

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

5 RULES TO IMPROVE YOUR CONVERSATIONS

Do Your Words Matter?

How To Find Your Voice, Communicate With Empathy To Resolve Conflicts, And Improve Relationships At Work, Home, Or Anywhere — Chapter One. About a 14-minute read.

From the moment of birth, communication begins.

The cry of a baby is so powerful for this purpose that our heart rate and blood pressure increase, even when it is not our own child! * Communicating is an essential human activity. It's the way we share our feelings and thoughts. It's how we let others know our needs and how we want to have those met. It's the way we learn about these feelings, thoughts, and needs in others. Most importantly, it's how we connect and belong.

We all have interactions with many different types of people, some from our same background and others from diverse cultures. Whether it's for getting along better with your family and friends, being a part of a well-functioning work team, or advocating for social change, this book will help you on the path to rich and meaningful relationships and experiences. I look forward to sharing this through the lens of my years of experience as a psychologist and life coach helping others improve their communication and thereby improve their relationships.

This book builds on mindfulness, but it is not about disengaging from the world or letting yourself only be guided by intuition rather than conscious effort. For example, I might offer meditation as a strategy for calming emotions and turning inward for self-discovery, but only occasionally. Rather, you will find many strategies that match the topic at hand. On the topics, we will look at their research-basis. Having both conducted research and being immersed in it, I will frame the topics within examples and scenarios. You'll have activities

and exercises to implement and resources to continue your journey. That's important because improving conversations will be an ongoing task in life.

Communicating effectively takes time, effort, patience, and commitment. When it goes well, it is rewarding and fulfilling. When it goes poorly, we can feel upset and lonely. In *5 Rules To Improve Your Conversations: How to find your voice, communicate with empathy to resolve conflicts and improve relationships at work, home, or anywhere*, we will take a journey through communicating to achieve these goals.

We will cover communication in all the settings where we have conversations with others. You will learn the underlying concepts, why knowing yourself and finding your voice matters, and effective and powerful strategies to establish and maintain positive and fulfilling relationships. Lastly, we've sprinkled some of the rules, as sort of tips, to help you improve your communication skills.

The theme that runs through this book is mindful communication. This interaction style means being fully present in the moment, nonjudgmental, not overreacting, expressing empathy, and being authentic and genuine. It's a powerful approach to decrease misunderstandings and increase mutual respect.

In short, this book is designed to teach, motivate, and inspire you to achieve the biggest return on your communication investment. It can be a tall order for anyone, but we break it all down for you. We begin with the core principles of peaceful communication. Then we move to self-awareness and the role you play as the central actor in conversations. Knowing yourself and how to manage your emotions through introspection and self-awareness is a key part of mindful communication.

We will take a deep dive into why misunderstandings and conflict occur and how you can resolve these with empathy and respect. In particular, active listening is a technique you will learn that will serve you well in any situation and you will see step-by-step how to apply it.

Having both practiced and written in this area, I've seen firsthand the importance of communication and relationships. Many people struggle in this area—some because they

are aware they have weaknesses, others because they think they know how to communicate well, but are missing key steps and skills. The good news is that with an open mind and willingness, they do improve their communications and the strength and health of their relationships...and so can you. I'm excited to be your guide as you embark on this journey to improve your conversations!

Are you ready to reap the benefits? Keep reading to first learn about the principles of nonviolent communication.

Do Your Words Matter?

People have told Kevin to 'chill out' or 'calm down' for as long as he can remember. He will admit he's got strong opinions and can get insistent on sharing them. He knows when he does this, he comes across as dominating and kind of a know-it-all. Sometimes, he gets into pretty heated arguments with people.

Recently he saw an ad for an app for mindfulness and thought, "Why not?" He's been slowly realizing that he needs to do something proactive to improve his situation. He's hoping the app will help him be more calm since that's what people tell him he needs to do. He's been using the app for a few weeks, and he thinks he feels calmer inside.

He's confused, though, because he went to dinner with his cousin who was in town last weekend. When Kevin saw the high prices on the menu, he started sharing his opinion on inflation. He was trying to stay calm, but his cousin was really pushing his buttons and making it worse because he kept telling Kevin to relax.

When they left the restaurant, his cousin said, "Well, thanks for ruining dinner, dude. I never even got a chance to tell you how it feels now that I'm a new dad. It's pretty clear, though, that you don't care." Now, Kevin is discouraged and he's deleted the mindfulness app from his phone.

The term mindfulness seems to be everywhere you turn. Mindfulness, in popular media, can come across as a panacea for overall well-being. It commonly revolves around decreasing

stress and increasing self-awareness. Practices like meditation and yoga are frequently suggested to achieve mindfulness. There is also a large community of researchers working in this space.

From academic journals to popular media to apps to sayings on T-shirts, mindfulness is easily one of those concepts that has captured the attention of all of us.

Yet, just as we saw with Kevin, it is possible to be mindful and ineffective in communicating with others. Why?

