel frustrated that

you weren't able to focus on the important tasks at hand.

Once you've identified what you're feeling, you can connect it to a need. Perhaps you have needs for effectiveness, efficiency, or progress. Give yourself a moment to "sit with" your needs and how important they are to you. At the same time, you might realize that the time you spent on the computer met your needs for stimulation, relaxation, and fun—at least for a while.

Sometimes, we aren't aware of how judgmental we are toward ourselves. As an example, when things don't go the way we planned, we sometimes tell ourselves that we "should" have done this or we "shouldn't" have done that. At first glance, this criticism may not seem like self-judgment, but, for many of us, it is a fault-finding pattern of which we're simply not aware. "Should" is almost always about a criticism and it's hurtful to the receiver of the message. Often we send the "should" message to ourselves.

Self-empathy is, in its most basic form, an act of self-awareness without blaming, shaming, or judging ourselves. Many of us were never taught to explore how we can be our own best friend.

A first step in becoming conscious of the messages we are giving ourselves is observing the words we are telling ourselves, which is why observation is such an important first step. Simply notice what you are saying to yourself and pay particular attention to judgmental words, such as "should."

Examples:

### Without self-empathy

*"I'm so absentminded. I should have been more careful in distributing the reports. I didn't even keep one for myself."*

### With self-empathy

*"Wow. I notice that I feel frustrated and annoyed. I am aware that*

*I had a need for effectiveness and efficiency and was putting the needs of others before my own.”*

A lack of self-empathy can cause us to judge ourselves. Anyone who has ever played a game or sport or practiced a musical instrument can certainly relate to the harsh language we often direct toward ourselves.

Instead of telling ourselves what should or shouldn't be happening, we can be conscious of the feelings we have. Giving ourselves empathy is an act of self-care. We're not used to relating to ourselves this way, but, with practice, it can start to become more a part of our thinking process; we can practice self-empathy instead of self-judgment. The practice of self-empathy has increasingly helped me connect to my needs and feelings, especially in moments that are stressful.

To assist the process of self-empathy, here are some key questions to ask yourself:

- “What am I observing?”
- “What am I feeling?”
- “What am I needing right now?”
- “Do I have a request of myself or someone else?”

Self-empathy takes practice. It can result in tremendous benefits in terms of both self-awareness and connecting with others.

In the beginning, practicing this language can sound a little “clunky,” and it is! Most of us aren't used to thinking and speaking in terms of our needs and feelings—or truly listening empathically. What I can tell you is this: after practicing, especially with those you are close to, a significant shift can begin.

Relationships don't have to be so difficult—really they don't.

My mom and I have distanced from each other. I barely talk to her anymore. Ever since my parents have been having problems, my mom has been acting differently. I know she feels depressed and sad and confused but that doesn't give her the reason to stop talking to me. When I'm with my mom it doesn't feel the same. I don't tell her anything anymore because she would get mad or won't listen to what I'm saying. I know at this time I can't be depending on my mom. My mom mostly gets me mad and angry that she isn't acting mature and handling things in a grown-up way.

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– ninth grade female student

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## CHAPTER 6

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### Adverse Childhood Experiences

#### The Emergence of the Trauma-Informed School Movement

The past few years saw a dramatic advance in the understanding of brain development. Neuroscientists agree that this development is an ongoing process from birth until sometime in the mid-twenties.

Much of early brain development is guided by emotional cues and environment. Effective stimulation of brain growth requires interaction with other people. Children learn from every person they encounter, especially primary caregivers and teachers.<sup>1</sup>

When children have unstable and volatile home environments, their brain architecture is disrupted, which in turn affects their ability to learn. Absence of adequate adult support and protection is a key factor that creates instability for a child. Unfortunately, similar conditions sometimes persist in a child's school environment. In many schools, there are students who are labeled as "problem students." We have all known one or two of them. Maybe we have even been one of them ourselves.

A child who has experienced an unstable or disruptive home is more likely to have learning and behavioral difficulties. The effect of a disruptive home life can often be passed on from generation to generation.

Every child has a unique story. Each adverse experience in a child's life has an impact on their brain development, their learning abilities, and their physical health. The more

trauma and stress they experience, the more likely they are to not only struggle in school, but also suffer from chronic depression, self-harm, and risky behavior.<sup>2</sup> Every day, children are dealing with bullying, domestic violence, addictions, and other stressors. These children are more likely to drop out of school, be incarcerated, or be chronically unemployed. Society also suffers a tremendous cost for social services and loss of productivity.

Behavioral issues with students have become a national concern, and they are increasing at an alarming rate. Teachers have taken many approaches to address these concerns, yet the challenges continue.

This chapter will illustrate how the awareness of brain science played a crucial role in one school's ability to successfully address such concerns and achieve the goal of effectively educating its students, a story that's making national news. The teachers in this school came to realize that the students' behavior problems were often the result of what was going on in their home lives and the pain they brought with them to school. Enhanced self-worth helped the students build resilience to the effects of trauma and succeed academically and socially.

#### **The ACEs Study — A Revelation in Understanding Behavior Issues**

Beginning in 1995, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Kaiser Permanente Department of Preventative Medicine combined forces to develop a large scale study of the influence of stressful and traumatic childhood experiences. They found that these experiences led to behaviors that were correlated with the leading causes of social

problems and health-related issues.

This collaborative study between the CDC and Kaiser was one of the largest investigations ever conducted to assess associations between childhood maltreatment and later-life health and well-being. More than 17,000 people participated in the study that identified ten primary Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Members volunteered to provide detailed information about their childhood experiences of abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction from birth to age eighteen.

**Until this study was conducted, ACEs typically were not addressed due to shame, secrecy, and social taboo.**

Out of the ACEs research, a questionnaire was created to help identify, clarify, and measure ten different ACEs. Three are abuse: physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. Two are about neglect: emotional and physical neglect. The other five are related to family instability: a parent/caretaker addicted to substances, a parent/caretaker victim of domestic violence, a family member in jail, a family member diagnosed with depression or other mental illness, and the disappearance of a parent/caretaker through abandonment, divorce, or death.<sup>3</sup>

The study revealed that ACEs are shockingly common. Within the study, 67% of the participants had experienced at least one ACE, and one in eight experienced four or more. The study indicates that childhood abuse, neglect, and exposure to other trauma are major risk factors for leading causes of illness, death, and poor quality of life. The risk for social and health problems increase with each additional ACE.<sup>4</sup>

This expanding body of knowledge generated from neuroscience, behavioral science, sociology, and medicine now provides child health care professionals with new insights to evaluate conditions that affect a child's long-term mental,

physical, and emotional health. Until this study, there had been little information about childhood environmental factors that affect the health of an individual.

### **The ACEs Questionnaire: What's Your ACEs Score?**

The ACEs questionnaire serves to identify past trauma, which creates an opportunity to better understand the root of certain behaviors. Recognizing our own ACEs may help us understand more about ourselves, our relationships, and our unmet needs and the corresponding feelings.

There are ten types of childhood trauma identified in the ACEs study. Each type of trauma counts as one point on the questionnaire. For instance, a person who has been physically abused, has an alcoholic parent, and has a mother who was subjected to domestic violence has an ACEs score of three.

Here's the questionnaire. Prior to your 18th birthday:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often swear at you, insult you, put you down, humiliate you, or act in a way that made you afraid that you might be physically hurt? (**Emotional abuse**)
2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often push, grab, slap, throw something at you, or ever hit you so hard that it left a mark? (**Physical abuse**)
3. Did an adult or person ever touch or fondle you, have you touch their body in a sexual way, or attempt or actually have sex with you in any way? (**Sexual abuse**)
4. Did you often or very often think that no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Did you often or very often think your family didn't look out



for each other or support each other? (**Emotional neglect**)

5. Did you often or very often not have enough to eat, not have clean clothes, and/or had no one to protect you? Were your parents ever missing, drunk, or high on a substance, so much so that they couldn't take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it? (**Physical neglect**)

6. Was a parent lost through divorce, separation, death, or other reasons? (**Abandonment**)

7. Was a parent or stepparent pushed, grabbed, slapped, kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard? Were they threatened with a gun or knife? (**Domestic Violence**)

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker, alcoholic, or abused other substances? (**Addiction**)

9. Was a household member in prison? (**Incarceration**)

10. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill, or did a household member attempt suicide? (**Mental Illness**)

Now add up your "yes" answers to get your ACEs score.<sup>5</sup>

### ACEs I Didn't Know I Had

I took this test myself and discovered I had three ACEs. Through the lens of Adverse Childhood Experiences, I was better able to understand the difficulties I had experienced in my relationships throughout the course of my life. After sharing this questionnaire with several friends, it turned out they had a few ACEs of their own. Some expected to have them;

others were surprised at what the questionnaire revealed. My friend, a renowned health care practitioner, discovered that he had five ACEs. He said because of his ACEs he had never felt safe in the world. With this understanding, he gained a new level of clarity which opened a door for greater self-care, compassion, and understanding.

### The Neuroscience of ACEs

Though a normal amount of stress is healthy, prolonged exposure to stressful events can be toxic. ACEs, both in and out of the household, can cause toxic stress. During a stress response, the body releases stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, which in excess keep the body in a constant state of vigilance and inhibit proper brain development.<sup>6</sup>

As cortisol and adrenaline maintain a state of stress within the body, the brain structures responsible for dealing with stress and emotions are subsequently affected. The amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for emotional appraisal and responding to fear-inducing stimuli, mediates the brain's "fight, flight, or freeze" response. The amygdala of a child experiencing toxic stress will evaluate neutral situations as hostile, leading to the release of more cortisol and the perpetuation of a cycle of stress and response. Even in situations with no immediate threat to one's safety, a traumatized child's brain reacts as if a threat is present. This tendency toward hostile reactions inhibits emotional and social awareness.<sup>7</sup>

Toxic stress also prevents proper development of the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for planning and decision-making. Children with ACEs are more likely to behave in an erratic or disruptive manner and struggle to make decisions that will be beneficial in the long term, making it challenging for them to learn and thrive in a classroom environment.

ACEs also impact the functioning of the hippocampus, the brain structure responsible for long-term memory. In a state of stress, the brain is focusing on immediate threats, not on learning or memory; prolonged stress can lead to a prolonged inability to focus on memory. Children experiencing toxic stress have difficulty forming long-term memories, which impairs their ability to learn.

Chronic neglect or disruption during a child's formative years creates a level of disturbance in which the child is less likely to see their environment as safe and secure. School-aged children with one or more ACEs tend to have trouble understanding their emotions, and, for many, anger is the one most readily expressed. Trauma is pervasive for many children and can cause a constant state of vigilance. Without the constructive coping skills and a strong support system that eases their nervous system, positive behavior and learning outcomes are hard to achieve.

### **Viewing Students Through a Trauma-Informed Lens**

Many children who have experienced toxic stress cannot learn well. Educators do not regularly confer with neuroscientists to examine this dilemma. However, there is a growing awareness about how building healthy relationships holds the key to the reversal of some of the major problems that hinder students from getting the most out of their education and their lives.

In spring of 2012, I came across the story about “last chance school” Lincoln Alternative High School, its principal Jim Sporleder, and the staff. Under a new practice of AC-Es-based intervention, suspension days over a three-year period dropped from 796 to 135, and graduation rates increased fivefold. The article was titled “High School Tries New Approach to School Discipline—Suspension Days Drop 85 Per-

cent.” The story about the school went viral and as of March 2016 has had more than 900,000 page views.<sup>8</sup>

What had played such a significant role in the drop in suspension days? I wanted to know! As I read the article, I learned that Lincoln had fostered a culture of understanding, empathy, and compassion. As the administration, teachers, and staff became aware of their students' ACEs, Lincoln High transitioned into what's known as a “Trauma-Sensitive School.”

After I read the article, I emailed the principal expressing my interest and appreciation for what the school had accomplished. To my surprise, he emailed me back within a few hours, and we continued to correspond regularly until the end of August 2012 when, on his invitation, I arrived in Walla Walla to give a day long relationship skills workshop for his staff and faculty. It was a most rewarding experience to share information with a group of people so determined to help their students gain a greater sense of safety and stability. In him, I found I had met a colleague who understood—more than any other educator—the critical emotional needs of his students. He explained more to me about how complex trauma has a significant effect on brain development during childhood and continues through adolescent years, and into adulthood.

