

Language that Connects: A Guide to Compassionate, Restorative Communication

A companion to Affective Statements and a foundational resource for Restorative Practices Training
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Introduction

Restorative Practices provide a framework for healing and connection—but without concrete tools for communication, even the best intentions can falter. This guide expands upon the Affective Statements section of the Restorative Practices Overview by offering practical, heart-centered tools for “Language that Connects,” grounded in the principles of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and the relational insights of Carl Rogers. It aims to fill a common gap in restorative training: the skill of speaking and listening in ways that build trust, care, and connection.

Core Principles of Connecting Communication

Drawn from BayNVC’s Key Assumptions and Intentions and the foundational teachings of Carl Rogers and Marshall Rosenberg:

- All humans share the same needs.
- Feelings arise in response to our needs being met or unmet.
- All actions are attempts to meet needs—even when they’re maladaptive.
- Empathy and authenticity are the soil where connection grows.
- Mutual understanding is more powerful than agreement.
- True dialogue requires choice and care, not coercion.
- We communicate to connect—not correct.

The Practice of Connection Before Content

Every conversation carries an implicit request: Please give me your attention, your care, your presence. Before offering advice, feedback, or even appreciation, the first need is for mutual readiness to engage.

Practice 1: Ask for Attention Before Speaking

“I have something I’d like to share. Do you have the capacity to listen right now?”

Practice 2: Respect Emotional Capacity

“I want to give you my full attention, but I’m distracted right now. Can we come back to this in 30 minutes?”

This small shift changes the tone of a conversation from one of imposition to one of mutual respect.

From Reactive to Restorative: Transforming Disconnection

Carl Rogers taught that healing happens in relationships that offer unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence. NVC shows us how language can embody these conditions.

Disconnecting Language	Connecting Language
“You’re not listening to me!”	“I’m feeling frustrated because I really want to be heard.”
“You always interrupt.”	“When you cut me off mid-sentence, I felt confused and sad. I’m really wanting to share this idea with you so that you can understand its potential.”

"You don't care."	"I'm needing reassurance that what matters to me also matters to you."
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The Four Components of Language That Connects

A deeper dive into the NVC framework

These four components—Observation, Feeling, Need, and Request—are the building blocks of compassionate and effective communication. They help us express what's alive in us without blame or defensiveness, and invite connection even in moments of conflict or challenge.

1. Observation vs. Evaluation

When we describe what we see or hear, it's essential to separate fact from interpretation or judgment. Why? Because evaluations ("She's rude") tend to provoke defensiveness, while observations ("She interrupted me while I was speaking") create space for curiosity and understanding.

- ♦ Judgment: "He's angry and aggressive."
- ♦ Observation: "He raised his voice and slammed his hand on the table."

This shift helps keep the door of curiosity open. Observations are facts we could capture with a video camera. They invite others to stay in the conversation rather than defend themselves.

2. Feeling vs. Thinking

It's easy to confuse our thoughts or judgments with our feelings, especially when we're upset. But thoughts like "I feel disrespected" are not true feelings—they're interpretations of someone else's behavior.

- ♦ "I feel ignored" → ❌ (judgment "You ignored me.")
- ♦ "I feel sad and discouraged (because I want to be valued and listened to)" → ✅ (true feelings)

Feelings are physical and emotional experiences: sad, angry, scared, joyful,

curious, tired. They change when our needs are met or unmet. Labeling true feelings helps us get in touch with what really matters—and helps others understand and connect with us.

“I feel nervous because I want to do well.”

“I feel excited because I’m anticipating connection.”

“I feel hurt because I really long for support.”

3. Need vs. Strategy

At the root of every feeling is a need—something universal to all people.

When our needs are met, we feel peace or joy. When they’re unmet, we may feel scared, hurt, or angry. But too often, we mistake strategies for needs.

“I need you to be on time” → ❌ (strategy)

“I need support, ease, and reliability (and showing up when you said you would is a way to help me have those qualities)” → ✅ (needs)

Needs are not about a specific action from a specific person. They are universal qualities: care, freedom, belonging, clarity, rest, inspiration, trust, connection, order. When we identify the real need, many strategies become possible.

“I would like more clarity in our communication.”

“I want mutuality and care in this relationship.”

“I long for reassurance and ease.”

Understanding your need helps you speak from the heart—and increases your chance of being heard.

4. Request vs. Demand

Once you’ve identified your feelings and needs, the next step is to make a clear, doable, and compassionate request.

“Would you be willing to...?”

“Would you tell me what you heard me say?”

“Would you be open to talking more about this after dinner?”

A request is not a demand unless there’s a penalty for saying no. If you’re not

willing to hear a “no,” you’re not really making a request.

When someone says no, try asking,

“Is there something you’re needing that makes it hard to say yes right now?”

“Can you share what’s coming up for you in hearing my request?”

This opens a door to dialogue and mutual care, rather than resentment or control.