Mindful communication is like a seesaw. On one side is mindfulness, being fully present and engaged in the moment in whatever you are doing. On the other is communication skills, the ability to express yourself effectively and comprehend and understand what others are saying and feeling.

If mindfulness and communication skills are balanced and working well together, everyone has a positive interaction. Otherwise, one person is stuck on the ground, and the other is hanging in the air. Neither can enjoy the experience!

There are scores of authors writing about what constitutes mindfulness, but let's take a look at the one put forward by Baer and her co-authors. In their definition, mindfulness calls upon us to give complete attention to what is being experienced in the current moment and doing so in a nonjudgmental and accepting way.

These researchers used a large number of measures and found that mindfulness comprises five components:

- Acting with awareness
- Observing
- Nonjudging
- Nonreacting
- Describing*

Importantly, these are not completely distinct from one another. Further, they interact with and influence one another. It's like they're 'playing in the same sandbox,' and what they

create varies depending on how skilled the builders are!

Similarly, when it comes to communication, there are a multitude of ways to define this concept. Whole theories have emerged to try to do so. In fact, in the book *Theories of Human Communication*, Littlejohn and Foss contend that it's almost too difficult!*

That said, it is important to have a way to define communication for our purposes. The one put forth by Adler and associates is widely accepted and easily understood. At its most basic level, when messages are exchanged between a sender and a receiver, this is communication.* Much like mindfulness, the communication process involves many facets, and it is dynamic. It also matters that the two people in the exchange have a shared understanding as they engage in communication. This applies to all relationships, whether they be personal, professional, or public.

Mindful communication takes communication further as an interaction style with several components. These are being self-aware by being fully present in the moment, not judging, not overreacting, expressing empathy, and being authentic and genuine. The underlying goal of mindful communication is to build healthy connections with others that result in a decrease in misunderstandings and an increase in mutual respect.*

Now, we can just start to see how mindfulness and communication can come together as a powerful game-changer for you.

In this book, we will be fully exploring the many aspects of mindful communication. But here in Chapter 1, we begin laying the groundwork for how mindful communication works. You will learn about the core principles and values. As we go through these, we'll take a deep dive into the importance of the three pillars of empathy, respect, and trust in relationships. We will look at the ways they interweave within nonviolent communication.

The Four Core Principles Of Nonviolent Communication

When you see the term 'nonviolent communication,' your first thought might be, "This doesn't apply to me. I don't hit anyone or throw things! Nobody does that to me, either!"

But have you ever encountered judgment, verbal demands, or disrespect—giving or receiving? If you're like most, then you have indeed experienced traditional communication. Nonviolent communication is the opposite. Here, interactions involve mutual choice and are more respectful and peaceful.

One of the most helpful ways to understand mindful communication is through the knowledge and application of nonviolent communication. Working as an international mediator, psychologist, and educator, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg developed the approach of Nonviolent Communication (NVC).*

Beginning in the 1960s, NVC became a worldwide phenomenon. It encompasses academic research as well as application through workshops, books, videos, and more.

This approach involves applying four core principles: observation, feelings, needs, and requests.

Core Principle One: Observation

The first principle means observing without evaluating. We must learn to clearly say what is happening in a situation without adding judgment or interpretation. This step focuses on concrete, specific, and observable behaviors rather than vague or abstract evaluations. When we observe without evaluating, we can communicate more effectively and build more authentic and understanding relationships with others.

Core Principle Two: Feelings

The second principle is identifying and expressing feelings. Here, we both connect with and express our emotions through self-awareness. We recognize that our feelings follow our needs, which are either being met or not being met. Our feelings need to be directly related to what is being observed by us and in an objective way. Our ability to connect with others is enhanced when our feelings are expressed constructively. It does not matter the other person's culture or background. When we express our feelings in this way, we are able to develop relationships that are more meaningful.

Core Principle Three: Needs

Principle three of nonviolent communication is to identify the underlying needs behind our feelings. It involves recognizing the universal human needs that are driving our emotions, such as safety, connection, autonomy (meaning choice and independence), and respect. We have feelings about our needs and these are highly interwoven with our individual and personal desires and values. Through self-awareness, we can develop a higher degree of empathy and understanding in relationships by identifying and acknowledging that our human needs are a motivating force for the emotions we experience. This puts us on a path to having connections with others that are more fulfilling.

Core Principle Four: Requests

The fourth principle involves making clear, concrete, and actionable requests to meet our needs. It can be tempting to make demands and try to manipulate others to get our needs met. Yet, enriching our existence is possible by requesting specific and fair actions from others. Dialogue that is empathetic and understanding is possible with requests made by us that are clear, concrete, and action-oriented. Relationships that are filled with more harmony and which are more fulfilling will now have a chance to flourish.

The Pillars Of Nonviolent Communication

To apply the principles of nonviolent communication, it is helpful to know that this approach is built on three main pillars. These are empathy, respect, and trust in relationships. These pillars are part of how change happens through NVC. Our perspectives shift on how we think about other people. This goes beyond just learning communication skills.*

Jenny and her boyfriend Alonzo are at a football game, and he seems upset. Alonzo is usually very upbeat, but today, he's been uncharacteristically quiet.