In 2009, Jim learned about the CDC-Kaiser Adverse Childhood Experiences Study and about the neurobiology behind toxic stress at a conference in Spokane, Washington. The journey of public attention to the ACEs in Walla Walla began in October 2007. That's when Teri Barila, Walla Walla County Community Network Coordinator, heard Dr. Robert Anda, coinvestigator of the CDC's ACEs study, speak at a Washington State Family Policy Council event. “Without a doubt,” Dr. Anda said, “childhood trauma is the nation's number one public health problem.” Realizing the impor-

tance of this issue, Barila set out to educate the community about the dire and costly consequences of ACEs and their impact on the developing brain of a child. In February 2010, she established the Children’s Resilience Initiative (CRI), which is now part of the Walla Walla County Community Network.

That year, Jim Sporleder attended a “From Hope to Resilience” conference in Spokane with Teri Barila. He heard John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist, speak about the ACEs and the effects of toxic stress on children’s developing brains. Jim came to realize that his approach to discipline, which often included suspensions, was actually counterproductive. He returned to Walla Walla determined to integrate Trauma-Informed practices in his school.

Jim Sporleder said he realized that he’d been doing “everything wrong” in disciplining kids, and he began to work on turning Lincoln High into a Trauma-Informed School.

“Stressed brains don’t learn well,” Sporleder told me. Sporleder shared this information with his staff and examined how the ACEs were impacting the Lincoln students.

If a student does not feel safe in their school it is more difficult for them to perform well. If they think they are being misunderstood, they will feel isolated. When a student is struggling, the more a teacher makes an effort to get to know them, the more the student will begin to have a sense of safety. Student-teacher relationships are fundamental for personal and academic achievement.

### **Relationships drive brain development.**

With the help of Natalie Turner, assistant director of the Washington State University Area Health Education Center in Spokane, Washington, Sporleder and his staff implemented three basic changes that essentially shifted their approach to student behavior from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What’s

going on with you?”

1. When a students showed symptoms of stress, teachers intervened early to provide help—a quick talk, a longer chat with a school counselor, or an intervention with a psychologist at the adjacent Health Center.
2. For behavior that required more follow-up, such as not complying with a teacher after numerous requests, teens talked with Sporleder, who walked them through where they were in their decision-making ability: green, yellow, or red. If they were fuming, for example, they were in the red zone and were unable to think clearly. They might need a day to think about things before they could discuss how to handle such situations differently and what actions would get them to that point.
3. In staff meetings, conversations switched from how to discipline kids to how to help them and their families.

Two years into the new approach, CRI brought in Laura Porter, cofounder of ACE Interface and former director of the Family Policy Council in Washington State, to work with Lincoln High teachers and staff. They came up with four sets of new, interrelated practices:

1. **Safety practices:** Teachers provided an increased sense of safety by decreasing trauma triggers and providing emotionally safe spaces. When a traumatic event is triggered, it is far less detrimental when there is a calm adult present.
2. **Value practices:** Teachers and staff held and expressed values of hope, teamwork, compassion, and respect. Such conversations increased the quality of student-teacher relationships reinforced by these

values.

3. **Conversation:** Relationship normative practices as conversations focused on “What happened to you?” and the more compassion and tolerance that students experienced, the more positive behavioral norms arose.
4. **Learning practices:** Greater learning occurred as a result of fewer trauma triggers, generated by a greater sense of safety and more “conversations that mattered” between teachers and students, as well as students’ own reinforcement of different skills and new normative relations.

One of the greatest predictors of performance in schools is the emotional stability of the child’s home life. If a child is experiencing one or more ACE, the emotional stress can have a huge impact on their ability to learn.

“Teens who live with complex trauma are walking post-traumatic stress time bombs,” says Turner. They teeter through their days. The smallest incident can push them into a full-blown meltdown. Some kids run away, some explode in rage, and some simply mentally check out. These are all protective responses. Turner explains, “Survival trumps everything else.” Our bodies are meant to react quickly to a stressor or to the perception of danger and then return to normal. However, for kids that have been exposed to chronic trauma, returning back to a normal state takes much longer. It best happens when they are in the presence of someone who provides them with a sense of safety.

When a kid who has a history of complex trauma feels the slightest amount of fear or discomfort, they may explode in rage at a situation most people wouldn’t even shrug. This rage is a perfectly normal response for them; it is how trauma has conditioned their brains to react.

**That’s worth repeating: exploding in rage, getting pissed off, stomping, hitting....It’s all normal.**

For some, erupting is a stress reflex response. They may react in an aggressive manner out of pure self-protection. Until someone helps kids learn how to recognize and understand their emotions, they’ll just keep reacting in this way.

“There are just two simple rules,” says Turner. “Rule No. 1: Take nothing a raging kid says personally. Really. Act like a duck: let the words roll off your back like drops of water. Rule No. 2: Don’t mirror the kid’s behavior. Take a deep breath. Wait for the storm to pass, and then ask something along the lines of: “Are you having a bad day?”, “Are you okay?”, “Did something happen that’s bothering you?”, “Do you want to talk about it?”

It’s not that a kid gets off the hook for bad behavior. ACEs help to explain behavior, but not excuse it. “There has to be consequences,” explains Turner. “What works is replacing punishment with a system to show kids how to begin to get clarity on their reactions to stress that helps them find other ways to respond to it. This has the potential to create transformation both in and out of the classroom. We have to teach the kids how to do things differently if we want to see a different response,” she says.

“They are not equipped to know how to manage their stress on their own. Kids need adults they can count on, who are there to help them learn these new skills,” Turner told the Lincoln High staff. “If it’s not happening at home, it had better happen at school. Otherwise that teen doesn’t have much of a chance at life.” As Robert Anda from the CDC stated, “What’s predictable is preventable.” There is a way to prevent the life-long health impact of the ACEs.<sup>9</sup>

With this new information, Jim was determined to inte-

grate new practices in his school. He led his staff in incorporating a more compassionate and caring attitude toward their students, creating what's now known as a Trauma-Informed or Trauma-Sensitive School. The results were nothing less than extraordinary.

Sporleder had collaborated with his entire high school staff to recognize that many of their students enter the school doors each day carrying a heavy physical, emotional, or social burden. The students at Lincoln anonymously took the ACEs questionnaire. After examining the results, the faculty realized there was an average score of 4.5 ACEs per student; a number that indicates a person is in crisis. This number informed the faculty that many of their students arrived at school each day in a mode of fight, flight, or freeze. This stress was clearly affecting both their behavior and their academic performance. One of his staff stated, "these kids don't have easy lives." Many of them were in a state of crisis and had been subjected to physical and emotional abuse or worse. Increasingly, the teachers realized the trauma the students were dealing with and began learning to understand it, rather than take punitive action. They understood that many of their students were operating at a high level of stress that had been going on long term, and that their brains were wired for fear and programmed to be in survival mode.

**They understood that disruptive behavior was a brain issue, not a behavioral issue.**

Sporleder and the teachers at Lincoln High came to understand that they did not have to take it personally when students acted out in disruptive ways, but rather view these actions as a call for help. The staff came to see their students in a new light, and the ACEs data served as a tool to better

understand and support them. For instance, 30% of the students had seen their mothers physically abused, 40% had felt anger to the point of rage, and 60% had been involved in drug abuse.

A high percentage of the students had lost a loved one and had experienced serious depression; some had even considered suicide. Many led high-risk lives often involving alcohol and other forms of drug use; some were even homeless. They had trouble with trust, and they feared abandonment.

In addition, some had to take on an adult role, caring for younger siblings who had been neglected.

Once teachers at Lincoln High had been trained in how to deal with complex trauma, it created a significant shift in the school's philosophy. The approach to discipline had changed with more focus on "How do we keep kids in school?" rather than "How can we get rid of the ones labeled 'problem'?"

When a student's behavior became overly disruptive, they were sent to the principal. Instead of asking the student what's wrong with them, he asked, "What happened to you?" A question like that gave the students the opportunity to share about their struggles. It gave them space to de-escalate out of a heightened emotional state and realize there was a caring adult who wanted the best for them. Imagine what it was like for his students, perhaps for the first time in their life, to experience acceptance, understanding, and even love.

The trusting relationships that students had with caring adults, like Jim and the rest of his staff, were the game changer at Lincoln High. Additionally, at the school's health center, students were able to talk about their problems rather than bottling them up, and many of them received long overdue medical care. The effectiveness of this approach had students

gaining a new level of stability rather than being at the mercy of their pent-up emotions.

Members of the local community helped fund the health center, realizing that by helping the students become resilient, they would have far less to pay in the future for services such as the juvenile justice system, rehabilitation, and social welfare. The school and health center saw it as a win-win situation: they helped the students, and the students increasingly helped sustain the school and the community. An understanding emerged that ACEs are not one's destiny, but rather a lens for understanding behavior and strategizing new ways of coping. After three years of implementing the new approach, Lincoln's results were astounding. Suspension rates dropped by 85%, there were no expulsions, and kids' test scores and graduation rates surged. The staff at Lincoln was able to mitigate the effects of traumatic stress and help students build skills for resilience and well-being.

The number of hours of their lives children spend in school can encourage educators to take a cue from Lincoln High: transformation is possible, but schools must commit.

In spring 2014, 111 students were surveyed for their ACEs scores and resilience, and from school records, their attendance, grades, and test scores were compiled. The survey also asked students to reflect on their school and life experiences since coming to Lincoln High. The four types of students' experiences related to the practices that teachers and staff put in place to build resilience. They included:

- Learning to trust, confide, be liked, and be loved.
- Learning to respect themselves and others.
- Learning to be responsible for their actions.
- Learning that others were proud of their academic and personal achievements.

There were also three different dimensions of resilience

that increased: supportive relationships, problem solving, and optimism.<sup>9</sup>

The results: Resilience trumped ACEs among many of the students who had gained a greater sense of safety and stability. Resilience had counteracted the negative impact of ACEs on students' behaviors, grades, and test scores. Resilience moved them from a place of surviving to thriving on a life journey of fulfillment, meaning, and purpose.

During the 2012-13 school year, Jamie Redford, an accomplished documentary filmmaker, came to Lincoln and spent the school year filming the transformation that was occurring in the school. *Paper Tigers*, released in the spring of 2015, has become an award-winning film that is touching the hearts and minds of people nationwide. In addition, a companion film, "Resilience," by Redford, delves deeper into the subject of Adverse Childhood Experiences and how communities everywhere can become more aware and help alleviate the problems associated with them.

Jim Sporleder retired as an administrator in 2014 but left a legacy that is now being recognized by parents, teachers, and school administrators all across the country. His work is also being sought after by social service agencies. He travels extensively doing trainings and advocating for Trauma-Informed Schools. In 2017, he cowrote with Heather Forbes a guidebook called *The Trauma-Informed School*.

Jim's wake up call:

"I was hit with a lightning bolt when I realized my students acted the way they did because of the trauma they experienced in the past or the trauma they go home to every night. I realize we couldn't expect our students to focus at school when they get abused the night before, so we implemented a

Trauma-Informed School in Lincoln. It was the hope and resilience that re-engaged our students into the learning environment.

When implementing a Trauma-Informed model in any school, there has to be a shift from a fear-based culture to a relation-based culture. As staff and teachers make the shift, students will experience the change and begin to feel safer.

Many of the students experienced years of stress and a toxic home environment that had them living in survival mode. Their “normal” is fear, reactivity, and failure. Their brains are not “bad;” they’re just wired for fear. It’s a brain issue, not a behavioral issue. They are products of their environment. They have survival brains, and that’s how they enter the classrooms every day.

Students impacted by trauma carry a very heavy load and continuously operate at a high level of stress.

Through the trauma-informed environment, relationships became the priority. Then, test scores improved dramatically and graduation rates increased. We definitely focused on academics, but first we had to focus on the social and emotional needs of our students in order to get to the academics.”

The zero tolerance policies are the least Trauma-Informed policies ever put into our schools. They ignore the mental and emotional needs of the most vulnerable of students. The zero tolerance policy is actually a zero relationship policy.

With an understanding of how the traumatized brain operates, we are called to re-examine how we have been perceiving disruptive students. We have been judging or labeling these students as “bad” when the truth is they cannot make logical decisions or calm their nervous systems in survival

mode.

The solution: we must help to calm their brains. Fear-based punishment is not the mechanism to return students from stress response to top-down brain control. Meaningful relationships, acceptance, and closer connection are the means by which top-down control can develop. These students need caring and stable adults. We must teach them strategies that help them build their regulatory skills and understand that we value their voice and their feelings.

Making this shift to a Trauma-Informed paradigm is critical. Our schools were designed for students with low ACEs scores; they need to accommodate all students and even help students with the highest ACEs scores to thrive.

