

Getting Past the Pain Between Us

**Healing and Reconciliation
Without Compromise**

*A Nonviolent Communication™
presentation and workshop transcription by*

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Getting Past the Pain



Introduction

The following was excerpted from a workshop given on October 4, 2002, by Marshall Rosenberg, founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication. *Getting Past the Pain* focuses on mending our relationships with one another and gives us skills for understanding and resolving our conflicts, for healing old hurts, and for developing satisfying relationships using Nonviolent Communication™ (NVC).

Here you will find steps you can take for the healing or reconciliation of any conflicted relationship, whether at work, at home, at school, or in your community. It will also give you a sense of the energy of empathy: the compassion and the heartfelt “presence” necessary for healing to take place. Nonviolent Communication skills empower you to make lasting peace, and even to prevent trouble from happening in the first place. Join in on this workshop dialogue and enjoy the magic that understanding brings when we listen and speak from the heart.

The training opens with Marshall Rosenberg role-playing a situation posed by an audience member. In the role-plays, participants are identified as UF (unidentified female participant), UM (unidentified male participant), and MR (Marshall Rosenberg). All other words are Marshall’s.

Role-Play: Healing Bitterness

MR: Good afternoon. So, what could I share with you about healing and reconciliation that would meet your needs? Would you like to hear me talk about it? Or maybe you have some pain left over from something that happened to you in the past with somebody, and would like us to do it “live” and not just talk about it?

UF: I wonder how I can get past or release a lot of bitterness I have toward somebody.

MR: How about if I use Nonviolent Communication and play the role of the person that you have the bitterness toward? I’ll be that person, but I’m going to be speaking to you as someone living Nonviolent Communication. All you need to do is just say what you want to say. Okay, you got the game? Good, now who am I going to be?

UF: My brother.

MR: (BEGINS PLAYING THE ROLE) Sister, I am very touched that you want to heal this bitterness between us, and by the courage you’re showing. What would be a big gift to me is if you would share what is alive with you right now in relationship to me. Just say what’s going on however you want to.

UF: I have a real ethical problem with you. You weren’t honest with me or reliable when our parents were declining. When I reached out to you to try and work it out, you were unwilling. You just wanted to put the past behind us. That’s what you’ve always done, our whole life. You say it’s my problem; you don’t want to deal with it. Whatever is upsetting to me doesn’t seem to matter.

MR: You’ve said a lot to me here, a lot of different feelings: Let me check to be sure I understand fully. I’m hearing a lot of anger connecting to a need you may have had for more support when our parents were declining. Did I hear that much right?

UF: Yes.

MR: So that was real, and you'd like some understanding now about how difficult this was for you to go through, how you would've really loved support . . . but not only didn't you get that support that you would've liked, but I'm also hearing that some of the things that I did since then in relationship to family matters have left you with a great deal of pain . . . that you would have really liked us to have made those decisions differently . . .

UF: Yeah.

MR: Yeah . . . especially since it wasn't the only time you've experienced that your own needs weren't given the consideration you would've liked. Did I hear your message accurately?

UF: Yeah, yeah.

MR: Do you like me when I'm wearing empathy ears?

UF: Yes! Will you be my brother?

MR: So, still wearing these ears, I'd like to hear whatever else is still alive, still going on in you.

UF: You say you want us to get back together, but I just can't. We just don't resolve conflicts in the family, and I don't want to live like that any more.

MR: So, if I hear your need, it's to protect yourself from the pain that you've felt in the past when you've reached out and tried to resolve things and it didn't happen. At this point you've had enough of that. It's as if part of you would like to hear from me, but not if it means going through the pain that you've felt in the past.

UF: Right. I'm still left in a quandary, because I can't see it working either way. If I go back, it's not going to be good for me, but then just staying away seems unnatural.

MR: So, you're really torn. You have two needs. One need is for there to be reconciliation and healing between us. The other is this strong need to protect yourself. You don't know how to meet both needs.

UF: Right.

MR: That's a real painful conflict.

UF: Right.

MR: Anything else, Sister, that you'd like me to hear before I react to what you've said?

UF: No.

MR: Hearing you now, with these empathy ears on, I feel a deep, deep sadness, because I can see that I have not met my own needs with some of the things that I've done in our relationship: my need to nurture you in the way that I'd like, to contribute to your well-being. When I see how my actions have just the opposite effect, how it's created so much pain for you, I feel a deep sadness . . . and I'm very vulnerable right now . . . I'd like to hear how you feel when I tell you about this sadness.

UF: You're probably in the same quandary that I am, in the sense that you don't know how to meet my needs without being highly uncomfortable yourself . . .

MR: I want to thank you for anticipating that, and what I'd really like right now is for you to just hear how sad I feel that I didn't get my need met to contribute to your well-being as I would've liked.

UF: I appreciate that.

MR: Now, what I would like to do is tell you what was going on in me when I did those things in our relationship. And—I think you've already somewhat anticipated this—I'd like to make it as clear as I can. First, about not providing more support for your efforts in dealing with the stress around our parents when they were declining: I had an inner message telling me that I really should help, and that I was a rat for not giving more support. And then because I was feeling so guilty, I wasn't able to hear your pain and your needs with my compassionate listening ears. Your requests were sounding too much like a demand on me. I was torn because

I wanted to help, but I was also angry hearing a demand. I felt guilty, and I just didn't know how to handle all of those feelings going on in me except to try to avoid the whole issue. I'd like to know how you feel when I tell you that.

