

` Speaking While Upset:

Moving from Destructive to Constructive in 6 Simple Steps

Shift the way you communicate when upset so you can be heard this time!

Published on October 18, 2010 by Elaine Shpungin, Ph.D. in her blog "Peacemeal"



Let's assume that you already know that trying to express your feelings and thoughts while you are physically and psychologically aroused (angry, exasperated, deeply disappointed) is unlikely to help you communicate productively (unless you count number of insults or volume level as part of your productivity quotient).

Let's also assume that like me, you have adopted a number of "calming down" techniques (time out from the other person, breathing, going for a walk, standing on your head, eating chocolate, ok - I digress) before trying to talk with the person about what happened (or simply re-engaging with them at all).

Perhaps you have then discovered, like I have, that these *calming down strategies work fairly well while you are apart, but don't do much good when you actually try to communicate about the issue* (whether in person or over email)

This is because most calming down techniques do not fundamentally change the thoughts and judgments you are holding about the person or their behavior.

Thus, when you again communicate with that person, those negative thoughts and judgments ("She's careless and incompetent!" "That was so inconsiderate and disrespectful!") are still there, and get woven into your tone and word choices. And - **sensing these barbed messages within your communication, the person will have a much harder time focusing on what you are saying - or hearing you the way you'd like to be heard.**

So, what is one to do? Marshall Rosenberg, the father of Non Violent Communication (NVC), urges us to engage in "empathy before education."

The most effective and efficient way I know of doing this *on my own* is to fill out an Empathy Worksheet.

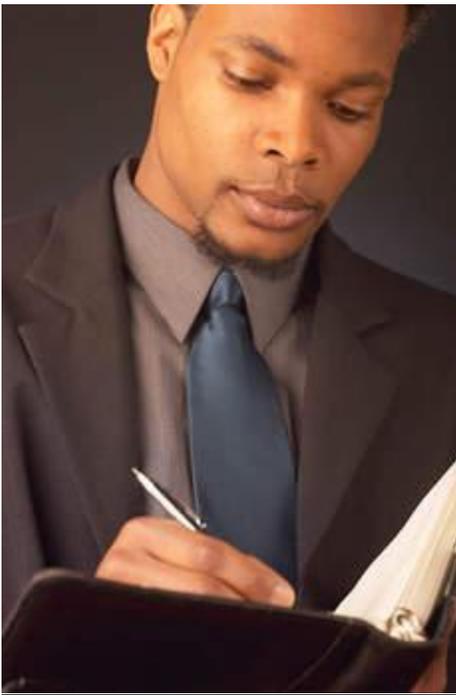
There are different variations of these in the NVC community; this one is a slight modification of one used by [Newt Bailey](#), effective communication coach and conflict resolution trainer, facilitator and mediator - as well as one of the stars of the [Conflict Hotline](#), a show on conflict resolution hosted by [BayNVC](#)'s non violence guru Miki Kashtan.

What I love about my Empathy Worksheet:

- **Quick** (10 - 20 min depending on how deep you want to go)
- **Easy** (my 8 yr. old does it on his own)
- **Empowering** (moves me past self-pity, anger, judgments and criticisms to what really matters to me)
- **Effective** (allows me to communicate in a way that greatly increases my chances of being heard and to hear the other person)

So, what's involved?

STEP 1: Stop, Drop and Write!



STOP what you are doing and take 10 minutes to fill out the Worksheet!

BEFORE YOU PRESS SEND. Don't send that angry email you just composed! Go do the Worksheet and then edit the email before sending it out.

BEFORE YOU ESCALATE. If you are in an escalating argument, **STOP.** Tell the other person this is not going anywhere productive and that you'd like to take some time out and continue in 30 minutes. Go do the Worksheet and then reboot the conversation using what you discovered.

BEFORE YOU CONFRONT. If you are upset and rehearsing all the things you are going to say when you see that person, find 10 minutes to do the Worksheet first.

BEFORE YOU LOSE ANY MORE SLEEP. If you are ruminating about something, do the Worksheet for some relief and some movement forward.

STOP what you are doing. Take 10 minutes to fill out a self-empathy worksheet.

Preparing the Worksheet: You can create the Worksheet on *any* piece of paper. Divide the paper in thirds by letter folding it. Label the top third "Judgments", the middle third "Feelings" and the bottom third "Needs"

Step 2: Choose one specific incident.

Choose a specific incident and describe it as objectively as you can at the very **BOTTOM** of the page (the top will get thrown out later).