Students need a caring adult to spend time with them to evaluate their stress levels and help them identify the causes of their behaviors. Teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and social workers are gathering to share information in national conferences and learning how to create a Trauma-Informed Schools.

A movement has begun that has the potential make schools safe and productive environments where every student, no matter what their circumstance, has an opportunity to thrive and achieve.

Journal Entry #9

When my male peers pick on me, it affects me in such a way where I became physically sick from being chronically depressed. I don't think they truly understand that their tiny comments really affect me + my self-esteem. I don't know if there's truly a solution to this problem.

“When my male peers pick on me, it affects me in such a way where I become physically sick from being chronically depressed. I don't think they truly understand that their tiny comments really affect me and my self-esteem. I don't know if there's truly a solution to this problem.”

– tenth grade female student

News:

Today in the news I heard about 2 girls who killed themselves because of bullying. They were being teased for being chubby. They didn't feel like they felt welcomed to school. I think it is terrible that people are being bullied to the point, they can't handle it anymore.

“Today in the [news] I heard about 2 girls who killed themselves because of bullying. They were being teased for being chubby. They didn't feel like they felt welcomed to school. I think it is terrible that people are being bullied to the point they can't handle it anymore.”

– tenth grade female student



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## CHAPTER 7

### Bullying

#### THE STAKES ARE HIGH

In May 2014, the New York City schools chancellor reported ten suicides in a seven-week period.<sup>1</sup> One of the students was fifteen-year-old Jayah Ram-Jackson. “At least eight people have told me that they want me to kill myself,” she wrote on Facebook a month prior to her suicide. She jumped from the roof of her grandmother’s twenty-seven-story apartment building.

In August 2018, nine-year-old Jamel Myles hanged himself. His older sister noted he was bullied regularly at school.<sup>2</sup>

Bullying is not always life-threatening, but it can be. Bullying is always harmful to all involved and disrupts communities.

Like everything in this book, bullying is about relationships. Instances of bullying are unhealthy relationships between two or more people, but even the relationship between a person exhibiting bullying behavior and a person experiencing it has the potential for healing and understanding. Positive, supportive relationships can be an antidote to bullying. While the causes and consequences of bullying are complex, Relationship Education can undoubtedly help communities address bullying with compassion and understanding.

#### Understanding Bullying

Bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior—physical, verbal, or social—that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. It can occur in person or online; virtual bullying is known as

cyberbullying.

Keeping in mind Nonviolent Communication and how we learned to make observations instead of judgments, it is important that we do not label people as “bullies” or “victims.” When we label someone a bully, we make a judgment about their character rather than an observation about their actions. Labeling can prevent us from seeing the role each person can play in a situation and can make people, especially the person bullying, believe their behavior is an inevitable part of their personality. Instead, we can say “someone who exhibited bullying behavior” and “someone who was bullied.”

Though there are diverse motivations for bullying, at its core, we can understand bullying as a strategy to meet a need. It is a strategy that creates disconnection, pain, and suffering for the people being bullied, bystanders, community members, and even the people who exhibit bullying behavior themselves. People who exhibit bullying behavior still must be held accountable for their behavior, but understanding it as a strategy can help us view them with more compassion and understanding. Attempting to understand and address the needs and feelings of the person exhibiting bullying behavior and the person being bullied are essential to resolving the issue.

#### A Culture of Violence

The media contributes to a culture of violence. National attention has documented an increase in violence in media, film, television, video games, and song lyrics.<sup>3</sup> Studies indicate that violent media can lead to an increase in aggressive thoughts and behavior.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to portraying physical violence, the media also allows a culture of verbal violence to persist. News platforms highlight politicians’ aggressive responses to each other. Social media platforms provide opportunity for people to bully each

other directly, such as through comment functions, and indirectly, such as by leaving people out of a photo or tagging them in photo they aren't in to emphasize exclusion.

Violence in media is not the cause of bullying; however, it can enable it. Parents and teachers can use their discretion to discuss media content in order to help kids appropriately understand media in context. Parents can also discuss the dynamics of their children's relationship with social media.

### **Adult Bullying**

Bullying does not only occur among kids—children and adults can bully each other. The story of Karen Klein, an upstate New York bus monitor, received national and international media attention in June 2012 when a video was posted on Facebook and YouTube showing a group of middle school boys harassing and insulting her while she was on duty.<sup>5</sup> In the video, the students repeatedly poked her, called her names, and made mocking comments about Klein and her child, who had committed suicide in 2002. Three boys organized the taunting, and a fourth student subsequently stated that he filmed the bullying due to peer pressure. She was able to keep her composure in the face of the insults rather than engage in confrontation. The video eventually went viral.

Klein's story demonstrates that adult bullying should not be absent from the conversation. While children can exhibit bullying behavior toward adults, most adult bullying occurs in the workplace. According to the 2017 Workplace Bullying Survey, almost 60% of US employees have been affected by workplace bullying, defined by the Workplace Bullying Institute as repeated harmful abusive conduct that is threatening, intimidating, humiliating, work sabotage, or verbal abuse.<sup>6</sup>

The social and emotional consequences of adult bullying are serious; bullying at any age can affect a person's well-being

and their ability to be productive.

### **Consequences of Bullying**

Bullying has immediate consequences—people who are bullied often experience emotional distress and physiological effects, such as heart palpitations, elevated blood pressure, and increased perspiration, in response to bullying behavior.

In addition to these short-term consequences, recent research shows the long-term effects of bullying to be severe. Bullying increases a child's or adolescent's risk of depression and anxiety disorders.<sup>7</sup> Bullying can even physically alter a child's brain structure in a way similar to that of ACEs, affecting the child's ability to learn, plan, and process and retain information.<sup>8</sup> Though it cannot be considered a direct cause of suicide, bullying does increase a child's risk for suicide, especially when combined with other risk factors such as low self-esteem, family turmoil, and mental illness.<sup>9</sup>

Bullying also has social consequences. Students experiencing bullying may have difficulty learning and struggle to form friendships in school. Adults experiencing bullying in the workplace often are less productive, take time off work, or decide to leave their jobs.<sup>10</sup> These emotional and social consequences are detrimental to a person's well-being, and they also negatively affect an entire community. When any one student or employee is distressed and unable to do their best work, but especially when multiple people are, the whole community suffers.

### **Speaking Up About Bullying—Individual Intervention**

Jennifer Livingston, a news anchor in Wisconsin, was criticized for her appearance. Livingston received an email from a viewer saying she was a “disgrace as a public figure” because she was overweight. In her televised response, Livingston admitted

that being overweight was an everyday battle she struggled with. She appeared in front of TV cameras at the station where she worked with the following response: “You don’t know me, so why are you saying this?”

She told the audience, “Do not let your self-worth be defined by bullies. This behavior is learned. It is passed down. If you’re at home and you’re talking about the fat news lady, guess what, your children are probably going to go to school and call someone fat.” After her statement, Livingston received overwhelming support from her viewers.<sup>11</sup>

Not everyone can go public with the courage of Jennifer Livingston, but Livingston sets an example of how a person can intervene to address bullying. If you feel comfortable, you can speak up on your own behalf by talking to the person bullying you directly about your needs and feelings or by telling an authority figure about the issue.

If you believe you have experienced bullying in the workplace, a good first step is to keep a journal of whatever bullying behavior you are experiencing. Try to include as much detail and evidence as possible, such as letters, emails, text messages, or faxes sent from a bullying employer, superior, or coworker. Additional steps include discussing your issues with a trusted coworker, a therapist, or a family member and bringing the issue to human resources. If necessary, you can seek legal advice.

Often, though, people are hesitant to advocate for themselves, and bystanders must intervene to help end the bullying. Some people think bullying is not their problem because they do not participate in it. However, everyone plays a part when bullying takes place. A person who acts with bullying behavior often needs an audience to entertain. By not speaking up, people who exhibit bullying behavior might interpret silence as a form of approval.

Bystander intervention can be extremely effective. You can find someone, such as an employer, manager, teacher, administrator, counselor, or any person of authority, who can intervene.

Recall the story of Karen Klein, bus monitor who experienced bullying. In response to the video of the incident, a fundraising campaign went up to send Klein on a vacation, with an initial goal of \$5,000. Within a few weeks, the fund exceeded \$700,000. Klein has since started the Karen Klein Anti-Bullying Foundation, and the boys who were responsible were suspended from school for a year and required to complete fifty hours of community service. The people who started the fundraiser and donated to it intervened on behalf of Klein and were able to make a positive impact on her life that prompted her to help even more people. Speaking up against bullying can have a widespread positive impact.

However, speaking up against bullying can be challenging. Bystanders may fear retaliation or ostracism. Though alerting a person of authority is one method of intervention, bystanders may also intervene in more subtle, less intimidating ways. You can change the subject, question the bullying behavior, use humor to redirect conversation, talk to the bully as a group, act as a support system for the person who has been bullied by walking or sitting with them, or practice empathic listening and ask how you can support them.<sup>12</sup>

These subtle methods of intervention—supporting the person being bullied and practicing empathic listening—are a component of healthy relationships. In having a healthy, supportive relationship with someone, you can help them respond to bullying and deal with its consequences.

Supportive relationships are not only an important part of addressing bullying as a peer bystander, but also they are essential to addressing bullying as an authority figure. Teachers and workplace leaders can address bullying behavior by speaking to the people involved and supporting them. They can speak to the person who is being bullied and encourage them to open up about their situation and also affirm their self-worth. When speaking to the person who is exhibiting bullying behavior, they

can foster a climate of compassion using restorative, rather than punitive, action. Using NVC, authority figures can reinforce the gravity of the person's actions and also discuss why they are exhibiting bullying behavior.

### **Systemic Intervention**

Individual intervention can be effective, but only systemic intervention will address bullying in the entire community and prevent it from happening again. Teachers today are struggling to address students' emotional well-being while also focusing on their academic success. There is pressure on them to attain high test scores for their classes, and, unfortunately, it can take precedence over the physical and psychological safety of school children. Workplace leaders also struggle to prioritize emotional well-being over productivity. However, creating a supportive community is essential to creating a safe and productive environment.

Bullying prevention programs can help alleviate the problem, as has been proven effective in Scandinavian countries where widespread bullying prevention curricula were implemented in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>12</sup> These countries now have some of the lowest rates of bullying worldwide.

Other research on the long-term effects of bullying reinforces the importance of bullying prevention.<sup>13</sup> According to *Latitude News*, "In Norway, the program [Olweus] has been shown to reduce bullying up to 50% and produce marked reductions in reports of vandalism, fighting, theft, and truancy."<sup>14</sup> The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program "is focused on long-term change that creates a safe and positive school climate." Olweus is about improving relationships.<sup>15</sup>

Olweus has been brought into three elementary schools in California. The schools reported a 21% decrease in bullying after just one year. When Olweus was implemented in Arizona,

several schools reported a reduction of bullying by more than 25%.<sup>16</sup>

The Trauma-Informed School approach, including Relationship Education, can serve as a component of a bullying prevention program. Like Olweus, the Trauma-Informed approach requires a change in school or organization climate that creates a more positive environment with healthier relationships. By fostering a community in which everyone feels valued, emotions are seen as important, and relationship skills are practiced, school- and workplace leaders can address the root causes of bullying.

We have to learn how to process our feelings and be taught to communicate in respectful ways. Adults have to develop healthy relationships with their children so they know there's a place to go for support. Children and adults have to develop healthy relationships with their peers to prevent the violence of bullying, and teachers and workplace leaders have to develop healthy relationships with their students and employees to better mediate and address potentially harmful classroom dynamics. Adults must find ways to show kids that their feelings and concerns are valid and encourage them to open up and communicate what they feel in a safe and supportive environment. Using the skill set of *Healthy Relationships 101* is one way to build these relationships.

Programs like Olweus are evidence that focusing on relationships on an institutional scale is effective in preventing bullying. When we learn how to communicate with respect and talk openly about our emotions, the whole community benefits. Viewing bullying as a strategy and addressing it as such moves all people involved toward understanding and reconciliation. Acting with compassion in our individual interactions and systemic decisions may not end all bullying, but it can help prevent it and can help improve the well-being of those around us.

### **A Personal Confession**

I have a confession to make. In sixth grade, there was a girl in my class who I'm guessing came from a poor family. Her clothes were old and sometimes dirty, and she had noticeable tooth decay. Children in our class made fun of her, and I may well have done so myself.

