Anger, Guilt & Shame

Reclaiming Power and Choice

Liv Larsson
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Preface by the Author

My partner and I sometimes tease each other about situations where either he or I have been really angry with each other. When we are asked what the conflict was about, retrospectively we surprisingly seldom remember what it was that triggered the anger. We remember some of the expressions we used and the less flattering actions we acted out. Although the cause of the conflict in the moment when it occurred seems to be the most important thing in the world, after a while we do not even remember how the fight started. During the worst raging of the storm, our respective positions seem extremely important. In order to be the one who is right, we are ready to use language and actions that are violent in one way or another. Later, when we searched for the core of our conflicts, we found often that they were about autonomy, care and respect. And that it is these values or needs that are important.

Slowly, step by step, I have began to understand that when I blame my feelings on others, I miss an opportunity to develop and learn something about myself. It has helped me to use the energy that I previously wasted on criticizing others, to change the things I want to change.

If we - instead of blaming others when we are angry - take responsibility for what is going on within us, we can find constructive ways to express ourselves. To connect what we feel to what we need will open doors to dialogue and make it easier to meet everyone’s needs. If no one has to give up their needs in a conflict, it will benefit all our relationships.

It took me several years after my first training in Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to understand the meaning of what Marshall Rosenberg, who developed NVC, meant when he said, “Never do anything to avoid shame and guilt.” As I explored this advice in depth, I discovered that my understanding of communication between people deepened. I also saw how shame, guilt and anger are potent keys to connect to my heart.

Working on this book, I discovered that often hidden behind anger and guilt, is shame and a desire to experience respect. To get in touch with our needs, we also need to get in touch with shame as we explore
anger and guilt. If we get to know shame it makes a big difference in our ability to deal with anger and guilt, so I have chosen to search for a deeper understanding of the concept of shame.

When I immersed myself in the concept of shame and began to use the compass of needs that I describe in chapter five, it deepened my sense of freedom in life. It has been a great investment of time and energy, to connect with and to make friends with anger, guilt and shame.

I have also had the privilege to learn from other people’s experiences - including people taking part in my trainings on the subject - of using the compass of needs.

With the help of this book, I hope you will be pleasantly surprised that it actually is not that difficult to create the life you are longing for. You will see that in every moment it is possible to connect deeper to the life within you, and that guilt, shame and anger can become new friends in this exploration.

I also hope I have managed to show how shame, guilt and anger intimately intermingle and that they are based on a mind-set that we have learned over the past eight thousand years. Although this book is largely about how you as an individual can deal with anger, shame and guilt in more efficient ways, I see these emotions primarily as a result of the domination systems we have been socialized into. Only when we can change this system from its core, will I have the confidence that we can really change our way of life. Our humanity and our social structures, will then, bit by bit, change to become more in the service of life.

My vision is that a person born today will be amazed if she or he is reading this book in about 30 years. She or he will ponder what on earth we were doing, and marvel at why we really needed all these tools to manage something that for them seems so simple.

Liv Larsson
Chapter 1
Shame, Guilt and Anger
Shame, Guilt and Anger

“We cannot solve problems with the same thinking that created them.”
Albert Einstein

My interest in anger, guilt and shame began when I discovered that the reason why it is often challenging to deal with these emotions has to do with how they are connected to a certain way of thinking. This way of thinking is a part of most contemporary cultures and can be seen as “a culture within a culture”. Behind this thinking there are feelings and needs that we sometimes forget, because we focus more on who is right and who is wrong than on what we need. By becoming aware of what we need we can discover new ways of thinking and relating.

The assumptions this book is based on are:

- Shame, guilt and anger are life-serving signals.
- We have misinterpreted these signals.
- We need to reinterpret them if we want to be able to manage them in ways that work for us.

As long as we are looking for someone we can blame our emotions on, we will miss the important messages in them. We need to realize that we have misinterpreted shame, guilt and anger and make new interpretations of what they want to tell us. When we listen for what needs are behind them, they are no longer as challenging to handle. The moment we connect with the needs behind these feelings they are transformed and this makes it easier for us to connect with others and ourselves.

What makes the exploration of anger, guilt and shame interesting is that they are so intimately associated with learned ideas about what is right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate, abnormal and normal. One can see these emotions as “residuals” from a way of life that is not adapted to the way life works. At the core of these residuals are natural feelings and needs.

