

# Ten Steps that Transform Anger into Compassionate Connection

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## Introduction

Practicing Nonviolent Communication® guides us to reframe the way we listen to others and express ourselves by focusing our consciousness on four areas: what we are observing, feeling, needing and what we are requesting to enrich our lives. In this context the word need defines those basic human needs we all share. The following is an abbreviated list of universal human needs as defined in Dr. Marshall Rosenberg's book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (PuddleDancer Press, 1999):

- Autonomy
- Celebration
- Integrity
- Interdependence
- Physical nurturing
- Play
- Spiritual communion

As we learn to focus our attention on how we can meet these needs we can begin to connect at that place within us where we are all essentially the same. This process helps us cultivate deep listening, respect, and empathy, which engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart, and allows our natural compassion to flourish.

## The 10 Steps

When we feel angry, three things are happening. 1) We are upset because we are not getting our needs met. 2) We are blaming someone or something else for not getting what we want. 3) We are about to speak or act in such a way that will almost guarantee we will not get what we need, or that we will later regret.

When we are angry, we focus almost completely on what we don't want and our thinking is caught up in images of the wrongness of others that are involved. We have lost sight of what we really do want and need.

Using the following steps you will learn how to change this pattern and connect with the life-serving purpose of anger. You will discover where anger comes from and learn how to express it in ways that meet both your needs and the needs of others. Use these steps for re-focusing your attention during an angry conflict and learn to create outcomes that are satisfying for everyone involved.

### Step 1: Think of anger as a red light on your dashboard.

Anger is like a warning light on your car's dashboard and if you attend to it promptly you're more likely to get where you want to go. Remember, when dealing with anger that the goal is not just to "turn off the red light". Anger can be a wonderful wake-up call to help you understand what you need and what you value. Like warning lights and gauges, your emotions and the felt-sense in your body are there to help you understand which of your needs are being met, or are not being met.

So, when tempers flare or violence looms, it helps to remember that you can make life enjoyable for yourself and others if you focus your attention on what you need and put aside any ideas of the other as "wrong" or images of them as the "enemy." Make it your goal to attend to your underlying needs and to aim for a resolution so satisfying that everyone involved has their needs met also.

### Step 2: Look clearly at what happened.

Have you ever asked people what they are angry about? Most likely, they told you that someone said or did something wrong. One example might be an executive saying, "He's unprofessional! He ruined the presentation! He was disrespectful to everyone in the meeting!" Such statements say very little about what really happened. In this step you want to be like a detective, you want "Just the facts." Notice the difference in the quality of information in the previous statements and the following. The executive might have said, "He arrived twenty minutes later than the scheduled start time, and brought coffee-stained handouts."

In this step you take a clear look at what you are reacting to. When you can objectively describe what happened you are more likely to be clear about what you need. Other people are less likely to respond defensively because they can more easily agree with what you've said. So, the second step in dealing with a charged situation is to be able to state a clear

observation of the situation itself.

Statements from an angry spouse such as: "You insulted me!" "You're a control freak!" "You're always trying to manipulate me!" imply wrongness, but they don't describe what actually happened. With the aim of making a clear observation you ask yourself, "What would a video camera have recorded?" With this perspective you might be able to describe the situation very differently. "I heard you say I'm a lazy slob." "You said you wouldn't go out with me unless I wore the red dress." "You said I always wear clothes that are out of style." Once you can clearly describe what you are reacting to, free of your interpretation or evaluation of it, other people are less likely to be defensive when they hear it.

### **Step 3: Take responsibility for how you feel.**

Anger is also a signal that you've been distracted by judgmental or punitive thinking and that some precious need of yours is being ignored. Use your anger to remind yourself to stop, look under your hood and into your heart to find out what needs attention.

When your car's water temperature gauge is in the red, your engine's need for cooling is not being met. When your car's battery warning light is off, your charging system is doing fine. Like these indicators, your emotions and the felt-sense in your body are very powerful and accurate indicators of the conditions under your personal hood. They are designed to tell you very quickly and clearly, in each moment, which of your needs are not being met, or are being met.