At halftime, Jenny and Alonzo make their way to the concession stand. Jenny decides to ask him if everything is okay. He steps away from the rushing crowd, stops, and seems hesitant. Jenny waits to see what he's going to say. Finally, he says he's upset about the way she treats him like a child.

At first, Jenny is shocked. In her mind, she and Alonzo are the perfect couple. Jenny has to catch herself because she almost says this aloud.

Instead, Jenny actively empathizes with Alonzo. After all, she's felt this way herself in past relationships.

Jenny acknowledges Alonzo's feelings: "I'm sorry to hear that. It must be really tough for you when I come across that way." She tells Alonzo she knows there needs to be many and much deeper conversations and she is open to that because her relationship with him is very important to her.

Alonzo looks Jenny in the eyes and says, "Thank you, Jenny. I was worried about how you'd react if I told you how I was feeling. Knowing our relationship means you're willing to work things out with me gives me a lot of hope."

We have all likely come across the term empathy. At its heart, empathy is the capacity to understand and share the feelings experienced by another person. You can put yourself in someone else's shoes and understand their thoughts, emotions, and their unique point of view. This is essential for building strong relationships. It is part of the backbone of communicating effectively and nonviolently.

Nonviolent communication is a powerful tool for building empathy and resolving conflict.* Koopman and Seliga reviewed impact studies and found the NVC model had a positive effect on building empathy. This allowed individuals to increase their understanding of others and brought out their compassion. People also didn't shy away from conflict. Instead, they saw empathy as a tool to resolve differences successfully.*

Once you empathetically gain insight into someone's perspective and what matters and motivates them, a solid foundation for resolving conflict is built. De-escalating the situation is more probable when people can connect across their differences. Finding win-win solutions is much more likely when 'protecting your corner' isn't top of mind.

Another essential pillar is respect. In NVC, respect is about valuing each person's needs and feelings without judgment or criticism. It means listening with genuine empathy and understanding, even when you disagree with them. In NVC, respect also involves honesty and authenticity during communication, all while being attentive to the impact of your words on others.

The people you communicate with most regularly are likely those with whom you are the closest. Frei and Shaver wanted to study the attributes that people associate with feelings of respect in a variety of close relationships. They found that having and showing respect is about being trustworthy, considerate, and accepting.

What is very encouraging? Respect begets respect! It's like a mutual cycle. Further, when the two people in a relationship communicate respectfully, not only does their respect grow, but so does their trust in one another. And a bonus? You will like each other more.*

Trust in relationships is the third pillar of NVC. Psychologist Jeffry Simpson studies close relationships and interpersonal processes from different theoretical perspectives. His comprehensive review of the foundations of interpersonal trust highlights that it is one of the most essential and desired goals of human beings. Without it, relationships simply cannot be healthy and secure.*

Why? If you don't feel you are in a safe space for communication, you are less likely to be open and honest. After all, nobody wants to feel attacked.

Applying NVC establishes a compassionate connection that allows both you and the other person to get your needs met. To fully connect, you must feel you can trust someone enough to be vulnerable and share what you truly need.

Action Steps

We've now seen how important empathy, respect, and trust in relationships are for peaceful, effective, and satisfying communication. Let's look at these interwoven and in action within the four core principles.

How To Practice Observation

Look and listen objectively. Pay attention to the behaviors that can clearly be observed. Describe them, but leave out judgments. This reduces misunderstandings.

Instead of saying, “You’re always running late!”

Try saying, “I notice you’re frequently not on time.”

How To Practice Feelings

Express feelings without placing blame, either on yourself or others. However, taking responsibility is important. Empathy and true connection can then flourish.

Rather than saying, “I get ticked off when you’re late!”

Try saying, “Being on time is important to me, so I feel frustrated when I have to wait.”

How To Practice Needs

Everyone has needs. Identify these. Think about them. Put them into words to express what matters to you. Encourage the same for others. Through understanding what is underneath emotions and behaviors, you can collaborate to meet everyone’s needs.

Rather than saying, “You never put me first!”

Try saying, “I want to feel I’m a priority to you.”

How To Practice Requests

Frame requests positively and respectfully. Make them clear and specific. Include the action desired. Most importantly, this principle focuses on cooperation and building goodwill.

Instead of saying, “Take the trash out right now!”

Try saying, “Would you be willing to take the trash out before I start cooking?”

Moving On

Mindful communication has the potential to be life-changing for you. It can positively transform interactions. Rather than being in an endless cycle of misunderstanding, confusion, and ultimately alienation, like Kevin experiences, mindful communication allows

compassionate and empathetic communication where relationships can grow healthy and deep like the one Jenny and Alonzo are well on their way to experiencing.

In the next chapter, we will continue the journey and focus on mindful expression. We will talk about the significance of being more present, attentive, and mindful in conversations. We will also share the challenges because they do exist. I will share concrete techniques you can use to be more mindful, and to respectfully, but assertively, ensure your needs are met.

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