

# The Surprising Purpose of *Anger*

**Beyond Anger Management:  
Finding the Gift**

*A Nonviolent Communication™  
presentation and workshop transcription by*

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# The Surprising Purpose of *Anger*



*A Q&A Session With  
Marshall B. Rosenberg, PhD*

*In The Surprising Purpose of Anger Marshall Rosenberg shares his unique perspective on the role anger can play in our life. He challenges us to shift from the idea that anger is something to be suppressed. Instead, anger is a gift, challenging us to connect to the unmet needs that have triggered this reaction. Rosenberg reveals common misconceptions about anger and points out that our anger is the product of thinking. A discussion of anger easily supports a better understanding of Nonviolent Communication because it touches on so many key NVC distinctions. Living from your heart, making judgment-free observations, getting clear about your feelings and needs, making clear requests, and supporting life-enriching connections all relate to how we respond to anger.*

## **A Brief Introduction to NVC**

NVC evolved out of an intense interest I have in two questions. First, I wanted to better understand what happens to human beings that leads some of us to behave violently and exploitatively. And

secondly, I wanted to better understand what kind of education serves us in the attempt to remain compassionate—which I believe is our nature—even when others are behaving violently or exploitatively.

I've found in my exploration into these two questions that three factors are very important in understanding why some of us respond violently—and some of us compassionately—in similar situations. These three are:

- First, the language that we have been educated to use.
- Second, how we have been taught to think and communicate.
- Third, the specific strategies we learned to influence ourselves and others.

I have found that these three factors play a large role in determining whether we're going to be able to respond compassionately or violently in situations. I have integrated the type of language, the kinds of thinking, and the forms of communication that strengthen our ability to willingly contribute to our own well-being and the well-being of others, into this process that I call Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

NVC focuses attention on whether people's needs are being fulfilled, and if not, what can be done to fulfill these needs. It shows us how to express ourselves in ways that increase the likelihood others will willingly contribute to our well-being. It also shows us how to receive the messages of others in ways that increase the likelihood that we will willingly contribute to their well-being.

## *Anger and NVC*

When it comes to managing anger, NVC shows us how to use anger as an alarm that tells us we are thinking in ways that are not likely to get our needs met, and are more likely to get us involved in interactions that are not going to be very constructive for anyone. Our training stresses that *it is dangerous to think of anger as something to be repressed, or as something bad*. When we tend to identify anger as a result of something wrong with us, then our tendency is to want to repress it and not deal with anger. That use of anger, to repress and deny it, often leads us to express it in ways that can be very dangerous to ourselves and others.

Think of how many times you've read in the newspapers about serial killers and how they are described by others who have known them. A rather typical way they are described is: "He was always such a nice person. I never heard him raise his voice. He never seemed to be angry at anyone."

So in NVC we are interested in using the anger in ways that help us to get at the needs that are not being fulfilled within ourselves, that are at the root of our anger.

Many of the groups I work with around the world have witnessed the consequences of teaching that anger is something to be repressed. These groups have witnessed that when we teach that anger should be avoided, it can be used to oppress people by getting them to tolerate whatever is happening to them. However, I also have reservations about how, in response to that concern, some have advocated cultivating or "venting" of anger without understanding its roots and transforming it. Some studies have indicated that anger management programs that simply encourage participants to vent anger by, for example, beating pillows, etc., simply push the anger closer to the surface and in fact leave the participants more susceptible to express their anger later in ways that are dangerous to themselves and others.

So what we want to do as we use NVC to manage anger is to go more deeply into it, to see what is going on within us when we are angry, to be able to get at the need—which is the root of anger—and then fulfill that need. For teaching purposes, I sometimes refer to anger as similar to the warning light on the dashboard of a car—it's giving you useful information about what the engine needs. You wouldn't want to hide or disconnect or ignore it. You'd want to slow down the car and figure out what the light's trying to tell you.

### *It Works Even If Only One Person Applies It*

It has been my experience that if I can keep my attention on anger as a warning, no matter how the other person is communicating, we remain connected. In other words, NVC works, even if only one person applies it.

It's not too hard then to keep the focus in this direction. It *can* be scary because it always requires vulnerability on our part just to

nakedly say how we are and what we would like. And it can flow fairly well when both parties are trained in this process, but almost everyone that I work with is attempting to establish this flow of communication with someone who is not likely to ever come to workshops to learn how to do this. So it's very important that this process work with anyone, whether they have been trained to communicate this way or not.

One thing we certainly stress in our intensive training is how to stay with this process regardless of how other people communicate. Now, in one sense anger is a fun way to dive more deeply into NVC even if you are starting with this process for the first time. When you're angry, it brings many aspects of the NVC process into sharp focus, helping you see the difference between NVC and other forms of communication.