Keep in mind that other people's actions can never "make" you feel any certain way. Feelings are your warning indicators. Your feelings always result from whether or not your needs are being met. Anger results from focusing your attention on what another person "should" or "shouldn't" do and judging them as "wrong" or "bad." As your attention shifts to identifying which of your needs aren't being satisfied in a situation, your feelings will shift also. When you discover that you didn't receive treatment that met your need for respect, you might feel hurt, or scared, or disappointed – but without "should" thinking and judgments of others as "wrong" you won't feel angry.

When your feelings have served their purpose – when your attention is fully focused on your needs and values – then anger melts away. This transformation is not the same as repression, and it's not the same as "calming down." The emotions you feel when you are in touch with your needs may be intense and may be very painful – but they will be different emotions than anger.

### **Step 4: "Name the blame" and get clear about what you feel.**

In our culture most of us have been trained to ignore our own wants and to discount our needs. We've been called selfish for "wanting" and "needy" when we voice our deepest yearnings. But the fact is, everybody has needs, all the time. Every human being needs respect. Everyone needs nourishment, harmony, self-expression, and love (to name a few basic human needs). The only humans who don't have needs are dead.

When you're angry you are likely to have "blame thinking" going on in your head. Inside of "blame thinking" you have emotions and these are caused by unmet needs. When you can get conscious of your "blame statement" you can begin to explore your feelings and use these feelings to get clear about which of your needs are going unmet.

For example, if your blame statement was, "She's always insulting me!" what emotion or body sense would you feel? Would you feel tense, scared, sad, anxious, confused? Naming our feelings is not as easy as it sounds! As a society we are trained to mix our evaluation with our feelings and this is what gives rise to "blame statements" in the first place. Separating your feelings from your judgment of others is an important part of getting clear about your needs and moving into action to get them met. You can use the feelings inventory in chapter four of Dr. Marshall Rosenberg's book, *Nonviolent Communication* to develop your vocabulary of feelings and learn how these feelings relate to your needs.

### **Step 5: Determine your need.**

"Wait a minute, my reliability warning light is on!" The executive who thought the employee "ruined the presentation" remembered that his anger was just a warning. When he looked underneath his anger, translated his judgments and discovered his underlying needs, he realized that he values reliability, integrity, and trust very highly. Focusing on these needs brought a shift in the executive's state of mind. His anger dissolved. Instead, once in touch with these unmet needs, the executive felt worry and a pang of disappointment.

Even the harshest labels like "psychopath" are just veiled expressions of unmet needs. When a person calls someone a psychopath, it's tragic expression of his or her needs, possibly for predictability, trust, or safety. Tragic because the very act of calling someone a psychopath almost guarantees that the underlying needs will continue to go undiscovered, unexpressed, and unmet.

The beauty of being able to correctly interpret your feelings as warning signals is that once you discover what you need, you are back in a powerful position to act toward getting your need met! You can use the human needs inventory in chapter five of Nonviolent Communication to develop your vocabulary of needs.

Having named your need, spend a while really noticing how important reliability is to you, how you yearn for it, how much more satisfying life is when that need is satisfied.

You're Half Way There! In the previous steps you've explored how you are. In Step 2, you took a more accurate look at what the other person did. In Step 3, you took responsibility for your feelings, and in Step 4, you took ownership of your thinking and began looking underneath at your natural feelings and needs. You chose to use your thinking powerfully, as a way to clarify what you value. In Step 5, you experience a fuller sense of self because you've gotten in touch with your needs.

In the following steps you will explore who can do what so everyone's needs will be met. With Step 6, you begin to envision actions that are in harmony with meeting those needs.

### **Step 6: Find the do behind the don't**

When they are angry, people often focus on the behavior that they want the other person to stop. But this is similar to wanting your car to stop overheating. You can want your car to stop overheating but you're stuck with a car that overheats until you identify what needs to be fixed and take the actions needed to fix it.

The executive in the previous example may identify that he needs greater trust and reliability when it comes to presentations being made on time and with materials he enjoys using. If he has been trained the way most of us have, he may be tempted to think he wants to tell the other person, "Don't show up late and don't bring coffee stained handouts." The problem is that the person may not show up at all rather than being late, or show up without handouts rather than soiled ones.