I don't remember what I said, or if I said anything at all to this girl, but I'm certain I didn't stand up for her. I now know that there's no such thing as an innocent bystander. At that point in my personal development, my focus was likely on my own fears of being bullied and little else. My essential strategy in life was survival, so if this girl was the focus of bullying, perhaps the other kids would forget about bullying me.

As generally good-natured as my parents were, they did not teach me about the meaning and expression of empathy and compassion. How could they have known how to articulate the importance of these needs? There was little public conversation about mental and emotional well-being, today recognized by many as one of the greatest riches we can have. However, I do remember a piece of guidance my mother gave me: "If you can't say something nice to someone...." You know the rest.

Almost a lifetime later, I am wondering why, when I was ten years old, I didn't think about the repercussions of my decision to remain silent when it came to that girl in my sixth grade class. Having learned how to practice expressing empathy and showing respect and understanding for others, I now realize that if I'm unkind to anyone, the consequences can ripple far beyond anything I could imagine.

I can hardly believe that at this point in my life I'm regretting my behavior at the age of ten. On the Internet, I tried to find the girl who was bullied in my sixth grade class, but I couldn't. If I did, this is what I would have written:

*To an elementary school classmate,*

*I don't know if you remember me, but we were in the same sixth grade class in elementary school in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1961. I'm not really sure if I ever personally did or said anything unkind to you, but I clearly remember that other kids were mean to you, and I didn't stand up for you. Even if I wanted to, I doubt I could have found the courage to do so. I want you to know that I'm sorry. I hope my behavior or my silence didn't leave any lasting scars.*

*I hope you have had a good life, good health, and good relationships. Looking back, I am saddened by my behavior, and I wish I could go back and do it differently. Knowing what I know now, I would have made an effort to stand up for you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Michael Jasz*

Entry 8

Dear Journal,

~~The~~ The cartoon I found online is disturbing to look at because ~~the~~ the little girl makes me think of <sup>my</sup> niece who is <sup>in the cartoon</sup> one year old. This girl is being ~~to~~ informed that her body can make her successful instead of her mind.

I ~~don't~~ wouldn't want my niece to be told that, luckily <sup>she</sup> she is being raised by good role models. But unfortunately, ~~she~~ ~~is~~ not everyone has the kind of support a child needs. The

woman in the cartoon is supposedly a mother figure, she is a disgrace to all ~~the~~ the decent mothers. According to the quote a female can be successful by using their body ~~in~~ in other words known as ~~prostitution~~ prostitution.

It seems to me that <sup>the</sup> girl does not have a father figure and if this is the case, I would like to state that her dating life will be a disaster. Because if she sticks to her "mother's" quote she will let boys control her because her self-esteem will be based on her body and not her self.

[Note to reader: Many of the journal entries were written as we were in the process of practicing and learning NVC. Though there is a judgment in this entry, we thought its content best exemplified the point of this chapter.]

"The cartoon I found online is disturbing to look at because the little girl makes me think of my niece who is [one] year old. This girl in the cartoon is being informed that her body can make her successful instead of her mind. I wouldn't want my niece to be told that. [Luckily] she is being raised by good role models.

But unfortunately, not everyone has the kind of support a child needs. The woman in the cartoon is supposedly a mother figure, she is a disgrace to all the decent mothers. According to a quote a female can be successful by using their body, in other words known as prostitution. It seems to me that the girl does not have a father figure and if this is the case, I would like to state that her dating life will be a [disaster.] Because if she sticks to her "mother's" quote she will let boys control her because her self-esteem will be based on her body and not her self."

– ninth grade female student

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## CHAPTER 8

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### Self-Esteem

#### Self-Acceptance and Self-Care

Just as you must learn how to cultivate healthy relationships with others, you must also learn to cultivate a positive and fulfilling relationship with yourself. Greater awareness of your needs and feelings allows you to have more control over the behaviors that transform your self-perception.

The benefits of improving your relationships with others and yourself are reciprocal—healthy relationships with your loved ones improve your happiness and self-esteem, and a healthy relationship with yourself improves your self-esteem and your capacity to exist in healthy relationships with others.

As is true of all relationships, your relationship with yourself requires constant practice. Practicing self-acceptance and self-care can help you foster a healthy relationship with yourself.

#### Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is your sense of your own value—essentially, it's how much you like yourself.<sup>1</sup> Self-esteem is distinguished from self-perception, also called self-concept, in that it places a value judgment on your idea of yourself, whereas self-concept is your awareness of who you are without evaluation of your worth.

It is not uncommon to define your self-esteem by how you look, thinking if you were thinner, had a different nose, or had different clothes, you would be happier and more deserving of

success, love, and friendship. The “ideal” body type is constantly changing, along with the definition of a healthy body. The pursuit of the “ideal” body in obsessive, unhealthy ways damages your self-esteem and may lead you to become unhappy. Obsessing over how you look and the main factors that affect your appearance—food, exercise, makeup, hair, clothes—causes stress.

However, your self-esteem can and must be based on much more than your appearance. You may also define your self-esteem by how you think others perceive you, whether you “fit in,” and your academic, occupational, or financial success. Perhaps you are critical of how you treat others; perhaps you ruminate over the feedback your boss gave you; perhaps your parents were harsh during your childhood and you inflict the same harshness upon yourself.

Regardless of exactly the criteria you use to evaluate yourself, your self-esteem comes from some combination of your own and others' perceptions of yourself, of your childhood and of your current situation, and of your physical and mental health. Your self-esteem matters—taking the time to understand your self-esteem and its contributing factors can improve your relationship with yourself and with others.

Low self-esteem is associated with mental health concerns including depression and anxiety.<sup>2</sup> Low self-esteem also impacts your relationship with others; you are better able to exist in healthy relationships if you regard yourself as worthy of them and consider your needs and feelings to be important.

This chapter is intended to bring you to greater self-awareness and give you the tools to improve your relationship with yourself; it does not describe in depth how to improve your self-esteem. With the importance of your self-esteem in mind, consider reaching out to a loved one or a mental health professional if you have serious concerns about your self-esteem.

You can foster higher self-esteem and a better relationship with yourself by practicing self-acceptance.

### **Self-Acceptance**

In your relationships with other people, you make an effort to accept and respect the other person's needs and feelings, even if you may not like them or agree with them at first, and you try not to judge their feelings and actions. In the same way, you must strive to accept your own needs and feelings and not judge yourself. Practicing self-acceptance is key to creating a healthy relationship with yourself.

Begin by assessing your feelings and needs across all areas of your life. What needs are being met or not being met by your relationships? your job? your home? What feelings arise from the fulfilled needs? What feelings arise from the unfulfilled needs?

When you ask yourself these questions, take note of your answers, but do not judge them. Try to not judge yourself for the feelings that arise from your needs; try to not blame yourself for unpleasant feelings and unfulfilled needs. Accept your needs and feelings as they are, and accept yourself as you are. As I've said, a person without needs is dead—you can be grateful that you are alive and able to have needs. You do not have to judge or blame yourself for needs and feelings every person has.

### **Self-Care**

Stress is a mental, physical, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension.<sup>3</sup> Stress can have a pervasive presence in your life. You may stress about your appearance and having the “ideal” body, your decisions, an upcoming test or meeting, social events, getting all your work done, or your relationships. It is normal to feel stressed about important or dangerous events;

however, existing in a constant state of stress can be toxic.

Stress releases hormones such as cortisol into our bodies. The prolonged presence of cortisol can be harmful to the parts of the brain that control fear, long-term memory, planning, attention, and social interaction, making it difficult for us to learn and thrive.<sup>4</sup> Toxic stress can also weaken our immune systems, making us more susceptible to illness.

Fortunately, you can mitigate the effects of stress through self-care. Self-care is any activity you do intentionally to take care of your mental, emotional, and physical health.<sup>5</sup> Self-care can take many forms, including eating healthy, getting adequate sleep, making time to do activities you love, and spending time with people who support you. Even cleaning could be a form of self-care if it meets your need for order. Exercise and meditation are two of the best ways to reduce stress and improve physical and mental well-being.

Acknowledging your needs and feelings in the moment can help you determine what you must do to take care of yourself. You can practice self-care by listening to your body's cues: Are you hungry? Do you need to stay in tonight and rest?

In your healthy relationships with others, you make time to take care of the people you love and do activities that meet their needs, and they do the same for you. Likewise, to have a healthy relationship with yourself, you must make time for what meets your needs for happiness, comfort, and peace of mind. Practicing self-care and reducing stress fosters a more positive relationship with yourself.

### **Boundaries**

Setting boundaries—physical and emotional—is an important practice in self-care. We can all decide our own boundaries, and we have the right to choose when we want to expand or



close them. Boundaries can vary depending on context and circumstance — there is no uniform boundary for any relationship. For example, you might be willing to listen to a sibling talk when it is late at night and you are tired, but you might not want to do the same for a coworker.

Constant assertive communication is necessary to understand and navigate these contexts without crossing someone else's boundaries or your own. It is your responsibility to communicate your boundaries and to understand and respect the boundaries of others. With the practice of NVC's needs and feelings, you will see the benefits of establishing boundaries that directly address your needs.

It is important to emphasize acceptance and avoid judging others when defining healthy boundaries. You also must practice self-acceptance and avoid judging yourself. You may feel uncomfortable saying no, especially if you are close with a person and are nervous about their reaction. However, a person's reaction to your boundary is not your priority.

You may be hesitant to set boundaries if you are concerned that you are not accommodating to others or are being selfish. Invalidating your emotions or making excuses for people is a way of ignoring your needs and feelings while putting someone else's first. In a healthy relationship, if a person loves and respects you, they will respect your boundaries.

Issues such as low self-esteem may cause us to avoid looking inward at our essential needs and instead focus on the needs of others. Boundaries created while focused on another person's needs may become enmeshed with that other person's boundaries. Enmeshed boundaries are boundaries that are unclear or permeable. If you cannot tell the difference between your own emotions and those of the other person with whom you have a relationship, you feel responsible for others' emotions, your happiness depends on the other person and their emotions, or you and another person have not established personal emotional

time or space, then you may have enmeshed boundaries.

Enmeshed boundaries can lead to codependency in a relationship. Codependency refers to a pattern of focusing excessively on another person's needs and neglecting your own needs as a result. Codependent relationships are unhealthy; people who are codependent may be searching for their own sense of identity through another person. Codependency has the potential to lead to emotionally abusive behaviors.

Here are some questions to help you decide whether or not you are in a codependent relationship:

1. Do you keep opinions to yourself to avoid arguments?
2. Are you usually worried about others' opinions of you?
3. Are the opinions of others more important than your own?
4. Are you uncomfortable expressing your exact feelings to others?
5. Do you judge yourself when you make a mistake?
6. Do you have difficulty accepting compliments?
7. Do you think people in your life would suffer without your constant efforts?
8. Do you have trouble saying no when asked to do something?
9. Do you have trouble asking for help?

If you have answered yes to several of the above questions, you may be experiencing the effects of codependency.

Making requests of others and setting boundaries is healthy and productive for relationships; boundary-setting is part of self-care. At times, people may attempt to test our boundaries, but it is important to stay firm in our values. Indicators of boundaries being tested can be comments, such as being told we are "too sensitive" or that we "can't take a joke." Although these comments

may be a strategy to meet someone's need for self-expression, we don't have to negate our boundaries. A response to "can't take a joke" can be as simple as "I feel uncomfortable when I hear those comments and I would appreciate if you didn't make them again."

Setting boundaries and practicing self-care are not selfish choices; it is important to take care of yourself so you can better take care of your loved ones. Your relationship with yourself is as important as the other relationships in your life. By improving your own physical, mental, and emotional well-being through self-acceptance and self-care, you can be more present and happier in your relationships with loved ones.



It is very disappointing to see pictures like this. This is a picture that indicates domestic abuse. Domestic abuse is very serious. There are 2,000,000 women who get involved with an abusive partner every year. This is very sad because no woman should have to be in a relationship where love hurts. When kids see their father put their hands on their mother, I can only imagine how upset they feel, especially to an infant who doesn't know what's going on. They shouldn't have to see this kind of relationship. Stop the violence!!

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— twelfth grade female student

## CHAPTER 9

### Abuse in Its Many Forms

#### PAYING ATTENTION TO WARNING SIGNS

People often see abuse as something that occurs between either family members or romantic partners. However, it can also happen between friends and in the workplace. Abuse doesn't typically appear out of nowhere. Learning to recognize the warning signs can help you detect if you or someone you know is experiencing abuse.