Because we have been trained in a way of thinking that is not in

1 http://www.compostera.org 091125
harmony with life itself, anger, shame and guilt inevitably become such residuals. They are all useful signals to us in living and it is important to become aware of them, because they help us to become aware of the systems that have created them. In this way they also show us when, and in what way, we are affected by these systems.

We may think it is up to each individual to learn how to deal with these emotional states. Or maybe we blame these emotional states on “the system”. What I am most interested in is that they can give us information on how we can make changes and start living in ways that do not have these “residuals” in the form we see them now. How can we build an internal climate, and extend this to our families, schools and other social structures that serve life fully? A first step is to develop a language that focuses on people’s inner processes, rather than on what somebody is doing rightly or wrongly. This will make it easier for us to live in a way that takes everyone’s needs into account.

Our Way of Thinking Creates Problems

“Anger can be valuable if we use it as an alarm clock to wake us up—to realize we have a need that isn’t being met and that we are thinking in a way that makes it unlikely to be met”.

Marshall Rosenberg

Many times we see anger, shame and guilt as a problem, or something we want to get away from. Imagine a person who has the habit of smoking in bed. Since he cannot stand the noise from the smoke alarm every time his bed catches fire, he moves from house to house. We act in the same way when we see anger, shame and guilt as something that we at all costs want to get away from. Instead of focusing on trying to get rid of them, we can relate to them as an internal alarm system that tells us “there is a fire” somewhere. They signal us that we need to be extra alert, not to get rid of the feelings, but rather to listen to what they want to tell us.

3 From the article Anger and Domination Systems, by Marshall Rosenberg. www.cnvc.org
Anger, shame and guilt are signaling us that we have needs that are not being met. The thinking that stimulates these emotions rarely helps us in meeting the needs the alarm is signaling us about. It rather distracts us, as we begin to look for who has done wrong, rather than to focus on what we need.

Shame and guilt are stimulated by the idea that there is something wrong with us, or we have done wrong and ought to have behaved differently. When we get tired of feeling guilt or shame, we change the focus to finding faults in other people and then we get angry. Adrenaline starts to flow in our body and we might feel vibrant and alive. It can make us believe that we are in deep connection with life, although we are not even connected with our needs. Because we are missing out on what we need, there is a great risk that we will act in ways that will not only not serve others, but in the long run are also detrimental to ourselves.

When we’ve been angry for a while, we often switch back to guilt or shame, especially if we have learned that there is something wrong with being angry. If we have been threatening, demanding, and in other ways showing what we think is wrong with another person, many of us will start being ashamed and start blaming ourselves. We judge ourselves for behaving inappropriately, immaturesly, carelessly, or tell ourselves that we are stupid and selfish.

When we have “turned on ourselves,” long enough and become exhausted by thinking that we are bad, the pendulum swings back again, and we direct ourselves outwards with our judgments and demands. It becomes a vicious circle that is difficult to get out of.
A United Minds survey of shame shows that we often feel a lot of shame after having been angry. Especially when the anger has been directed at our children. The author Alfie Kohn captures this parental wavering when he quotes a parent who says, “first I am so permissive that I hate my children. Then I become so punitive that I hate myself”. 5

Most people would be surprised if they began to examine exactly in what way anger ignites violence between people. They would discover that the anger, despite its explosiveness - and contrary to what they might have thought - is not what most often leads to violence. Behind people’s acts of violence, there is always an experience of humiliation and that some of our common human needs, often of respect or acceptance, have not been met. Nobody explodes into violence without having experienced being “disrespected” in one way or another. We do not know how to endure the shame and humiliation, with the result that violence seems to be a good option. War is not the expression of explosive angry outbursts but most often a strategically played game. Officers who act impulsively and in strong anger are usually demoted or punished. Men who beat the women they live with often plan when and how to do it. Research on domestic violence shows that rarely is this violence the result of a sudden outburst of anger.6

Natural Versus Cultural

Young children are innately vulnerable. This innate natural vulnerability can be seen as a thermostat for our interdependence with our environment, that reminds us of the vital needs of mutual respect, integrity and community. Our vulnerability makes us aware of both internal and external factors and helps us learn to live in harmony with other people. We can see this innate vulnerability as a kind of fine-tuned shame.