He is much more likely to get his needs met if he can come to an agreement around a "positive" request that states clearly what actions would meet his needs. For example, "Would you agree to call me 30 minutes before the meeting so I know you will be on time and put the handouts in a protective envelope as soon as they are copied?" Place your focus on what you do want, not on what you don't want.

### **Step 7: Think of a clear action request.**

Earlier, you saw that angry people think they're angry because other people made them angry. Now you harness the power to undo this misconception and focus on the power you, and others have – the power to deliberately make life more wonderful through the use of a "present tense" request.

"I want you to be reliable" is not a clear and doable request. In this step, the idea is to envision the other person doing or saying something right now that is in harmony with your desire and likely to meet your need. Ask yourself, "Right now, what could the other person say or do to honor my needs?"

For instance, a man passed over for a long expected promotion was keenly aware of his unmet needs for recognition and respect. He had already gotten clear about how to say what had happened, his feelings about it, and his needs. Only then did he consider making a very clear "positive action" request. He decided that the following would be a good beginning request for the dialogue he wanted to have with his boss: "Would you review at least two projects with me that I completed this year, and that you believe improved the company's market position?"

The man realized that his request was a "future request" and to really stay connected with his boss he wanted to make a "present action" request. To do this the man asked himself what action his boss could take in the moment he made his request.

He figured out two requests that his boss could respond to right now. The first was starting with, "Would you agree to..." This creates an agreement in this moment to do something in the future. It is something the other person can respond to immediately. He also added, "...within the next week" This request creates a definite time period during which the agreed upon action will take place. Now the complete request is positive in action language and in time. "Would you agree to review with me, within the next week, at least two projects that I completed this year, and that you believe improved the company's market position?"

### **Step 8: Name their feelings and needs.**

Just like coins, every situation has at least two sides. If you really want to reliably meet your own needs, it is important to make sure that the other person's needs are met as well. This step is about demonstrating your understanding that your needs can never be fully met at someone else's expense. It is about shining the light of awareness on your own feelings, needs and requests and also shining it on people in your life as well.

Use steps 2 through 7 to guess in your mind what the other person is experiencing. The essential element is to guess without worrying about guessing accurately. This is your best attempt to imagine what the other person desires, what the other person needs when they are acting as they do.

Remember, you haven't started talking yet. You're thinking hard, but you haven't yet spoken to the other person.

So guess at their feelings. Translate the statement, "He's compulsive!" into what you imagine the other person does want. For example, maybe they crave beauty and order (and that's why they're after you to pick up the dirty socks on the floor), or maybe they are yearning to be nurtured, cared for, or loved (and that's why they complain about you spending time with your friends). At this point, even though you are not talking to the other person yet, you are seeing the person differently. You are replacing your "enemy" image of the other person with a vision of something beautiful and sweet – the vision of a human being with needs, who seeks to make life more enjoyable by satisfying those needs.

### **Step 9: Decide whose need you will talk about first.**

Think big. Enjoy imagining that everybody's needs will be understood and honored – no one will "win" at someone else's expense. The process is complete only after both people have been heard and understood and walk away satisfied. You're not yet done when only one person has been heard and understood.

Only one person, however, can be heard at a time. So, now you ask yourself the following questions to determine who will speak first and who will listen first. Do you want to express how you are and invite the other person's understanding? Or do you want to extend your understanding to the other person first? Who is in the greatest distress? Who has the greatest clarity? Consider what happens when the person with greater clarity chooses to focus their attention first on hearing the feelings and needs of the person in greatest distress. Being heard in this way the other person will most likely experience relief and clarity, and be more willing to consider your needs.

Either way, you are the one focusing the light of awareness during the conversation. You will be the one who will focus on feelings, needs and values, and determining whose needs to explore first. If you choose to express, you'll be revealing your feelings, needs and requests, which you identified earlier. If you choose to receive, you'll invite the other person to reveal their feelings, needs and requests, which you guessed about in the previous step.