The NVC approach involves several steps. I will go over these steps in part by using an example of a young man in a prison in Sweden. I was working with this man in a prisoner training session, showing the participants how NVC can be used to manage their anger.

## Steps to Handling Our Anger

### *The First and Second Steps*

The first step in handling our anger using NVC is to be conscious that *the stimulus, or trigger, of our anger is not the cause of our anger*. That is to say that it isn't simply what people do that makes us angry, but it's something within us that responds to what they do that is really the cause of the anger. This requires us to be able to separate the trigger from the cause.

In the situation with the prisoner in Sweden, the very day that we were focusing on anger, it turned out that he had a lot of anger in relationship to the prison authorities. So he was very glad to have us there to help him deal with anger on that day.

I asked him what it was that the prison authorities had done that was the stimulus of his anger. He answered, "I made a request of them three weeks ago, and they still haven't

responded.” Well, he had answered the question in the way that I wanted him to. He had simply told me what they had *done*. He hadn’t mixed in any evaluation, and that is the first step in managing anger in a nonviolent way: simply to be clear what the stimulus is, but not to mix that up with judgments or evaluation. This alone is an important accomplishment. Frequently when I ask such a question, I get a response such as, “they were inconsiderate,” which is a moral judgment of what they “are” but doesn’t say what they actually did.

The second step involves our being conscious that the stimulus is never the cause of our anger. That is, it isn’t simply what people do that makes us angry. *It is our evaluation of what has been done that is the cause of our anger.* And it’s a particular kind of evaluation.

NVC is built on the premise that anger is the result of life-alienated ways of evaluating what is happening to us, in the sense that it isn’t directly connected to what we need or what the people around us need. Instead, it is based on ways of thinking that imply wrongness or badness on the part of others for what they have done.

### **Evaluating Triggers That Lead to Anger**

There are four ways that we can evaluate any anger triggers that occur in our lives. In the case of the prison officials not responding for three weeks to his request, he could have looked at the situation and taken it personally, as a rejection. Had he done that, he would not have been angry. He might have felt hurt, he might have felt discouraged, but he wouldn’t have felt angry.

As a second possibility, he could have looked within himself and seen what his needs were. Focusing directly on our needs is a way of thinking that is most likely to get them met, when we are on them. Had he been focused directly on his needs, as we will see later, he would not have been angry. He might have felt scared, which it turned out he was when he got in touch with his needs.

Or another possibility: We could look at things in terms of what needs the other party was experiencing that led them to behave as they did. This kind of understanding of the needs of others does not leave us feeling angry. In fact, when we are really

directly connected with the needs of others—at the point at which we understand their needs—we are not really in touch with any feelings within ourselves, because our full attention is on the other person.

The fourth way that we can look at things, which *we will find always at the base of anger*, is to think in terms of *the wrongness of other people for behaving as they did*. In NVC, whenever we feel angry, we recommend saying to ourselves, “I’m feeling angry because I am telling myself \_\_\_\_\_,” and then to look for the kind of life-alienated thinking going on inside our head that is the cause of our anger.

In the case of the prisoner, when he told me that he was angry and that the trigger for his anger was that the prison officials hadn’t responded for three weeks to his request, I asked him to look inside and tell me what the cause of his anger was. He seemed confused, and he said to me: “I just told you the cause of my anger. I made a request three weeks ago and the prison officials still haven’t responded to it.”

I told him: “Now, what you told me was the trigger for your anger. In our previous sessions I’ve tried to clarify for you that it’s never simply the trigger that creates our anger. The cause is what we’re looking for. So I’d like you to tell me how you are interpreting their behavior, how you are looking at it, that is causing you to be angry.”

He was very confused at this point. He was like many of us: He had not been trained to be conscious of what was going on within himself when he was angry. So I had to give him a little help to get an idea of what I meant by how to just stop and listen to the kind of thoughts that might be going on inside of us that are always at the core of anger.

After a few moments he said to me: “OK, I see what you mean. I’m angry because I’m telling myself it isn’t fair, that isn’t a decent way to treat human beings. They are acting as though they are important, and I’m nothing.” And he had several other such judgments that were floating rapidly through his head. Notice he initially said it was simply their behavior that was making him angry. But it was really all of these thoughts that he had within himself that were making him angry, any one of which could

have created his anger. But he was ready with a whole series of such judgments, “They’re not fair; they’re not treating me right.” All such judgments are the cause of anger.

Once we had identified this, he said to me, “Well, what’s wrong with thinking that way?” And I said: “I’m not saying there’s anything wrong with thinking that way. I’d just like you to be conscious that it’s thinking that way which is the cause of your anger. And we don’t want to mix up what people do—the trigger—with the cause of anger.”