When we feel shame, muscles in the neck and shoulders weaken. This leads to the head and eyes turning down and away, the neck and

shoulders sagging. Shame can also lead to heat flashes in our face and all over the body - as well as redness in the face. With strong shame our stomach tightens. We can respond in many ways to these effects on our system. Sometimes we laugh nervously, and sometimes our mouths get stuck in a nervous smile. At other times it is hard to find words and our mouths dry out.

When shame switches to anger, the bodily reactions change. We get tense jaws, tense facial muscles, an even redder face, a higher voice capacity and tense, restrained lips. The physical reactions depend partly on how much anger is held back and how much of it is expressed.

In contrast to anger and shame there are no common physical reactions when we say that we feel guilt. The psychologist Silvan Tomkins has conducted research on human emotional expressions and did not find anything specific that happens in the body when we feel guilt.7

The word guilt is used to describe a variety of emotions that have different effects on our bodies. When we feel guilty, there are many commonalities in our way of thinking. We think that we should do something other than what we are doing and that if we do not change our behavior, we deserve to be ashamed. Since the word should often leads to guilt, we can use it as an eye opener to realize that we are carrying guilt at a certain moment. It is when our natural vulnerability is merged with our culturally influenced way of thinking that shame becomes uncomfortable. Maybe it’s time for us to recapture the core of interdependence that exists in shame, guilt and anger, instead of letting them lie in the way of our connection with each other and ourselves!

Shame chokes us, so we say nothing when we need to. Guilt scares us, and we do not do what needs to be done. Anger blinds us so that we do things that we later regret.

7. Tomkins used to call guilt, moral shame. He made the assumption that guilt had its source in shame. Nathanson, Donald L (1992), *Shame and Pride*. W.W. Norton&CO.
An Approach for Change

In this book, I use an approach called Nonviolent Communication (NVC) to get closer to understanding shame, guilt and anger. This means that I use the assumption that behind every human action there is an attempt to meet a need. Even when people blame, threaten or use violence, we can see them as attempts, albeit tragic ones, to meet needs.¹

We can use NVC to transform shame, guilt and anger into emotions that will more easily help us to get in touch with what we need. Instead of trying to avoid these feelings, we can connect them to our needs and thereby get in touch with what is going on within us at a deeper level. When we do so we find more ways to deal with shame, anger and guilt than to shy away from relationships or to blame ourselves or someone else. Neither do we need to try to get rid of the feelings by rebelling against them.

There are many ways to approach shame, guilt and anger, and NVC is what has so far given me the most hope. What makes me hopeful, is that with NVC, I can find the natural driving forces behind the anger, shame and guilt, and do not get stuck in talking about right or wrong. To do that, we need to be willing to explore our view of human nature. Chapter three therefore describes how the different elements of NVC can be used in this exciting exploration.

The following poem speaks to the vulnerability that arises when we are making new choices, such as the ones I suggest in this book. I also enjoy the reminder of how embracing shame gives me the power and possibility to be real!

¹ Isdal, Per (2001) *Meningen med våld.* Gothia förlag. Isdals definition of violence: “Violence is any action that is directed towards another person, which hurts, scares, violates or abuses another”
You shall thank your gods,
if they force you to go
where you have no footprints
to trust to.

You shall thank your gods,
if all shame on you they pin.
You must seek refuge
a little further in.

What the whole world condemns
sometimes manages quite well.
Outlaws were many
who gained their own soul.

He who is forced to wild wood
looks on all with new sight,
and he tastes with gratitude
life’s bread and salt.

You shall thank your gods,
when your shell they break.
Reality and kernel
the sole choice you can make.
- Karin Boye\(^2\)

\(^2\) http://www.karinboye.se/verk/dikter/dikter-meduff/?you-shall-thank.shtml
Chapter 2
The Myth of Domination in Our Everyday Life
Education for Peace

For many years I used to argue against opinions such as, “We are violent and you cannot change human nature.” I did everything to prove I was “right” and expressed my arguments with force and intensity. My whole focus was to convince the other person that we humans are really not born violent. It was very counterproductive, as the way I did it became a confirmation of our potential violence and our commitment to competition, even if my words said otherwise. Afterwards I was often ashamed and frustrated with myself.

That human beings have the potential to be violent is evident as soon as we see a newscast or read a newspaper. But we can also see that we have the potential to be caring, warm and loving. If we want to contribute to lasting peace, it is important that we nurture our ability to cooperate and to care about each other.