UF: It makes sense . . . clarifies things.

MR: So then, just as you have some hurt in relationship to me, I have some hurt that I haven't known how to express to you about things that have happened in the past. I wish I could've known how to talk about it, but having that hurt inside and not knowing how to express it made it come out angry toward you at times. I wish I could have expressed it differently. So, how do you feel when I tell you that?

UF: Good to hear.

MR: So, is there anything else that you'd like me to hear or you want to say, or that you want to hear from me?

UF: I guess I'd want to know how to work through this in a way that is comfortable enough for each of us. Then we can move forward. It's a mess that has to be cleaned up. And I'm willing to hear whatever you have to say, to open the dialogue.

MR: (Still role-playing) I have an idea. Tell me how this feels to you: How about asking the folks who are recording this workshop to send me a copy of this as a start? And then maybe call me and ask me if I'd like to continue this kind of dialogue, maybe with the help of a third party?

UF: Yeah, I think that's an excellent idea.

MR: Okay, let's do it.

UF: Thank you. (END OF ROLE-PLAY)

Reactions to the Role-Play

MR: Okay, any reactions to that situation? Questions?

UF: What would you recommend in the event that sending the tape was not a possibility?

MR: I think we got some of the healing accomplished that she wanted, that we dealt with the hurt. She wants to deepen the relationship. That shows that we don't have to have the other person physically available to get some healing. Sure, it would be nice now to deepen things with him and go further, but we don't want to depend on the other person's availability for our own healing to take place. Especially if they're not alive any more, if they're inaccessible. Fortunately we can heal *fully* without the other person being involved.

UM: It seems to me to be very important, if I have an issue with a person that I cannot heal by myself, to have somebody who is able to play the NVC part with me. Like you did right now, someone who is able to listen to my issues and listen empathically. So my question is, if I don't have that friend, do you have a method to do that with myself?

MR: Yes, I think you can do it with yourself, and certainly in the best of all worlds, we would have had the brother here. That would have been even more powerful. He could have played himself. But we can do it without him.

Let me outline the steps we went through to help do that. What's very important is to notice how little we talked about the past. Sister made very brief reference to what I, the brother, did, but we didn't go into detail. And what I've found over the years is the more we talk about the past, the less we heal from it. Most of our conversation was about what was alive in both of us right now. We were talking about the present, what she's still feeling as a result of what happened in the past.

Most people think you have to understand the past to get healing. And that you have to tell the story to get the understanding. They mix up intellectual understanding with empathy. Empathy is where the healing comes from. Telling the story does give intellectual understanding about why the person did it, but that's not empathy, and it doesn't do any healing. In fact, retelling the story deepens the pain. It's like reliving the pain again. So, while we're not denying the past, and we make reference to it—to what the brother

did—we didn't go into the details. We didn't say, for example, "I had to take Mother to all the stores and not only that, but when Dad got sick, you know, dadadadadadada." The more she would've talked about that, the less healing would've happened. Especially when you do it with the people you have pain about. They're not going to see that your objective is to get understanding for the pain. They're going to think your objective is to create a case to send them to hell.

UF: I was kind of getting this feeling that the brother has issues that he hasn't expressed to her around this? What if he's holding stuff against her?

MR: As the brother, at the end I said, "I'm feeling some hurt that I don't know how to express to you." That's all I need to do. I said that I was still feeling some hurt in relationship to the past for which I need some understanding, and that understanding doesn't mean that I have to tell the story, to talk more about the past.

UF: Right.

MR: It just means I got it back from her. I saw in her eyes that she heard it.

UF: Okay, okay.

The First Stage of Healing: Empathic Connection

MR: So, what we first want to remember, whether we want to heal ourselves or help somebody else to heal, is to put the *focus on what's alive now*, not what happened in the past. If there is a discussion of the past, say five words, no more: when you ran away from home, when you hit me, whatever.

The first stage of healing involves empathizing with what's alive right now in relationship to what happened. In my role as brother, I *empathically connected* to what is alive in her now. Doing that requires certain things.

The first step to empathic connection is what Martin Buber calls the most precious gift one human being can give to another: presence. In the role of the brother I was fully present to what was alive in her now, in this moment. I wasn't thinking of what I was going to say next, or what happened in the past.

This is a hard gift to give to somebody because it means that I can bring nothing in from the past. Even a diagnosis I've had of this person in the past will get in the way of empathy. This is why my clinical training in psychoanalysis was a deficit. It taught me how to sit and think about what the person was saying and how to intellectually interpret it, but not how to be fully present to this person (which is really where the healing comes from). To be fully present I have to throw out all of my clinical training, all of my diagnoses, all of this prior knowledge about human beings and their development. That only gives me intellectual understanding, which blocks empathy.

The best I can tell you about what empathy feels like to me is that it's like surfboard riding. You're trying to get with the energy of the wave, trying to hear what's alive right now. I'm trying to go with this rhythm of life that's in this person. And sometimes just looking at the floor I can get more with it than looking at the person and being distracted by things.

UF: I get sucked into sympathy, though.

Empathy versus Sympathy

MR: Sympathy, empathy—let's get clear about the difference. If I have strong feelings in me, just being conscious of them is sympathy, not empathy. So, if I had been the brother and I had said, "Boy, I feel sad when you say that," that would have been sympathy, not empathy. Remember a time when you had a pain in your body, maybe a headache or a toothache, and you got into a good book? What happened to the pain? You weren't aware of it. It was there, I mean the physical condition hadn't changed, but you weren't