### **Step 10: Now start talking.**

Ask yourself the following questions before you begin talking: Are you clear about what you're reacting to? Are you in touch with your feelings and needs? Do you have a hunch about the other person's feelings, needs and values? Do you know what you want to have happen next? Okay, now's the time to talk! Here are some suggestions about what to say (and what not to say).

First, don't say anything from Step 3. This is the blameful thinking that fueled the anger in the first place. Instead, stick to Step 2 and state a clear observation. ("I have been thinking about how you spend three nights a week with your friends.") Then jump to Step 4 and be open about how you are feeling. Remember to choose a feeling that comes from the heart or a body sensation like, "I feel lonely and sad." Watch out if you start by saying, "I feel that" or "I feel like you..." - remind yourself that what is likely to follow is analyzing or blaming, and that you are unlikely to get what you want by speaking this way. Remember: express emotions and body sensations, not analysis or blame.

Once you've named the feeling that replaced your anger when you got in touch with your needs, name your needs out loud. ("I realize I need more companionship than I'm getting.") Then make a request that invites a response from the other that will make life more fulfilling right now. ("Would you be willing to agree to spend every Tuesday and Saturday evening with me?")

The other person will also want understanding for their needs. But chances are, they won't have done all the internal work you just did. They will probably go straight to Step 3. They may be saying something out loud like, "You're so selfish, it's always about you isn't it?" Just the blameful sorts of things you've just refrained from saying to them! That's okay. You can handle it. Choose to empathically receive whatever they say. Move your attention to their feelings and needs. Guess what action they might like you to take. "So are you worried (feeling) about consideration for your needs (need) and want to

know that I am willing to consider them as well (action)?"

Telling a person that you hear what they want is not the same as agreeing to do it. By hearing what they want, you make sure you understand clearly so you can let them know how you are about doing it. When you demonstrate that you really understand what they feel and need, you will be amazed how quickly they will trust that their needs are important to you, and as a result will be open to considering your needs in return. They are also likely to be more receptive to various strategies for meeting their needs.

So, let's recap.

- In steps 1 through 3 you learned new ways of understanding and relating to feelings of anger.
- In Step 1 you learned that anger is a valuable warning signal that tells you to stop and look under your "emotional hood" at your feelings and needs, and to begin to look for outcomes that would make life more satisfying.
- In Step 2 you learned to identify "just the facts."
- In Step 3 you learned that your feelings result from your needs being met, or not met, and are never the result of what another person does or doesn't do. In steps four through ten you practice new ways of relating to yourself and others...
- In Step 4 you take ownership of your thinking and focus your attention on your feelings and needs.
- In Step 5 you experience a fuller sense of self because you get in touch with your needs and realize that you can take positive action in meeting those needs.
- In Step 6 and 7, you begin to envision positive actions that are in harmony with meeting your needs right now.
- In Step 8 you refocus your awareness on the others involved, connect with their feelings and needs, and identify actions that might contribute to meeting their needs.
- In Step 9 you choose who you would like to speak first, knowing that you can continue the dialog until everyone's needs are met through actions everyone is willing to take.
- In Step 10, you finally put it all together and begin a dance of communication, where you take turns expressing how you are and receiving how the other person is. You stay focused on making clear requests and tuned in to how you feel about what is being requested of you. You continue to dance until everyone's needs are met through actions everyone agrees to take. Summing up.

Every minute, every one of us is alive with needs and values, seeking expression. You love to live in harmony with your values, and you love to contribute to others' experience of harmony, when you can do so with no element of coercion involved. Moment by moment, with honesty and empathy, you can meet your needs, and bring your values to life. Practicing these 10 Steps you truly can transform anger into compassionate connections.