At a conference I attended, the lecturer got a question about whether we can “educate for peace”. The lecturer, who had worked on education issues in Israel for a long time, responded in a way that I have often thought about later. Simplified, she said that if we nurture the longing for peace in our children and young people, without at the same time changing the old ways of thinking about good and evil, we risk seeing even more violence. She explained further that in most Palestinian and Israeli schools the subject of peace was addressed by having the children write essays about peace, paint peace doves and sing peace songs. In this way, the desire for peace was nurtured and maintained. Meanwhile, the students (as in most other school systems) were being trained in a thinking based on moral judgments such as right and wrong and good and bad. Students around the world are learning that one way to act is bad and another good and to follow the standards that those in charge have set up. When people trained in this approach see war going on around them, they ask themselves who is responsible for the war? Whose fault is it? If we have a strong enemy image of another group, we quickly find the answer outside of ourselves and outside of the group we belong to. We have nurtured a strong passion for peace - and simultaneously created a breeding ground for more violence.
To find the root of where violence is coming from, we first need to become aware of how much our view of human beings affects us. In addition to awakening a longing for peace, we need to change the old system of thought which no longer leads us there. All around and within us is proof that this way of thinking is a myth, but something we have learned to believe in as if it were true.

Our Myths Shape Our World...

About eight thousand years ago large parts of humanity turned from seeing themselves as part of the universe to position themselves at the center of the world.¹ I enjoy how Hartmann summarized what has happened with human beings over the millenniums. There are many reasons for this development and I will try to give a very simplified picture of it. We benefit from having at least a superficial understanding of this if we want to explore anger, shame and guilt.

During the last few millennia, most of the existing languages changed from describing processes to becoming more static. We developed a language of diagnosis, labels and analyses. Using this static language we can easily categorize and compare ourselves with others, which makes it easier to understand who should be rewarded and who should be punished. The language was developed to serve those who were highly ranked (regardless of whether it was a king, an emperor or a priest), not to serve life.²

At that time we went from seeing ourselves as part of creation, to placing our planet in the center of the universe with man at the top of it. Creation was made for man, we were the crown of creation and were therefore entitled to exploit and control other life forms. Men received the right to rule over women, adults over children and some groups received the right to rule over other groups.

We also began to assert ownership over land and animals and to believe in the myths of how the earth was created by “evil forces” that destroyed the good. And that man, who was sprung from the earth, therefore, was fundamentally bad, sinful or evil. But also that there

¹ Hartmann, Thom (2001), The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight. Hodder and Stoughton
were some that were a little better than others, and therefore they had the right to rule. As it became a “truth” that our true nature was so sinful, evil and selfish, we needed someone to control us in order to guarantee that no one would be harmed.

At one point we realized, through help from Copernicus and others, that we could not assert that the earth was the universe’s physical center. After prolonged resistance (when we, among other things, killed those who brought forward proof that the Earth actually spun around the sun and not vice versa) we shifted our focus to a world view that was slightly different.\(^3\) Now instead, we regarded the earth and humanity as the spiritual center of the universe.

The static language that we have held on to, creates a definitive and static picture of the world and makes it appear as if we can define the way things are. From this limited horizon it gives us the ability to quickly divide people into normal or abnormal, good or evil and to have opinions on how things should be.

“... it began long ago with the myths of man’s true nature being evil and selfish - and that the good life came only as the heroic forces crushed the evil forces. We have lived a long time with this destructive mythology that comes complete with a language that dehumanizes people and turns them into objects.”

Marshall Rosenberg\(^4\)

If we could have the opportunity to question a person who worshiped Thor and the other gods, in what is called the Nordic mythology more than a thousand years ago, we might have this conversation:

- **Could you tell me about the myth of how Thor and his hammer creates thunder?**

- **Myth, what do you mean!??**

Each system needs its myth, or a story that explains why the world looks the way it does and why what happens, happens. A story that is told enough times and that is confirmed in everyday life ceases to

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be a tale or a myth. We start taking it for reality. When this happens, people seem to accept the story, even if it is destroying their lives.

I have often asked myself which is the myth that we are blind to in our time. What would cause us to respond in a similar way as the person above, answering the question about Thor? What are the beliefs we now have that in a few thousand years will be called old myths? What is it that we today take for granted as self-evident and true? Beliefs that people in a thousand years will marvel about - that we possibly could have believed in?