Even if you are angry or disappointed by a series of incidents, it will help if you choose **ONE** (either the most recent or the one that is MOST symbolic of the whole thing).

Let's say the issue is your partner repeatedly not following through with agreements you have made. The most recent incident might be that they did not mail a package they said they would mail for you.

EXAMPLE OF OBJECTIVE DESCRIPTION OF THIS INCIDENT: "Got home and saw the package on the table."

(A less objective description would be): "The package was *still* on the table..." or "*You forgot* to mail the package" or "Once again, something I care about was not..." etc.



Step 3: Write down your Judgments. (This is the part where you get to vent!)

In the TOP THIRD of your Worksheet, write down all the nasty, brutal, attacking, judgmental, self-pitying, analytical, diagnostic, despairing, evaluative judgments and thoughts you are having about the person or incident. ***Don't hold back*** (they will NOT get to see this part of the sheet).

EXAMPLE: "So inconsiderate! Frick'in IDIOT! Oh my god- can't take it anymore! Self centered, uncaring, no feelings. Really in trouble this time. Why why why??? Can't trust anymore. Unbearable! etc.

Step 4: Write down your Feelings.

In the MIDDLE THIRD of your Worksheet, **write down all the feelings you have about the person or incident.** ***If your feeling vocabulary is a bit under-nourished, use a list such as this one:*** <http://cnvc.org/Training/feelings-inventory>.

EXAMPLE:

Angry. Furious. Frustrated. Surprised. Actually - NOT surprised! Exasperated. Fuming. Despair.
Hopeless. Super sad. etc.



Step 5: Write down your Needs.

On the BOTTOM THIRD of your sheet, write down the unmet needs which may be leading to the feelings you wrote above. Try using the starting phrases "I need more..." or "I am really wanting some..." .

Most of us have been trained not to consider our needs as legitimate, so your needs vocabulary might also benefit from a helpful list: <http://cnvc.org/Training/needs-inventory>.

It is important to remember that, in this model, the feelings stem from the deep unmet needs you have in this area - not from the one incident or even from the one person consistently failing to meet those needs (that is, our needs can only be met fully when we turn to multiple people and multiple strategies to fill them).

EXAMPLE: I really want more respect. I need consideration and care. I want to be able to trust you when we agree on something. I want some help and support around here. I want things to just be easier between us!

When you have finished writing down all the needs, **circle the ones that seem most essential to you in relation to what happened. These are the ones you'll be sharing when the time comes.**

Step 6: Use the Worksheet to Have a Constructive Conversation

(a) Schedule a time and space to speak, rather than coming at the person out of the blue.

(b) **Rip off and burn the TOP THIRD of the Worksheet (Judgments).** Ok, you can shred it or destroy it some other way.

(c) **Speak (or write) ONLY from the remaining parts of the Worksheet (Needs, Feelings, and Objective Description of Incident).** This is the part that will increase your chances of actually being heard and will shift the conversation from destructive to constructive.

Breathe and be patient with yourself and the other person, especially the first few times you do this. Now go forth and try it!

WHAT IF IT STILL DOESN'T WORK?

If the two of you have a history of not being able to hear each other, or you find that the person is still sounding "defensive" or "dismissive" when you try to speak from your feelings and needs, you may need to build up a little more trust over the next couple of conversations by doing one or more of the following:

(a) Try filling out an ADDITIONAL Worksheet for THEM or ask them to fill one out for themselves. To do a Worksheet for another person, make GUESSES about their Feelings and Needs (skip the Judgment section).

(b) Try introducing or explaining what you are doing.

(c) Try taking turns speaking and reflecting understanding (Council).

EXAMPLE of PUTTING IT TOGETHER:

So, like I said before, I'd like to talk about what happened this morning. But I really want this conversation to be different. For both of us. So I used this exercise to write down some of my feelings and thoughts so I can sound less critical. Are you willing to try this out with me?

Sure. I guess.

And I'd also like to try this thing where we check what each person hears after the other person speaks. Just to help us feel like we are really listening to each other. Ok? Because I really want this conversation to be different for us. Are you willing to try that with me?

Yeah. Go ahead.

Ok, so I got home and the package I asked you to mail was on the table. [looking at your Worksheet] And I felt some anger and some sadness and some frustration. [Choosing one of the two circled needs for now] Because I really want to be able to trust you when we agree on stuff. [Deep breath] So, just wondering what you heard me say so far?