Abuse can sometimes be misunderstood as intense feelings of care or concern. Being worried or voicing concern about a loved one is not abusive, but when that worry shifts into jealous, obsessive, or controlling behavior, a relationship becomes unhealthy. If you find yourself changing your behavior for fear of someone's reaction or "walking on eggshells" around that person, you might be in an abusive relationship. Abuse can be physical, emotional, or verbal.

With the rise of social media, cyberstalking has become increasingly common. Someone that stalks or is being stalked may not even realize that it is an obsessive, intrusive, and unsafe behavior.

Healthy relationships can be cultivated only when you are willing to examine and address the circumstances of any situation that is uncomfortable. Whether you or someone you know have experienced abuse in any form, steps can be taken to address it and move forward.

### Consent

Consent is most often discussed in the context of sexual intimacy, and it is absolutely necessary. A culture of consent in all areas of our lives is important and can be fostered with open communication involving verbal and physical cues, as well as active listening. You can ask people for consent in anything we do, ranging from physical affection to emotional intimacy. Asking a friend if it is okay if we vent to them is a form of asking for consent.

A person is giving full consent when they freely and actively agree to engage in an activity; however, a person still has the right to change their mind at any point. As mentioned in the last chapter, it is crucial to be mindful and respectful of yourself and others' boundaries. Boundaries can change and are represented through verbal and physical communication.

By practicing strategies of assertive communication and articulating refusal, you can communicate your needs and feelings and be prepared to use this communication in intimate situations. Assertive communication and refusal skills, as well as active listening, are particularly important when it comes to romantic relationships. The more communication, verbal and physical, the closer you will feel with your partner and the more positive the experience will be for both parties.

When a person acts toward you, sexually or otherwise, without your consent, you may be experiencing abuse.

### Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse can take many forms. Any sexual act, whether it be a comment, kissing, or sex, done without all parties' participation and agreement is misconduct. The following terms are important to understand what is abusive sexual behavior.

Coercion of sex is unwanted sexual activity that happens when one is pressured, tricked, threatened, or forced in a non-physical way.<sup>1</sup>

Sexual assault is any sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the full consent of both parties.<sup>2</sup>

Sexual misconduct is coercion of sex, sexual assault, and unwanted sexual comments. Sexual misconduct can occur at any age and between people of any gender; it can occur in public, at home, or in the workplace. Sexual misconduct with minors is child abuse.

### **Emotional and Verbal Abuse in Romantic Relationships**

The following examples are typical behavior from someone who is being emotionally and verbally abusive toward another.

You may be experiencing abuse if someone with whom you are in a relationship:

- Does not want you to spend time with anyone else.
- Tries to isolate you from friends and family.
- Hits, punches, kicks, shoves, or threatens to hurt you in any way.
- Is extremely jealous.
- Gets mad when you talk to other people.
- Is possessive: treats you like a belonging and does not want you to share your time with others.
- Is controlling: insists that you call to “check in” or has to approve of your daily interactions.
- Texts or calls you excessively to find out where you are or who you are with.
- Tries to control what you wear, what you do, and how you act.

- Scares you: makes you worry about reactions to things you say or do.
- Behaves violently: owns weapons and threatens to use them.
- Has a history of fighting, loses temper quickly, has hurt animals or other people.
- Is emotionally abusive: puts you down, calls you names, tells you that you are nothing without them.
- Makes all the decisions in the relationship: disregards your thoughts, needs, and feelings.
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs and pressures you to take them.
- Will not accept breaking up: threatens to hurt you or themselves if you end the relationship.
- Stalks you after you have tried to break it off.

Sometimes it is hard to see why people who experience some of the above examples stay in a relationship that is abusive. It is not uncommon for people who have experienced abuse to believe the person abusing them will eventually stop. In fact, the reality is quite the opposite: people who abuse become more violent when they believe they are losing control of anything, especially the person closest to them.

Other people in these abusive relationships might believe the possessive patterns are an expression of love rather than acts of abuse. People who are abused may be afraid to leave an abusive situation when they think of the consequences of making their partner angry. They may believe the emotional abuse will turn physical. They might also be embarrassed by their situation and don't want others to know what is going on.

People experiencing abuse often have low self-esteem and believe it's their own fault they're being abused. In some cases, they see being with a person who abuses them as better than being alone. Many victims of abuse often continue to care about the person who is hurting them, making it difficult to see they are

being hurt emotionally, psychologically, or physically. They often make excuses for the person abusing them or place the blame on themselves.

While it is common to experience shame and self-blame in an abusive relationship, it is never the fault of the person being abused, and it is important to remember that an abusive relationship does not define a person.

### **Abuse Between Friends**

The most common form of abuse between friends is verbal. Friends can joke with one another in ways that are degrading. When the insulting and joking persist to an uncomfortable level, despite one person's request that it stop, the joking could cross the line from humor into abuse. Making fun of someone is not fun.

### **Getting Help**

Consider whether there are any elements of abuse in any of your relationships. Know that identifying these circumstances begins the process of change. No one is expected to do this alone. Reach out to someone you trust. If you cannot contact them, you can reach out to friends or family.

Before confronting someone who is abusive, notify someone you trust and ask for support under safe and secure conditions. The first step to getting help is realizing no one has the right to control us and everyone has the right to live without fear.

Abusive relationships are not only unhealthy, but also unsafe. If you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, help is available, and it is important to reach out.

### **Resources:**

National Domestic Violence Hotline  
(800) 799-7233  
[www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

National Dating Abuse Helpline  
1-866-331-9474  
[www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org)

Safe Horizon Hotline  
1-800-621-HOPE (4673)  
[www.safehorizon.org](http://www.safehorizon.org)

Journal #6

Sure thing by Miguel expresses emotions for a girl he's in a relationship with. Throughout the song he says that "this love is a sure thing". My question is, is love ever really a sure thing? People say that and get married but much like my parents they get divorced. In some rare occasions it might work out but for many people that are in "love" it is only temporarily.

“[‘Sure Thing’] by Miguel expresses emotions for a girl he’s in a relationship with. Throughout the song he says that ‘this love is a sure thing.’ My question is, is love ever really a sure thing? People say that and get married but much like my parents they get divorced. In some rare occasions it might work out but for many people that are in ‘love’ it is only temporary.”

Journal #9

I believe that family should always be the core to a person's life. The connection between family is important because they mold you mostly into the person you are. When around them there should be a positive energy that radiates an emotion that fills you with safety. The home is ~~the~~ where you start before venturing out into the world.

“I believe that family should always be the core to a [person’s] life. The connection between family is important because they mold you mostly into the person you are. When around them there should be a positive energy that [radiates] an emotion that fills you with safety. That home is where you start before venturing out into the world.”

– tenth grade male student

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## CHAPTER 10

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### Divorce

#### SOME WORDS TO THE WISE

Divorce is no less a threat to healthy relationships than everything else this book has addressed. Using the needs and feelings list and practicing empathy are powerful tools to keep us connected in any relationship. These tools have not been readily available to the general population until now. Nonetheless, the occurrence of divorce has broad implications. We found one person's outlook on divorce to be quite striking: Minnesota's 9th District Judge Michael Haas. In two hundred words he says more about the consequences of divorce than two hundred books on the subject.

Your children have come into this world because of the two of you. Perhaps you two made lousy choices as to whom you decided to be the other parent. If so, that is your problem.

No matter what you think of the other party—or what your family thinks of the other party—these children are one-half of each of you. Remember that, because every time you tell your child what an “idiot” his father is, or what a “fool” his mother is, or how bad the absent parent is, or what terrible things that person has done, you are telling the child half of him or her is bad.

That is an unforgivable thing to do to a child. That is not love. That is possession. If you do that

to your children, you will destroy them as surely as if you had cut them into pieces, because that is what you are doing to their emotions.

I sincerely hope that you do not do that to your children. Think more about your children and less about yourselves, and make yours a selfless kind of love, not foolish or selfish, or your children will suffer.

– Minnesota 9th District Judge Michael Haas

Here is a story to illustrate potential consequences for those people who don't heed the judge's words.

In 2012, I attended the screening of a documentary called “Gang Girl,” directed by Lori Davis. Her film was shown in Harlem and sponsored by ImageNation, a media arts foundation.

Lori Davis has been married twice; she had three children with her first husband. After her divorce, her children went back and forth, alternating time between her and their father. When Lori's daughter, Nefsha, was a teenager, she joined an all-girl gang in Los Angeles. Losing her daughter to a gang was, to say the least, a troubling experience that left Lori fearful for the life of her child. She not only began the process of bringing her daughter back home, but also began to document it in her film, “Gang Girl.” One report estimates that there are 32,000 teenage female gang members in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

In attendance at the screening were Lori and her daughter Nefsha. In a Q&A session following the screening, Nefsha described why she joined the gang. She said it was the home she never had. She explained that she never felt comfortable either at her mother's or her father's home. Each house had its own culture and



its own set of rules. The one place she felt at home was with the gang. There she knew her identity, the role she played and where she fit in. In a way, the gang met her needs for safety, security, and stability.

I believe a lesson can be taken from this for all parents, particularly those who have gone through a divorce. If you fight, belittle each other, have conflicting sets of rules and, in the worst-case scenario, plot to turn your children against your “ex,” you may wind up driving your children away to a place where they believe they’ll have more stability; that place may be on the street. On top of that, they may hate one or both of you for making their life so conflicted and confusing.

What I learned from listening to Nefesha was she needed a stable home where she would be accepted for who she was.

No matter what your version is of why a marriage or partnership has to end, a contentious divorce may drive your children into harm’s way.

### Today’s Divorce Rate

In the 1950s, the divorce rate was about 10%;<sup>2</sup> now it hovers around 50%.<sup>3</sup> Based on the US census, the divorce rate in 2010 was 53%.

According to Jennifer Baker of the Forest Institute of Professional Psychology in Springfield Missouri, over 50% of first marriages, 67% of second marriages, and 74% of third marriages end in divorce in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

If you are a couple with children, married or divorced, it’s important to remember:

### Your relationship is bigger than the two of you.

Some statistics to consider:

- A total of 2,539 divorces occur per day in the United States.<sup>5</sup>
- Children in divorced families are twice as likely to drop out of high school.<sup>6</sup>
- Children who have experienced a divorce frequently have lower academic achievement.<sup>7</sup>
- Twenty-five percent of adolescents who come from a divorced home become disengaged from their families.<sup>8</sup>
- Children from divorced families are more likely to have academic, behavioral, and psychological problems.<sup>9</sup>
- The top four reasons people get a divorce are the lack of effective communication, abuse, finances, and infidelity.

There are endless books written about divorce. What we’re most concerned about is its effect on children. If you are a parent who is about to get divorced, is already divorced, or if you come from a family where your parents or guardians were divorced, then I hope this chapter has given you added perspective. For those of you who are thinking of getting married or remarried, I hope that this chapter has provided you with some clarity as well.

What we can suggest—and have suggested since the beginning of this book—is to learn and practice expressing your needs and feelings without blame. Imagine a family that communicates in a way that evokes empathy, care and understanding—a family that commits to a way of relating and speaking that cultivates and sustains a lasting bond. This builds a foundation for safety, stability, and security. Relationships don’t have to be so difficult. Really, they don’t.

Facebook | Internet Stalking #3

Lets get real, it's 2010 and technology allows us to do anything nowadays. The internet sure does make it tough to get over a breakup with all the resources available to know what <sup>now</sup> your ex is doing - just a click away. In my opinion, Facebook is a curse and a blessing all in one. Internet stalking is unhealthy. It keeps you stagnate, not allowing you to grow and move forward in your life. The temptation is irresistible, and its not ~~that~~ like I haven't done the same thing before, because I have. All I learned was that it hurt more than it helped, its a futile waste of energy and time.

This internet stalking makes you want to stalk all the time. It takes over your brain and once you start theres no way of stopping. Its unhealthy to stalk because you can easily misjudge a person's picture or status or their comments. Once you're off, all you ~~want~~ want to do is go back on, and stalk some more to keep your mind satisfied. But lets face it, once you're out of the relationship, its over - stalking won't help bring it back. Also, before meeting someone new, you should not research them on the internet before your second date. Knowing information can trigger jealousy or misconception, and you definately don't want the stranger to know youre stalking so early in the friendship or that youre a psycho.

Due to this entry's legibility, a transcription is not provided.

## CHAPTER 11

### Technology and Cell Phones

#### THEIR IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

As a member of the Baby Boom generation, I've witnessed firsthand the impact technology has had—and continues to have—on relationships. We are able to stay in touch in more ways than ever before. However, we are also losing out on authentic connections with the people in our lives.