### Trigger Versus Cause

Now, this is very hard for many of us to keep straight: to not mix up the trigger, or stimulus, of our anger with the cause of our anger. The reason that that’s not easy for us is that we may have been educated by people who use guilt as a primary form of trying to motivate us. When you want to use guilt as a way of manipulating people, you need to confuse them into thinking that the trigger is the cause of the feeling. In other words, if you want to use guilt with somebody, you need to communicate in a way that indicates that your pain is being caused simply by what they do. In other words, their behavior is not simply the stimulus of your feelings; it’s the cause of your feelings.

If you are a guilt-inducing parent, you might say to a child, “It really hurts me when you don’t clean up your room.” Or if you are a guilt-inducing partner in an intimate relationship, you might say to your partner, “It makes me angry when you go out every night of the week.” Notice in both of those examples, the speaker is implying that the stimulus is the cause of the feelings. You make me feel. That makes me feel. I’m feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because you \_\_\_\_\_.

If we are to manage anger in ways that are in harmony with the principles of NVC, it’s important for us to be conscious of this key distinction: *I feel as I do because I am telling myself thoughts about the other person’s actions that imply wrongness on their part.* Such thoughts take the form of judgments such as, “I think the person is selfish, I think the person is rude, or lazy, or manipulating people, and they shouldn’t do that.” Such thoughts take either the form of direct judgment of others or indirect



judgments expressed through such things as, “I’m judging this person as thinking only they have something worth saying.” In these latter expressions, it’s implicit that we think what they’re doing isn’t right.

Now that’s important, because if I think this other person is making me feel this way, it’s going to be hard for me not to imagine punishing them. We show people it’s never what the other person does; it’s how you see it; how you interpret it. And if people would follow me around in my work, they would get some very significant learning in this area.

I worked a lot in Rwanda. I often worked with people who had members of their family killed, and some are so angry all they can do is wait for vengeance. They’re furious. Other people in the same room had the same family members killed, maybe had even more killed, but they are not angry. They have strong feelings, but not anger. They have feelings that lead them to want to prevent this from ever happening to others again, but not to punish the other side. We want people to see that it’s how we look at the situation that *creates* our anger, not the stimulus itself.

We try to get people to see that when you’re angry, it’s because your consciousness is under the influence of the kind of language we all learned: That the other side is evil or bad in some way. It’s that thinking that is the cause of anger. When that thinking is going on, we show people not how to push it down and deny the anger or deny the thinking, but to transform it into a language of life, into a language in which you are much more likely to create peace between yourself and whoever acted in the way that stimulated your anger.

We talk first about how to get conscious of this internalized thinking that’s making you angry and how to transform that into what needs of yours have not been met by what the other person has done, and then how to proceed from that consciousness to create peace again between you and that person.

The first step in expressing our anger, managing it in harmony with NVC, is to identify the stimulus for our anger without confusing it with our evaluation. The second step is to be conscious that it is our evaluation of people—in the form of judgments that imply wrongness—that causes our anger.

### **An Illustration of Stimulus Versus Cause of Anger**

I was working one time in a correctional school for delinquents, and I had an experience that really helped me learn the lesson that it is never the stimulus that causes the anger. There is always, between the trigger and the anger, some thought process that is going on.

On two successive days, I had remarkably similar experiences, but each day I had quite different feelings in reaction to the experience. The experience in both situations involved my being hit in the nose, because on two successive days, I was involved in breaking up a fight between two different students, and in both cases as I was breaking up the fight, I caught an elbow in the nose.

On day one, I was furious. On day two, even though the nose was even sorer than it was on the first day, I wasn't angry. Now, what was the reason I would be angry in response to the stimulus on day one, but not on day two?

First of all, in the first situation if you had asked me right after I had been hit in the nose why I was angry, I would have had trouble finding the thought that was making me angry. I probably would have said, "Well I'm obviously angry because the child hit me in the nose." But that wasn't the cause. As I looked at the situation later, it was very clear to me that the child whose elbow hit me in the nose on day one was a child that I was thinking of before this incident in very judgmental terms. I had in my head a judgment of this child as a spoiled brat. So as soon as his elbow hit my nose, I'm angry—it seemed that just as the elbow hit I was angry—but between that stimulus and the anger this image flashed within me of this child being a spoiled brat. Now, that all happens very fast, but it was the image of "spoiled brat" that made me angry.

On the second day, I carried quite a different image into the situation of that child. That child I saw more as a pathetic creature than a spoiled brat, and so when the elbow caught my nose, I wasn't angry. I certainly felt physical pain, but I wasn't angry, because a different image of a child in great need of support flashed through my mind rather than the judgmental image "spoiled brat" which caused the anger.

These images happen very quickly and they can easily trick us into thinking that the stimulus is the cause of our anger.