Universal Needs

Here are just a few needs we all share:

- Connection: belonging, closeness, love, support
- Autonomy: choice, freedom, independence
- Well-being: rest, food, peace, movement, health
- Meaning: purpose, growth, learning, integrity, self-actualization, self-transcendence
- Play: joy, humor, creativity, spontaneity
- Security: stability, order, protection, predictability

When we speak from these universal needs, we speak a language that transcends roles, identities, and even conflict.

5. Hearing the Yes in the No

When someone says “No,” they are saying “Yes” to something they value. Stay curious.

The Power of Affective Statements Revisited

Restorative language is clearest and most effective when built from the NVC model:

Observation → Feeling → Need → Request (optional)

Example:

“When I saw you close the meeting without hearing my idea (observation), I felt discouraged (feeling), because I value inclusion (need). Could we make sure all who wanted to be heard have a chance to share next time?” (request)

Slowing Down & Do-Overs

Mistakes happen. Words land wrong. We get overwhelmed. The power of a Do-Over is that it says:

“I care more about this relationship than being right.”

Try saying:

- “Can I try that again with more clarity?”
 - “I realize I came across sharply—I’d like to rephrase.”
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Practice

Exercise 1: Observation vs. Evaluation

Below are five judgments or evaluations. For each, write a possible observation that describes what actually happened, without interpretation. Stick to what a video camera might record.

Evaluation	Observation (You fill in)
She's so disrespectful.	<i>(ex. She didn't ask before taking the last muffin.)</i>
He's lazy and doesn't care.	
They're always angry.	
She's manipulative.	
He never listens to me.	

Exercise 2: Thought vs. Feeling

Below are statements often mistaken for feelings. For each one, list at least two possible true feelings the speaker might be experiencing. Use a feelings list to help.

Thought	Feelings (You fill in)
I feel dismissed.	<i>(ex. I feel/am worried my vote won't be counted.)</i>
I feel unappreciated.	
I feel judged.	
I feel taken for granted.	
I feel rejected.	

Exercise 3: Strategy vs. Need

Here are five common strategies. For each, name one or more underlying needs the person might be trying to meet by using that strategy.

Strategy	Needs (You fill in)
Asking someone to call when they arrive	(ex. <i>Consideration</i>)
Requesting silence during meals	
Wanting someone to attend your event	
Telling someone to “act professional”	
Asking a roommate to clean the kitchen	

Exercise 4: Drafting a Request

Each example below includes an observation, feeling, and need. Your task is to write a clear, doable, and non-demanding request that might follow.

Expression	Your Request
“When I saw you walk away while I was still talking, I felt hurt because I value mutual attention.”	<i>(ex. Would you be willing to tell me what was going on for you?)</i>
“When you shared that news without checking in with me, I felt anxious because I need trust and clarity.”	
“When you interrupted our meeting, I felt frustrated because I want a sense of flow and respect in our time together.”	
“When you showed up late to dinner, I felt sad because I was really looking forward to time with you.”	
“When I saw you help clean up, I felt grateful because I need shared effort and care.”	

A Note on Demands vs. Requests

Not all demands are “bad.” In moments of crisis, urgency, or danger, demands and clear directives can be essential for safety and harm reduction.

“Stop the car now.”

“Put that down—it’s dangerous.”

These expressions may override consent in the moment in order to minimize harm. That’s not a failure of restorative communication—it’s a necessary function of care.

What matters is how we relate to the use of force afterward.

If you’ve made a demand or taken an action without consent:

- Acknowledge the impact
- Listen to how it affected others
- Attend to unmet needs that may have arisen
- Restore connection as soon as safety allows

When time permits, requests are preferred because:

- They invite collaboration
- They support autonomy
- They reduce resistance
- They keep connection and dignity intact

Remember: a true request includes a willingness to hear “no.” It asks, “Is this something you’d be willing to do?” and stays present and curious regardless of the answer.

Practices to Cultivate Connecting Language

Daily Micro-Practices:

- Begin one conversation each day by asking, “Is now a good time to connect?”
- Notice and write down a judgment you make, then translate it into a feeling and need.
- Practice a Do-Over at least once a week in a low-stakes interaction.

Partner Practice: Reflective Dialogue

With a trusted friend or partner:

1. Share a real moment that brought up emotion.
2. Partner reflects back what they heard: observation, feeling, need.
3. Switch roles.

Reflection Questions for Integration

1. When are you most likely to speak from judgment instead of need?
2. How does it feel when someone checks in before offering feedback?
3. What helps you stay open-hearted when hearing a “no”?
4. How do you distinguish between your strategies and your true needs?
5. What would shift if every conversation prioritized connection before content?

Conclusion

Language that connects is not just a communication tool—it is a practice of relational integrity and emotional literacy. It supports Fair Process, strengthens community, and moves us toward the “WITH” space of the Social Power Window. When we speak and listen in this way, we build bridges where before there were walls.

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