Throughout history, the primary means of building relationships has been through face-to-face contact. A century ago, people were alarmed as telephone use became more widespread, resulting in a loss of face-to-face contact. In this century, with the growing use of smartphones, there's been a reduction in not only face-to-face, but also voice-to-voice, contact. Today, technology dominates how we communicate, so we have to consider: what effect is technology having on relationships?

#### The Internet as a Tool for Connecting People

Technology has changed the way we communicate. We don't have to see someone in person to talk to them—we can call, text, video chat, or email. We can order dinner via an app on our smartphones, and we can search for potential employers via online job boards. We trust the Internet to tell us who are the best doctors in our area, and we look for that perfect romantic partner on dating sites. A recent survey found that 17% of married couples over the course of three years met on the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

The Internet allows people to create new friendships and even collaborate to achieve social change. In these situations, the In-

ternet functions as a place for groups and individuals to connect and communicate with one another. Connections forged on the Internet can become real-life opportunities.

### A Growing Dependence

An anonymous survey of 200 people reported the following results in December 2018:

- 74% use their phone as an alarm clock.
- 62% check their phones 160 times per day.
- 91.5% feel uneasy leaving their phones at home.
- 48.5% use their phone on dates.
- 54.5% use or look at their phone while driving.
- 59.5% have texted someone who is in the same room as them.
- 76.5% consider themselves addicted to their phones.<sup>2</sup>

A study published by the Pew Research Center in 2015 stated that “aided by the convenience and constant access provided by mobile phones, 92% of teens report going online daily with almost 24% using the Internet ‘almost constantly.’”<sup>3</sup> In another 2015 Pew Research Center study, “89 percent of cell-phone owners said they had used their phones during the last social gathering they attended. But they weren’t happy about it; 82 percent of adults felt that the way they used their phones in social settings hurt the conversation.”<sup>4</sup>

Technology allows us to communicate with people not geographically available in our lives, but the absence of face-to-face conversation can compromise our capacity to develop meaningful and fulfilling relationships. Understanding the people in our lives is important in creating these relationships. Instead of advancement in relationship skills, which are argu-

ably the foundation of personal development, face-to-face and voice-to-voice conversations are fading from the human experience.

### Is Technology Bad for Your Health?

Research strongly suggests that this lifestyle of being constantly switched on leads to increased anxiety. Larry Rosen, an international expert on the effects of technology, has been researching the topic for thirty years. His 2012 book, *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession With Technology and Overcoming Its Hold on Us*, examines “how to stay human in an increasingly technological world.”<sup>5</sup> Are we losing the human touch?

Rosen explores the impact that technology has on our day-to-day habits and behavior. Constant patting of our pockets to ensure we have our phones and avoiding face-to-face contact, replacing it with the glow of face-to-screen interaction, fosters a sense of separation rather than connection. Mobile and social technology have become linked with our identity. Rosen points out that the psychological impact of technology can produce a mental imbalance. His research and that of his colleagues show that an enmeshed relationship with technology can cause symptoms of numerous psychological disorders.

The impact of cell phones is not just psychological—it’s physiological. Research by Gregory Jantz, founder of The Center: A Place of Hope, shows that the advancement of mobile technology is contributing to overstimulation in regions of the brain, which can lead to depression and anxiety. As a result, teenagers often “become fatigued, lose motivation, and sometimes distance themselves from their families and friends.”<sup>6</sup> Because of the overstimulation, there are more rash behaviors and risky decisions.

## Social Media

Social media has become increasingly present in our lives, and each platform can serve as a different depiction of a person. Platforms that involve likes and have a comment function, such as Instagram and Facebook, may show heightened or exclusively positive moments of someone's life. It is important to recognize that what is depicted is not always an accurate representation, and we should try, to the extent that we can, not to compare ourselves to the images of others we see on social media.

The idealism of social media is particularly relevant for relationships. Romantic relationships are often depicted as "perfect" on social media, with beautifully edited photos of happy moments that seem to represent a couple's entire relationship. Observing the depiction of romantic relationships on social media can encourage you to pine for an "ideal" relationship that does not exist or feel your own is inadequate.

It's important to remember that no one's relationship, or life, is perfect. Every relationship has its difficulties; social media never tells the whole story. To overcome comparison and the hurtful feelings that result, follow accounts that promote authenticity and subjects you find interesting, such as those that post about food, body positivity, sports, music, or art. You can also try measuring and attempting to limit your screen time or taking a break from social media; even a few days without social media can remind you that you do not need likes or comments to feel happy, fulfilled, and loved.

Limiting accounts that spark undesired feelings or limiting your time spent on social media can also benefit your mental health. While navigating the rise and constant changes in Internet interaction, it is important to constantly check in on your well-being. Using the needs and feelings vocabulary can be a useful tool for understanding how social media makes

you feel and taking social media breaks. Setting time limits on apps can also increase well-being.

## "Tech Neglect"

Too often I notice parents or caretakers pushing a baby stroller, so involved in texting that they're unaware of where they are going. At times, I've seen them even entering an intersection with approaching traffic, potentially endangering the child's safety. A while back, I saw a child and a man standing together on an uptown subway. I can't get out of my mind what I saw as the train barreled north. The child longingly looked up for attention and connection, while the man was glued to his cell phone. I consider this tendency to pay attention to our technology instead of children a form of child neglect, and it is happening more and more. I have coined a term for it: "tech neglect."

If you had a child and you knew the person taking care of them was regularly on their cell phone, would you want that person working for you?

Parental neglect is not new, but it's now exacerbated by the distractions of communication technology. For some children, tech neglect by parents or guardians can lead to a sense of isolation or abandonment. As these conditions spiral, will we have the willpower and the awareness to exercise caution, consciousness, and responsibility while using communication technology?

We don't yet know the long-term consequences of this modern-day "disconnect" between parents and children, and among friends, family, and coworkers. Children need an extraordinary amount of nurturing in their formative years. If they're ignored or feel unsafe, their social and emotional development can be affected, perhaps seriously.

If healthy bonding and attachment are not established in the early months, the ensuing periods of development can become

delayed. In this age of advanced communication technology, parents are increasingly distracted by their devices during these critical developmental periods in their children's lives, giving their children less of their focused attention.

We've entered a period in human evolution that will forever change how we communicate. Society at large must establish some sort of protocol regarding the presence of these devices in our everyday lives. I call this new period of communication "The Wild West of Texting."

Are we becoming more connected to our cell phones than to our loved ones? Do we place more value on responding to a text or even taking a call than being present and sharing quality time with others? Children have to know first and foremost that parents and teachers are there for them. Cell phones come second. Unless there is more awareness of this issue, we may be faced with generations of children whose sense of identity is fragmented. Anyone caring for young children has a huge responsibility, especially since a child's psychological well-being is impacted more in their first few years than during any other period in their life.

Neglect also occurs, although perhaps more subtly, when we choose to text or email rather than speak to someone. For example, have you ever texted someone to wish her or him a happy birthday instead of calling? Have you posted your condolences concerning a loss of some sort on a friend's Facebook wall? A few years ago, I was with a group of people and a cell phone rang. The woman receiving the call looked at her phone and said, "It's my best friend," and hit the off button so it would stop ringing. I was surprised and asked why she didn't answer. She replied, "I only text." In that moment, I felt concerned and uneasy, as I had witnessed how cell technology can affect our connection with others.

### **"Tech Neglecting" Our Friends and Family**

Tech neglect is not limited to parent-child relationships. Have you ever been in the middle of a conversation with a friend, family member, coworker, or romantic partner when they took a call or started texting without saying "Excuse me?" If so, what did you feel? What needs were met or not met?

Cell phones are sometimes used to avoid uncomfortable social interactions. As a result, rather than being a tool for connection, cell phones can act as a barrier, creating distance between the people in our lives.

A while back, I went to visit a doctor friend. The boyfriend of the doctor's office manager happened to show up at the same time I did. We had met a few times before. He was in his mid to late twenties. We entered the elevator together and struck up a conversation, and we continued talking in the waiting area. I was in the middle of a sentence when his gaze turned down to look at his cell phone, which had been in his hand since we met. As he looked at his phone, I stopped talking.

He looked at me, perplexed. I could see that he sensed an awkward moment. I said, "No offense, but I don't speak with people when they're looking at their cell phones." Hearing my reaction, he put down his device and apologized profusely.

This moment may not have changed his relationship with his phone, but I hope it brought him more awareness of our often excessive reliance on cell phones. Persevering through awkward situations without technology can build greater connection.

### **Technology in Relationships With Significant Others**

Romantic relationships are now subject to new stress, anxiety, and disconnection. When the majority of your communication is through technology, misunderstandings can occur due to an absence of tone, body language, and facial expression. Additionally,

needs that are fulfilled from physical interaction, such as the need for touch, authenticity, and warmth, are difficult to meet. These communications present new challenges in romantic relationships especially, though they can negatively impact all relationships.

As a relationship coach, I'm alarmed at the level of negativity escalating between couples in the form of aggressive, confusing, and critical text messages. I can't help but wonder: is communication that doesn't require face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction encouraging behavior that otherwise would not take place? One of my coaching clients, who was in a challenging relationship for several years, at one point showed me text exchanges between him and the woman with whom he was involved. I was astounded when I read the barrage of judgments laced with blame and shame.

These exchanges chip away at the foundation of any relationship. The residue of such behavior is a fast track to resentment and alienation. When behind a screen, people tend to behave more aggressively than in person; this tendency also manifests in cyberbullying.

No amount of coaching, counseling, or therapy is going to help couples until they realize they must be willing to consider a different way of communicating—both in person and behind the screen. One of the goals of my coaching work is to encourage couples to take responsibility for the way they communicate, especially as they navigate the modern era of enhanced technology.

### **Technology in the Workplace**

Could your relationship with technology be sabotaging your career? Are you running a company where the productivity is diminished due to excessive personal use of technology? Are you an employee who keeps making up for lost time or attempting to hide non-work-related activity that affects your job? If these

questions strike you as relevant, perhaps it's time to be more mindful of the "relationship" you have with your electronic devices. They may be affecting your life even more than you realize. Furthermore, in the workplace, "conversation among employees increases productivity."<sup>7</sup>

### **What Lies Ahead?**

Do we really know for sure that spending thousands of hours a year with cell phones up against our head isn't a health risk? The human brain isn't fully developed until around the age of twenty-two.<sup>8</sup> The consequences of excessive use of wireless technology have to be a topic of ongoing conversation and research. More open and honest communication would be beneficial regarding the impact of technology, not only on our health and well-being, but also on all our relationships. I know, right now, you're probably texting a friend to tell them to read this book. Thank you, now put it away.

[This student typed her journal entry.]

“Reflecting on my mother, I’ve had a shaky, at best, relationship with my mother. Since the time I had been born she became physically ill, with little hope, and angered with life itself. Although communication between us has gone from limited to more than extremely rare, I’ve become well aware of her fondness for the word ‘why.’

I can recall from even my earliest memories how her pile of ‘why’ questions would instantly veer a positive mood into a hostile one. Prior to learning about this, I hadn’t understood what had caused me to feel this way for so many years. Not just with my mother but also with my peers and teachers who often bury me under with their *whys*.

Here’s what I’ve come to understand. When we ask ‘why’ questions we usually aren’t actually interested in the response. We have already created the judgment and an answer in our minds. Not only are you aware of this, but the other person is as well. I believe that this is what ignites the shift, and from that point things usually just escalate. Realizing this constant irritation in my own life has helped me put a stop to bringing it into the lives of others.”

– twelfth grade female student

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## CHAPTER 12

### The Loaded “Why” Question

#### WORDS AND PHRASES THAT ARE CHARGED OR CONFUSING

When I started studying the language of relationships, I was struck by how many words and phrases I used that didn’t express what I intended to say. Not only did these phrases spark misunderstanding, but also they were, in many ways, harsh and aggressive to others and myself. I simply wasn’t conscious of the full impact of my words.

#### Phrases That Obscure Needs

##### *The Loaded “Why” Question*

I realized I had been using the word “why” in a way that was detrimental to connection with others. You might wonder why someone says or does something you don’t like. What might you say?

Examples:

“Why are you always late?”

“Why didn’t you get that report to the office?”

“Why didn’t you take out the garbage?”

“Why didn’t you pick up the groceries?”

“Why didn’t you do your homework?”

“Why did you pick up our movie tickets so late?”

