

Words Are Windows or They Are Walls

By Barry Schwartz
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Kelowna, BC – We often believe an event causes feelings, but feelings can only be triggered by an event. The cause of a feeling is what we bring to it: our needs and values, what's important to us.

Every decision we make is motivated by our needs. When our needs are met, we experience feelings of happiness, contentment, joy and excitement; when our needs are not met, however, we experience feelings of anger, disappointment, hurt and even fear. We literally "flip our lid," disconnecting from our rational mind.

According to counselor Mary Ellen McNaughton, it's the strategy that's the problem, not the need.

"If I can figure out what need a person was trying to meet, regardless of how ineffective or even tragic the strategy was they used to meet it, I can usually come to a place of compassion for them," says McNaughton.

McNaughton is the founder of Words as Windows and an expert in the philosophy of "Nonviolent Communication." Based on the communication process developed by Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication states all human beings have the capacity for compassion and only resort to violence when they don't recognize more effective strategies for meeting needs.

In developing his philosophy, Rosenberg asked, "Why is it that people under certain circumstances behave in violent ways while other people in similar circumstances stay connected to their compassion? How we derive meaning from situations determines how we will respond."

When we are triggered, we literally 'flip our lids' or disconnect from our cerebral cortex or 'thinking brain' and revert to our fight-or-flight survival brain. When this occurs, we are often telling ourselves that drastic action is required, but a response from this place is usually counterproductive.



Mary Ellen McNaughton is the founder of Words as Windows counseling practice and an expert in the philosophy of Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication.

"Rosenberg used the term 'nonviolent' the way Mahatma Gandhi used it, meaning when violence subsides from the heart," says McNaughton. "He was referring to the seeds of violence like judgment and labels, seeing people as alien or different so there's no need to have compassion."

Since her introduction to the philosophy in 1999, McNaughton has incorporated the frame of Nonviolent Communication into her practice to help clients to better identify their emotional triggers.

"I find with my clients that the question, 'What am I telling myself?' is a good reminder that what we are dealing with is our perception of reality and not reality itself," says McNaughton. "I use Nonviolent Communication as a tool for people to find clarity and understand what's motivating their decisions."

In addition to using Nonviolent Communication as a means of communicating more effectively with others, McNaughton also uses it to help clients connect more clearly and effectively with themselves. Using the model can shift thinking in a way that often preempts conflict in the first place.

"We often trivialize how we feel," says

McNaughton. "We're told we shouldn't feel a certain way. We should get past it." Instead, McNaughton works with a step-by-step flow-sheet that gives her clients the space and permission to feel, allowing her clients to debrief the triggering moment and recognize they have a choice about how they respond.

McNaughton believes words can be used as windows for people to connect or walls to block others out, hence Words as Windows.

"I work with self-empathy because it is tremendously healing and that translates out into our interactions and relationships with others as well."

For more on Words As Windows, visit
<http://www.maryellenmcnaughton.com>