Wink, Quinn, Hartmann, Clark and many other authors have described a modern myth, which we act on daily. Wink\(^5\) calls it “the myth of redemptive violence”.

This myth seduces us into believing that conflicts can be resolved with violence. It seems logical because, after enough violence a kind of harmony often occurs, at least for a short while. What one forgets is that after a while violence tends to flare up again, now with an enlarged force.

The more I study violence, the more Winks’ words below, capture the essence of what is at its core.

“The myth of redemptive violence is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational and primitive image of evil the world has ever known. Furthermore, its orientation towards evil is one into which virtually all modern children (boys especially) are socialized in the process of maturation.\(^6\)”

Maybe it’s just because this myth is so simple and yet so exciting that has allowed it to have such a huge impact worldwide. It penetrates all other stories - like a code programmed into an existing computer program. It appears in children programs, sports, and in all parts of the adult entertainment world. It infiltrates films, fairy tales, poetry, music and games.

In his book, The Lost Symbol, Dan Browns protagonist Robert Langdon, symbol researcher, reflects this:

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5. Riane Eisler calls it the myth of domination in The Chalice and the Blade, Our History Our Future. In his trilogy on The Powers, Wink use the term “The Myth of Redemptive Violence”.

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“When Langdon taught his students about archetypal hybrids, he used the example of fairy tales, which were recounted across generations and exaggerated over time, borrowing so heavily from one another, that they have evolved into homogenized morality tales with the same iconic elements: virginal damsels, handsome princes, impenetrable fortresses, and powerful wizards. By way of fairy tales, this primeval battle of “good vs. evil” is ingrained into us as children through our stories: Merlin vs. Morgan le Fay, Saint George vs. Dragon, David vs. Goliath, Snow White vs. the Witch, and even Luke Skywalker battling Darth Vader.”

I see this myth lived out over and over again. I hear it in the way we communicate and relate to each other, but also in the way we consume and relate to other living beings and to the planet. I hear it in the way we deal with conflict. This myth leads us to believe that we can solve personal conflicts in a satisfactory way by using violence in various forms.

Many of us threaten our children with punishment or loss of rewards if they do not do what we ask of them. In this way we forward to our children the idea that conflicts can be solved with violence.

We blame our partners, colleagues and others who do not do what we want, using judgments and demands. This way of communicating violently is turned outwardly, but also inwardly towards ourselves. Many of us judge and blame ourselves even harder than we judge others.

We have learned to think, “people need to be punished in order to understand that they have done something wrong,” “some do not learn unless it hurts” and “sometimes it is actually only violence that works.”

It is clear that retaliation and revenge are based on this myth, but perhaps not as obvious as that both our education and our legal systems are also governed in many cases by these ideas. If we are really interested in finding other ways than coercion, rewards or punishments to affect our environment, we will benefit from realizing that violence never or seldom leads to harmony. Only when we realize the limitations of this myth, of this way of thinking, can we avoid the many pitfalls it has created. Most of us are extremely well trained in this way of thinking,

but just as a person with ancient beliefs cannot see his view of life as only a myth, we can’t see our own view of the nature of human beings as a myth. It’s easy to lose hope when you see how a lethal combination of high technology and domination thinking right now controls large parts of the world. Especially when it is obvious that it would serve us all to give more support to children and young people and those working with them, instead of spending so much of our resources on weapons.  

A UNICEF report shows that the cost of a nuclear-armed submarine could provide 48 million people in the so called third world, with water and sewage systems. The cost of 11 bombers could fund four years of primary education for 135 million children. A single ballistic missile’s price tag would be enough to provide food for 50 million children in the Third World over a year. It’s not a question of whether resources exist or not. It’s a question of how they are used, and perhaps most importantly why they are used in this way.

Shame on You!

“If you have a plant and it isn’t growing the way you would like, do you punish it?”

Marshall Rosenberg

In any culture or system people are trained to think in a way that supports that particular culture or system. Our way of thinking characterizes the way we communicate. In every system there is also a view of life and of human beings, which affects what and how we do things.

In history, kings were given the right to decide who was good and who was evil, so that it would be easy to find out who should be punished and who should be rewarded. In other times, countries,

8. In Sweden, a plumber earns (on average) about 375 000 SEK per year and a preschool teacher about 260 000 SEK. We seem to be willing to spend more on those who fix our plumbing than on those who work with our children. The prevailing gender power structure of course contributes to these differences but also on what we value.


regions or cultures, the czar, emperor, priest, judge or politicians have been given that right. But the most important thing is not what you call the person at the top; the importance is in having a system whose aim is to control people.