“Why can’t you get out of the house faster?”  
 “Why don’t you get a new job?”  
 “Why don’t you listen to me?”  
 “Why didn’t you do the dishes?”

Listen for the “why” in your statements to others, and you’ll see that most of the time you aren’t asking a question at all; rather, you’re engaging in a thinly veiled judgment.

We ask a lot of “why” questions because it’s quite common in our everyday language. We don’t realize these questions are often used as a form of criticism, complaint, and insult. In many cases, a “why” question implies a “should.”

*Why didn’t you do the dishes?*

*You **should** have.*

Most of the time we don’t stop and ask why we’re asking “why,” but one day, I did.

A few years ago, I was working with a tech-savvy assistant. As time went on, her focus seemed to fade. She was getting a degree in fashion and as graduation day neared, she began looking for work in her field. During her last month, she seemed to be impatient and a bit on edge. Although she was working with me daily, she also had one foot out the door. It was not the ideal working environment for either of us. One day I asked her how a certain application worked. In response, she snapped back, “This is the third time I’ve told you how this works. Why can’t you remember?”

In that moment, I first realized how judgmental this “why” question was. Subconsciously, it had been troubling me for as long as I could remember. Without realizing it, the “why” question often carries a tone of evaluation, judgment, blame, and shame. I now call it the loaded “why” question—it was an “aha” moment, as I realized I had been using the “why” question throughout my entire life. The “why” question is a way of making people wrong without any awareness of the con-

sequences.

Unfortunately, as this realization hit me, I saw that sometimes my reactions also contained a degree of sarcasm. To her loaded “why” question I recall replying: “*Whyyyyy?* I’ll tell you *whyyyyy*. I’m lazy, I’m inconsiderate, I’m not very smart, and I waste time. *That’s why!*” In hindsight, I can see that my sarcasm was a reaction that escalated the tension. This incident occurred before I had begun to practice expressing my needs and feelings without blame and judgment.

I realized that I had been using the loaded “why” question without any awareness of how harsh it could be. I also realized that the “why” question is often more of a criticism than a genuine inquiry. It questions people’s intelligence or character. The use of the loaded “why” question implies that the person being addressed is in some way lacking in manners, integrity, or consciousness—maybe all three.

I decided from that moment on to try to remember to ask myself before I spoke, *Does this need to be said?* It became obvious to me in many cases that the loaded “why” question could trigger disappointment, resentment, or anger in others. It packs the kind of punch that could hinder or even stop effective communication in its tracks. In that moment, a weight was lifted from me. Up until that point, like comedian George Carlin used to say, “I didn’t know that I didn’t know.”

Now that I was aware, I began to notice how often I spoke using the loaded “why” question. I would frequently ask, “Why don’t you do this or that?” Although I didn’t mean to question anyone’s intelligence or good intentions, it may have been misinterpreted.

Imagine that you have been relating to somebody for years and, day after day, week after week, they ask why you did or didn’t do something. Would you find yourself defending whatever you said or did? It may not initially register that you were defending against a pattern of criticism. It is more chal-



lenging, and sometimes confusing, when these exchanges take place between two people who truly care about each other and value their relationship.

Of course, the “why” question doesn’t always convey a criticism. It has benefits in expanding dialogue, exploring topics, learning the reasoning behind certain rules or decisions, and respectfully debating points of view. It is a necessary element of communication in many cases.

Here are some examples of when “why” is useful:

*Why do you think math plays an important part in physics?*

*Why don't we all go to a movie?*

*Why do you think most newspapers are now published online?*

*Why do you think it's worth taking a position at another company?*

The “why” question can be an inquiry, or it can be criticism. You might be sitting there thinking, *I'm not attacking people when I ask the “why” question.* Next time you pose a “why” question, ask the person how they felt when they heard you say it. If they felt frustrated, uncomfortable, embarrassed, insecure, or anything of the like, then your “why” question could have been loaded. Again, it is important to check in with those around you. The point of analyzing the “why” question is to encourage inquiry into the way we think and speak, as well as to become conscious of how embedded some of these potentially hurtful habits are in our everyday language.

### **Close Cousins of the Loaded “Why” Question**

Here are a few more commonly used phrases, prevalent in everyday conversation, which can hinder our ability to effectively communicate. Are some of our most commonly used words and phrases lacking in both clarity and sensitivity?

***“She or he really pushes my buttons.”***

Nobody ever pushes your buttons. They hold out their finger, and you walk into it. In other words, we make choices consciously or subconsciously about how we will respond to others. Do we pay attention to the early warning signals when someone’s words or actions are upsetting to us? Is anyone in your life “pushing your buttons”—a friend, family member, coworker, girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, or wife? You might remember a relationship that went sour. Perhaps you may have said or heard someone say, “I knew this was coming. I realized it a long time ago, but I thought things would get better,” or maybe, “I was *hoping* things would improve.”

These thoughts are a call for reflection. When we pay attention to early warning signals, especially at the beginning of any relationship—and when we communicate our needs and feelings—we can usually prevent the button-pushing syndrome.

***“You caught me off guard.”***

Throughout my life, I have used the phrase, “You caught me off guard.” One day, not too long ago, I thought to myself, “Why would I want to live *on guard*?” As I thought about this, “You caught me off guard” was a phrase that seemed self-protective, as if I was living with an always-present defense system. I realized I don’t want to live defensively. I decided to take the phrase “You caught me off guard” out of my vocabulary. I now say, “You caught me by surprise!” or “That surprised me.”

***“I want to be with someone who’s emotionally available.”***

As a relationship coach, I have often heard women say this phrase above. When I ask them what they mean, they generally

respond “I want to be with someone who will show his feelings.” Sometimes I ask, “Do you also want him to be able to show his frustration and anger?”

When I ask this, they have to stop and think what emotions they *really* do want a partner to express. Feelings include both the positive and the negative—as NVC explains, the fulfilled feelings and the unfulfilled feelings.

Do you want someone who is emotionally available, or do you want someone who is emotionally mature? Being able to communicate your needs and feelings with your loved ones is a building block to creating a lasting bond.

***“I don’t care.”***

“What do you want for dinner?” You might say, “I don’t care,” or, “It doesn’t matter.” Someone has asked you what you would like to eat and what you would enjoy. Answering with “I don’t care” or “It doesn’t matter” implies you may not care about the other person’s interest in your well-being. Though it’s likely you don’t mean that, it still implies that you are disinterested in the person’s plan of action, and perhaps even the person.

If you don’t know what you want, as an alternative, you can say “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure. Give me a moment.” The phrase “I don’t care” repeated often enough could possibly build resentment. The same goes for “It doesn’t matter,” because it does matter to the person asking you. Can you see how these two widely used responses can communicate something we don’t intend?

***“In all honesty...” “To be frank...”***

This phrase subtly implies that, up until you used it, you haven’t been telling the truth. Also, if you say “frankly” in a sentence,

does that mean you weren’t being frank up until that point? I took these two phrases out of my vocabulary. You can, too.

***“They’re so dysfunctional.”***

How often have you heard people judgmentally describe others, especially couples and families, as dysfunctional? I sometimes ask the person who said it, “Could you describe functional?” Often, there is a moment of silence. How does one define a functional relationship?

As I see it, a key aspect of a functional relationship is one in which both people share an understanding of the power of language and use it with sensitivity and care in how they relate to others. As we become more aware of the intricacies of the way we think and speak, “functional” relationships will more naturally occur. Plus, dysfunctional is a stinging judgment.

***“Never mind.”***

There have been times when I have experienced “Never mind” as a put down, as in, “It’s not worth my time to repeat this to you.” For clarity’s sake, I went to the dictionary—because it seems there are at least two different ways to use this phrase. “Never mind” can be used more gently, such as “Never mind, I found it.” “Never mind about paying me back; it’s on me.” It can also be used as a term denoting “less than.” For instance, if you hurt your knee, you can say, “I can hardly walk, never mind run.” In other ways, however, “Never mind” can have a sting to it, such as when it’s said with a tone of exasperation.

Here’s an example from a work setting: Joe says, “When are you scheduled to work?” Brad doesn’t hear what was said and responds with “What?” Joe is in a hurry and a bit overwhelmed, and says, “Never mind.” Depending on the situation, this re-

sponse can be seen as a brush-off or a put down.

In exchanges like this one, is it that Joe thinks Brad wasn't listening and doesn't care to repeat what he said? Perhaps Joe is irritated, thinking Brad wasn't listening. Whatever the case, this phrase can create tension or a sense of disconnection, depending on the context.

If you're frustrated because you think someone isn't listening, ask for clarity. Don't use "never mind" as a put down. If none of this is relevant to you, then *never mind*.

### ***"I just want to be happy."***

What does it mean to be happy? In one of the first high school classes I taught, I started the class by saying, "I never want to be in a 'happy' relationship." As I looked around the room, the students seemed confused. I could see they thought this was a strange thing to say.

Then I said, "How often have you heard someone say 'He doesn't make me happy anymore?' or 'She doesn't make me happy anymore?'"

"I'm happy, I'm sad, I have sunny days, I have stormy days, I celebrate and I grieve." I went on to emphasize that we have a wide range of feelings, yet there is an unspoken pressure that we should be living a "happy" life, and unhappy feelings are often discounted.

If we pay attention to our environment, there seems to be a preoccupation with being "happy." From the ads on the buses of people smiling on their way to a vacation, to the smiles on the faces of the models drinking cola or smoking cigarettes, everyone seems to appear happy. Why is this? There are books, seminars, and workshops all designed to increase happiness in our lives. Ironically, this obsession with happiness can make us really unhappy.

I ask my students to consider the pressure that the word "hap-

py" can create. When I told them I didn't want to be in a happy relationship, I wasn't saying I didn't ever want to be happy. Realistically, I want my relationships to include the sunny days and the stormy days. I told the students I want to be in a healthy relationship, I want to be in a fulfilling relationship, I want to be in a meaningful relationship, and I want to be in a thriving relationship.

As an experiment, take "happy" out of your vocabulary. Now describe what you want in a relationship using the words below:

- Healthy
- Fulfilling
- Meaningful
- Thriving

These are inclusive terms; they include the tough times as well as the fun times.

### **The Five Hardest Words in the English Language**

Someone once asked me, "What are the five hardest words in the English language?" A therapist once told me, "The five hardest words in English or any language are no, stop, more, now, and help."

#### **"No"**

For many of us, it is hard to say no. I was taught to be polite and do my best to accommodate others, and that often meant doing things I didn't want to do or that I thought were not in my best interest. I now realize I don't want people to suppress their no, and I don't want to suppress mine. I don't want people to do anything for me or with me because they think they *should*. I want whatever someone does to be voluntary.

**“Stop”**

Stop is a powerful word. I use it when someone is doing or saying something that I believe has to come to an end. It is amazing what this word can do. In a way, it startles people, but it helps reset the conversation or situation or bring it to a close. When you’ve had enough, just say stop!

**“More”**

You want more? Ask for it. You’ll either get a yes or no, but either way you’ll know the answer.

As a society, we’re taught to take care of the needs of others before our own, often leading us to suppress our own needs. If we want to ask for more of something, we may fear that we’ll be labeled as “needy” or “greedy.”

Learning to be comfortable asking for more in order to meet your needs is something we all can do.

**“Now”**

When you want something done immediately, not later, you can use the word “now.” This usage makes your intention clear. We’ve also been taught that saying “now” can be disrespectful or perceived as a demand. However, sometimes it’s necessary to say “now” in order to meet a pressing need. It’s a way to practice meeting your needs more clearly.

**“Help”**

Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; in a way, it can be a sign of strength. There is asking for help to get something done, and then there is another kind of asking for help—when you

need emotional, financial, or some other form of support.

What would a relationship look like in which you could reach out and ask for help because you were hurting, confused, or worried? How would you feel if you knew a likely response would be something like, “Tell me more.” I imagine that kind of relationship would be very reassuring.

“No”

“More”

“Stop”

“Now”

“Help”

These are yours to use. Now.

**Being Impeccable with Your Words**

As Don Miguel Ruiz says in his book, *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom*, “be impeccable with your word.”<sup>1</sup> Since I’ve been practicing Nonviolent Communication, I’ve changed. Many people I’ve known for years have told me I seem like a different person, even those who used to keep their distance. I believe they are seeing someone who has been practicing speaking in a nonaggressive, nonjudgmental manner. As noted earlier in this chapter, before I speak, I ask myself, *Does this need to be said?* Admittedly, I don’t do this all the time, but I believe I have become more conscious about my choice of words.