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This article was collaboratively authored by Neill Gibson, Shari Klein, Gary Baran and Sylvia Haskavitz of the [Center for Nonviolent Communication](http://www.cnvc.org) (CNVC) and inspired by the work of Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D., author of *Nonviolent Communication - A Language of Life* and founder of CNVC. To learn about opportunities for training in Nonviolent Communication® skills call 800-255-7696 or visit the [CNVC](http://www.cnvc.org) website. (c) 2005 by Center for Nonviolent Communication, Website: [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org), Email: [cnvc@cnvc.org](mailto:cnvc@cnvc.org), Phone: +1.818.957.9393

## feelings inventories

The following are words we use when we want to express a combination of emotional states and physical sensations. This list is neither exhaustive nor definitive. It is meant as a starting place to support anyone who wishes to engage in a process of deepening self-discovery and to facilitate greater understanding and connection between people.

There are two parts to this list: feelings we may have when our needs are being met and feelings we may have when our needs are not being met.

### feelings when your needs are satisfied

#### AFFECTIONATE

compassionate  
friendly  
loving  
open hearted  
sympathetic  
tender  
warm

#### CONFIDENT

empowered  
open  
proud  
safe  
secure

#### ENGAGED

absorbed  
alert  
curious  
engrossed  
enchanted  
entranced  
fascinated  
interested  
intrigued  
involved  
spellbound  
stimulated

#### INSPIRED

amazed  
awed  
wonder

#### EXCITED

amazed  
animated  
ardent  
aroused  
astonished  
dazzled  
eager  
energetic  
enthusiastic  
giddy  
invigorated  
lively  
passionate  
surprised  
vibrant

#### EXHILARATED

blissful  
ecstatic  
elated  
enthralled  
exuberant  
radiant  
rapturous  
thrilled

#### GRATEFUL

appreciative  
moved  
thankful  
touched

#### HOPEFUL

expectant  
encouraged  
optimistic

#### JOYFUL

amused  
delighted  
glad  
happy  
jubilant  
pleased  
tickled

#### PEACEFUL

calm  
clear headed  
comfortable  
centered  
content  
fulfilled  
mellow  
quiet  
relaxed  
relieved  
satisfied  
serene  
still  
tranquil  
trusting

#### REFRESHED

enlivened  
rejuvenated  
renewed  
rested  
restored  
revived

## feelings when your needs are not satisfied

### AFRAID

apprehensive  
dread  
foreboding  
frightened  
mistrustful  
panicked  
petrified  
scared  
suspicious  
terrified  
wary  
worried

### ANNOYED

aggravated  
dismayed  
disgruntled  
displeased  
exasperated  
frustrated  
impatient  
irritated  
irked

### ANGRY

enraged  
furious  
incensed  
indignant  
irate  
livid  
outraged  
resentful

### AVERSION

animosity  
appalled  
contempt  
disgusted  
dislike  
hate  
horrified  
hostile  
repulsed

### CONFUSED

ambivalent  
baffled  
bewildered  
dazed  
hesitant  
lost  
mystified  
perplexed  
puzzled  
torn

### DISCONNECTED

alienated  
aloof  
apathetic  
bored  
cold  
detached  
distant  
distracted  
indifferent  
numb  
removed  
uninterested  
withdrawn

### DISQUIET

agitated  
alarmed  
discombobulated  
disconcerted  
disturbed  
perturbed  
rattled  
restless  
shocked  
startled  
surprised  
troubled  
turbulent  
turmoil  
uncomfortable  
uneasy  
unnerved  
unsettled  
upset

### EMBARRASSED

ashamed  
chagrined  
flustered  
guilty  
mortified  
self-conscious

### TENSE

anxious  
cranky  
distressed  
distraught  
edgy  
fidgety  
frazzled  
irritable  
jittery  
nervous  
overwhelmed  
restless

### PAIN

agony  
anguished  
devastated  
grief  
heartbroken  
hurt  
lonely  
miserable  
regretful  
remorseful

### SAD

depressed  
dejected  
despair  
despondent  
disappointed  
discouraged  
disheartened  
forlorn  
gloomy  
heavy hearted  
hopeless  
melancholy  
wretched

### FATIGUE

beat  
burnt out  
depleted  
exhausted  
lethargic  
listless  
sleepy  
tired  
weary  
worn out

### VULNERABLE

fragile  
guarded  
helpless  
insecure  
leery  
reserved  
sensitive  
shaky

### YEARNING

envious  
jealous  
longing  
nostalgic  
pining  
wistful