The purpose of punishment is to get people to change. To help people, so that they can behave “properly”, one must make them ashamed and realize what small unimportant “creeps” they are. This is rooted in the notion and belief that if people are suffering and hate themselves, they will learn from this.

To accomplish this, it is of great use if the language contains words of judgment such as good, bad, right, wrong, irrational and
incompetent. Also, the word “forgive” is one of the first things a child in this system must learn to say properly. It will show that they repent and understand that they have done wrong.

Does anybody really believe that a child who has been forced to say “I’m sorry” will begin to care more about others? I think it’s pretty obvious that there is no magical healing that will happen simply by the words in themselves. When we force a child to say that they are sorry, we have not only forced the child to say “sorry”, we have also taught them that it’s okay to say it even if he or she does not mean it - that is, we have taught them to lie. The whole concept of punishment and rewards is so deeply ingrained in us that we find it hard to imagine other options.

To mourn and to feel disappointment when we have done something that has not met needs, neither ours nor others, is, however, as
I see it, very natural, even innate. We can grieve, without criticizing ourselves, and in this way, learn new ways to act.

On the Scene of a Domination Culture

In order to clarify how we can make use of the understanding of the “domination system” in a concrete way, imagine yourself in Anna’s situation in the story on the next page. The story is looked at from different perspectives in several places in this book, and the more you can put yourself into her situation, the more you will learn about anger, shame and guilt. Perhaps it will even remind you of a situation in your own life.

For years Anna and her friends have dreamed of starting a “culture café” together. They talked and fantasized for hours about all the fun that could happen at this café. They dreamed of creating a meeting place for people who wanted to do something meaningful with their time. The place would, amongst other things, offer music, performances, workshops, body treatments, seminars and an opportunity to just meet and talk over a cup of coffee.

Anna has been one of the most committed to this idea and she has often impatiently asked if it is not time to at last get started with this project. When she has heard about a vacant property, she has immediately gone to inspect it, and afterward called her friends to talk about the pros and cons of this particular place. The more they talked about their idea, the stronger Anna has experienced a connection with her friends and the thought of getting to do something meaningful with them has grown stronger and stronger as well.

Then, through her current job, Anna is offered to immediately go abroad to work for six months and she accepts the challenge. After four months of work there, she gets a visit from an acquaintance from her hometown. He says that her friends have just started a café back home. And yet, Anna has not heard anything about this from her friends!
If we think that her friends have done wrong to Anna (or to us) and that they should have acted differently, we feel angry and might think: “They deserve to be punished in one way or another. They must at least know that they have done wrong and that they should be ashamed of themselves.”

When we put the blame on others, because we feel upset about how they behave, anger arises in us and, because we have been taught the concept of deserving, we might have thoughts of revenge - to give someone what they deserve. Anger can be viewed as a signal that we both have some important needs that have not been met, and have become distracted from this by our judgmental and punishing thoughts. Thoughts like “they should have thought about how I would feel” or “they are selfish bastards”, makes it hard for us to take responsibility for our own reactions and make it a challenge for us to act effectively in order to actually meet our own needs.
Domination Cultures Versus Partnership Cultures

To clarify some differences between how various systems affect our ability to manage anger, shame and guilt, I have made some comparisons below. Becoming aware of these differences may contribute to greater acceptance when we are experiencing anger, shame or guilt. What we put our attention on makes it easier or harder to deal with these feelings.

Anger, shame and guilt can be seen as signals that we have shifted our attention from the feelings within us that directly serve life, to a system based on competition, rank and domination. When we learn to recognize these signals, we gain access to valuable information about what we are currently focusing on - what we are judging as right and wrong.

Attention! Doing this division can get us caught up in ideas of right and wrong. If we do that, it will negate the purpose of doing it, so focus on the difference, rather than on trying to figure out if one is good and the other one bad.

Shame

Shame in partnership cultures
We have an innate sensitivity for others and their needs. Shame is interpreted as a sign that it might be valuable to become more aware of the other person’s needs as well as our own.