On a regular basis, I used to make sarcastic remarks I thought were funny. Yes, sarcasm can be entertaining, but it can also be toxic when it’s constant. Snide comments don’t bring us closer to others. Everything is a matter of choice. I have seen all my relationships change as I choose to think and speak in a way that is different from my conditioning. To restate this important point again, I want to be impeccable with my words.

As I've been teaching this work in high schools and colleges, and in my coaching practice, I've come to realize that the language I use is ultimately my choice. I now choose to speak in a way that brings me closer to others.

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## CONCLUSION

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### There's Hope

#### LEARNING TO EXPRESS NEEDS AND FEELINGS WITHOUT BLAME AND JUDGMENT

My goal in writing this book is the same goal I have when working with high school students, teachers, and parents; it is the same goal I have in my practice of coaching couples. It is my great hope to shine a light on the dynamics of healthy relationships, and for “healthy relationships” to become a household phrase.

I believe the key to effective communication is using words that create connection rather than separation, articulating needs and feelings, avoiding judgment and blame, and listening empathically. At the end of my classes in high schools, we hand out evaluation forms, and the majority of the students have reported that the Healthy Relationships 101 program had a positive impact on them. Teachers and administrators respond similarly. The Relationship Foundation believes this information should be shared far and wide, especially in the education world.

In some classes, we had students fill out pre-assessment and post-assessment questionnaires. We asked, “What would you do if somebody embarrassed you in front of your friends?” One student answered this question, “I might laugh it off, but I also might have to hit him.”

After our being in class with him for a month, the same student, who was known to bully others, answered this question with a very different response. He wrote, “I would take a look at my ‘needs and feelings list’ and figure out how I

Journal #12

It's finally the end of Relationship classes and I can only feel apprehensive for what will happen now that I know what I do. Everything I've learned has mostly brought me closer connections to everyone I hold close. I'm watching people more, wondering what they are thinking and feeling. I've come out better because of this class. Thank You Michael.

“It’s finally the end of Relationship classes and I can only feel apprehensive for what will happen now that I know what I do. Everything I’ve learned has mostly brought me closer connections to everyone I hold close. I’m watching people more, wondering what they are thinking and feeling. I’ve come out better because of this class. Thank you Michael.”

– ninth grade female student

can resolve things peacefully.” The shift in perspective of this student is evidence of how a new level of consciousness and maturity can be established in any school, with any student and, for that matter, throughout our entire society.

As a relationship coach, I also ask my clients to fill out a questionnaire, which gives me insight into what they wish to achieve in our sessions. The questionnaire not only enables me to get right to the core of the healing process, but it also gives my clients a chance to clarify issues they may not have been able to articulate before.

I let the people I work with know my approach is focused on learning new language and communication skills. I give them the needs and feelings list and instruct them to practice saying, “When you said... I felt...,” “When you did... I felt...,” or “Because... I need...”

Once they begin to identify each other as people with needs and feelings instead of adversaries, a shift can begin to take place. Often, this shift is dramatic, bringing out the spirit of the love that brought them together when they first met. It can only happen if they have accepted that change is necessary in order to heal and transform their broken bonds.

If couples are willing to learn to share their needs and feelings and listen empathically, as well as practice validating and empathizing with each other, then they have a much better chance of experiencing the change they are seeking.

It’s inevitable that, sometimes, others will say and do things we find irritating. Through the practice of NVC, however, we can actually unlearn the habitual patterns of judging and blaming. Rather, we see that what they are saying or doing is simply a strategy to meet their needs, even when it’s a strategy we don’t appreciate. Whatever behavior we find annoying may really be our judgment of the person who is making us feel annoyed. With practice, we can start to see everyone, everywhere, as people with needs and feelings instead of our judgments of them. I want to

live in this kind of world.

This method of bringing consciousness to the forefront of our thoughts and feelings can help us be less reactive to words and actions that tend to trigger us, preventing conflict before it even begins. We may still get irritated in certain situations, but we will no longer be affected by the things that have provoked us in the past.

As we study NVC, the language and principles become more ingrained in our thinking process, and eventually they become second nature to us. Again, if we want to be good at something, practice is essential. If we want to thrive in our relationships, we must practice. NVC is the cornerstone of our approach and works wonders with high school students, their teachers, their parents, and my coaching clients.

This book, most importantly, is about awareness. When you learn how to express your needs and feelings without blame and begin to listen empathically, your life can change dramatically. When you become aware of objectification, bullying, self-esteem and self-care, the influence of the media, detecting and avoiding abusive relationships, and technology addiction, then you can begin to think and speak with more clarity and respect for all.

If you are a parent who is putting people down in your day-to-day interactions, your children are picking up on your words and may be repeating them outside the home. Children are like sponges, and they will often replicate the behaviors of their parents, guardians, and caregivers. Judgmental words and behavior widen the divide between people.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, “It is passive violence that fuels the fire of physical violence.” He also said we must *be* the change we wish to see in the world. A nonviolent approach restores our innate ability to express care and empathy. To quote Gandhi’s grandson Arun, “The world is what we make of it. If we change ourselves, we can change the world, and changing ourselves begins with changing our language and methods of communica-

tion.”

I have often heard people say that humans are like animals, that we’re violent in nature and that we’re ultimately self-centered. I live in New York City, a place many people perceive as a tough town. I, on the other hand, have often experienced New York as a place full of caring, charming, and unique people when I choose to view humanity through a lens different from that of my conditioning.

I have seen people lose their balance and fall on the sidewalks of New York, only to be assisted by everyone around them rushing to help them get up. Is this the impulse of a callous society or the impulse of individuals who truly care about the well-being of each other?

To me, caring is the essence of who we are. I hope what you have read in this book gives you an idea that we are much more than what we may have seen growing up, as well as what we see in the news.

It is imperative that we adopt behavior that cultivates empathy, respect, and critical thinking. We must ask ourselves what kind of world we want to live in. My experience with thousands of people—students, parents, teachers, family, friends, and the couples I coach—leads me to believe that *there is hope for a world where healthy relationships can thrive and flourish.*



## Endnotes

### Chapter 3 – The History Behind the Mystery

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## APPENDIX

### FULFILLED FEELINGS

#### Affectionate

Caring  
Loving  
Open

#### Self-Connected

Centered  
Comfortable  
Relaxed

#### Hopeful

Optimistic  
Renewed

#### Engaged

Absorbed  
Curious  
Engrossed  
Fascinated  
Interested  
Intrigued  
Stimulated

#### Refreshed

Rested  
Restored  
Revived

#### Grateful

Appreciative  
Moved  
Thankful  
Touched

#### Excited

Amazed  
Energetic  
Enthusiastic  
Invigorated  
Passionate  
Surprised

#### Joyful

Amused  
Delighted  
Glad  
Happy  
Pleased  
Overjoyed

#### Exhilarated

Blissful  
Ecstatic  
Elated  
Thrilled

#### Peaceful

Calm  
Comfortable  
Centered  
Quiet  
Relaxed  
Relieved  
Satisfied

#### Inspired

Amazed  
Enthusiastic  
Moved

## APPENDIX

### Unfulfilled Feelings

#### Afraid

Apprehensive  
Fearful  
Frightened  
Mistrustful  
Panicked  
Scared  
Terrified  
Worried

#### Annoyed

Aggravated  
Bothered  
Displeased  
Frustrated  
Irritated

#### Anger

Angry  
Contempt  
Enraged  
Furious  
Outraged  
Resentful

#### Confused

Ambivalent  
Bewildered  
Conflicted  
Lost  
Puzzled  
Torn

#### Anxiety

Agitated  
Alarmed  
Anxious  
Concerned  
Disturbed  
Restless  
Shocked  
Startled  
Surprised  
Troubled  
Uncomfortable  
Uneasy  
Unnerved  
Unsettled  
Upset

#### Embarrassed

Ashamed  
Self-conscious

#### Fatigue

Beat  
Burned out  
Depleted  
Exhausted  
Lethargic  
Sleepy  
Tired  
Weary  
Wiped out  
Worn out

#### Pain

Devastated  
Grief  
Heartbroken  
Hurting  
Lonely  
Miserable  
Regretful

#### Tense

Anxious  
Cranky  
Distressed  
Distraught  
Nervous  
Overwhelmed  
Restless  
Stressed out

#### Vulnerable

Fragile  
Guarded  
Helpless  
Insecure  
Jealous  
Shaky

#### Aversion

Disgusted  
Hate  
Horrificed  
Hostility

#### Sad

Depressed  
Dejected  
Disappointed  
Discouraged  
Disheartened  
Gloomy  
Hopeless  
Miserable  
Unhappy

#### Disconnected

Apathetic  
Bored  
Detached  
Distant  
Envy  
Indifferent  
Longing  
Numb  
Removed  
Withdrawn  
Yearning

## NEEDS

**Connection**

Acceptance  
Affection  
Appreciation  
Authenticity  
Belonging  
Care  
Closeness  
Communication  
Community  
Companionship  
Compassion  
Consideration  
Empathy  
Friendship  
Inclusion  
Inspiration  
Integrity  
Intimacy  
Love  
Nurturing  
Partnership  
Presence  
Respect  
Self-respect  
Security  
Self-acceptance  
Self-care  
Shared reality  
Stability  
Support  
Trust  
Understanding  
Warmth

**Play**

Adventure  
Excitement  
Fun  
Humor  
Joy  
Relaxation  
Stimulation

**Peace**

Acceptance  
Balance  
Beauty  
Ease  
Harmony  
Order  
Peace of mind  
Space

**Physical****Well-being**

Air  
Care  
Comfort  
Food  
Rest/sleep  
Safety (protection)  
Shelter  
Touch  
Water

**Meaning**

Awareness  
Celebration  
Challenge  
Clarity  
Competence  
Consciousness  
Contribution  
Creativity  
Discovery  
Efficiency  
Effectiveness  
Growth  
Integration  
Integrity  
Learning  
Movement  
Participation  
Presence  
Progress  
Purpose  
Self-expression  
Stimulation  
Understanding

**Autonomy**

Choice  
Dignity  
Freedom  
Independence  
Self-expression  
Space  
Spontaneity

## Non - Feelings

Words that describe what we think others are doing to us.  
(We are really blaming others.)

Abandoned	Intimidated	Put down
Attacked	Invalidated	Rejected
Blamed	Invisible	Smothered
Betrayed	Isolated	Threatened
Caged	Judged	Trampled
Cheated	Left out	Tricked
Cornered	Let down	Unaccepted
Criticized	Manipulated	Unappreciated
Disrespected	Misunderstood	Unheard
Distrusted	Neglected	Unseen
Dumped on	Overpowered	Untrusted
Hassled	Overworked	Unwanted
Ignored	Patronized	Used
Insulted	Pressured	Violated

Words that describe what we think about ourselves.  
(We are really judging ourselves.)

Guilty  
Inadequate  
Insecure  
Stupid  
Unimportant  
Unworthy  
Worthless

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Michael Jasz was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He attended Ohio State University and graduated in the Social Sciences Honors Program. He has worked in various fields, including construction, film production, and working with special needs adults . He is a potter and a carpenter.

Shortly after the start of the new millennium, Michael embarked upon researching relationship authors and began relationship coaching. In 2008, he began teaching an enrichment program in New York City high schools called Healthy Relationships 101. From his experiences working with couples and with students in high schools, he uses his insights and humor to illustrate how we can develop the critical thinking necessary to address the challenges of modern relationships.

The book *Healthy Relationships 101* builds on a remarkably effective communication skill set, using the principles of Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication (NVC). The school program explores how we perceive and interact in any relationship. Students examine the effects of cultural influences, the media, social media and technology and how they are reframing relationships of every kind. The *Healthy Relationships 101* curriculum and companion guidebook provides a practical way of building and cultivating healthy relationships in the classroom, the workplace, for couples and in any social setting.

Michael established The Relationship Foundation in 2010. Its mission is to build a safer, more harmonious so-

ciety by advocating Relationship Education as a core component of the learning process.

The Relationship Foundation envisions a society where healthy and fulfilling relationships are built on communication skills that lead to greater critical thinking, respect and empathy. This work is pioneering as a new approach to social and emotional learning that helps to counteract the issues challenging our society and today's young people in particular. Based on the evidence Michael and his colleagues have seen in schools, as well as in his work with the Trauma-Informed School approach, virtually everyone agrees that Relationship Education is *the* vital next step in our learning process.

**For more information:**

[www.therelationshipfoundation.org](http://www.therelationshipfoundation.org)