Shame in domination cultures
Shame is interpreted as a sign that we are not good enough, that we are bad, disgusting, abnormal or that we have done something wrong and are not worthy of love. Inducing shame is used to try to create change.
Anger

**Anger in partnership cultures**
Anger is a sign that someone has needs that have not been met. Anger gives us strength to set limits to protect what we value. Anger is not taken personally or as if there is something wrong with anyone, but as a cry for help.

**Anger in domination cultures**
Anger means that someone has done something wrong and should have acted differently. They should “know better” and they now deserve to be punished. Criticism expressed with anger is directed at another person or is easily perceived as a personal attack.

Guilt

**Guilt in partnership cultures**
Instead of finding a scapegoat or deciding who is to blame, we try to consider everyone’s needs, our own and others. We explore whether there is something we want to do differently in order to meet the needs of others without giving up our own needs.

**Guilt in domination cultures**
Guilt is interpreted as a sign that we should have acted differently and therefore we deserve to be punished. We blame others or ourselves in the hope that it will lead to positive changes.

To Apologize

**To apologize in partnership cultures**
We listen with empathy to another’s pain about their needs having not been met. When we realize that we have not considered the needs of others, we act to repair it.

**To apologize in domination cultures**
If others are not happy, we blame ourselves, feel shame and ask others to forgive us. The focus is on the person who has acted in a way we do not think was right, normal, appropriate or acceptable.
Violence Between the Words

Part of what keeps the domination system in place, is that we learn that there’s something wrong with feeling anger, shame or guilt.¹¹ When we learn to focus on what is wrong with us, we are easily oppressed. The language we have learned easily turns us into obedient slaves. If we want to change that, we need to learn a language that empowers us to live our lives in the way we dream of.

Most of us grew up in domination systems - a system in which power is used as power “over” others, rather than power with others. It is a system where we look at people, including ourselves, as bad, evil or irrelevant. For such a culture of domination to be created and maintained, we need to continue to:

1. Use moral judgments and static language.
2. Deny human beings the ability to choose how to act.
3. Use the concept of “deserving”.

If we have these ideas and a language based on them, we are easy to control. In fact, not much external control is needed, because we have learned to voluntarily limit our freedom and ourselves.

We can use the three points above, to transform our thinking to a more life-serving way to think. The first step is that we learn to recognize when we use language derived from dominance thinking. The next step is to realize that we can use these very thoughts to understand more about what we feel and need. We may even find that it can be a shortcut to getting in touch with our needs.

The distinction of thoughts that lead to anger is that they are based on one or more of the above three points. If you got angry when you read about Anna or imagined yourself in a similar situation, you’re probably thinking along similar lines as Anna:

“Cowards! Selfish idiots! They are thinking only of themselves. They are

¹¹ Eisler, Riane. In, The Chalice and the Blade, Eisler describes a model she calls the partnership model and compares it with the domination system.
such cowards that they could not even stand up for what they have done. If they did not want me to be a part of the project they should have been honest enough to say it directly to me. I deserve to be treated better than this, but I’ll show them!”

These thoughts contain a few basic concepts: they include static language and ideas about what is “right and wrong”, the thinking that we have a “limited freedom of choice” and of course the crucial “concept of deserving”. With a few thoughts that contain all three points, we have brought the thinking within the dominance system one step further.

1. Anna makes moral judgments and uses static languages: “Cowards! Selfish idiots…” … are expressions of moral judgments based on right and wrong.

When we judge people in the form of static labels, it is easy to forget to treat them with care and respect. To turn our anger against them is close at hand.

2. Anna denies that they have choice, and thinks they should behave in a certain way: “If they did not want me to be a part of the project, they should have been honest enough to say it directly to me.”

We think that people ought to behave in a certain way. They do not really have the right to do what they do. They deserve punishment and this second point is linked together with the third, the concept of deserve.

3. Anna uses the concept of “deserve”: “I deserve to be treated in a better way so I’ll show them!”

The concept of “deserve” is the foundation of any punishment and reward. When people act in a way that we think is wrong, we threaten them with punishment. We have a belief that if someone we think has done “wrong” gets what he or she deserves, it will restore the balance. The idea is that the more they hate themselves and learn that they
have done wrong, the greater the chance will be that they will learn
to act differently next time.

If we are aware that we think this way, we become freer to act in
a way that can lead us to where we want to go. Before we go deeper
into that, let’s continue to experiment with how our habitual ways of
thinking can appear in the way we act when we feel guilt and shame.

Now use the same three concepts of thinking to understand how
these ways of thinking lead to shame or guilt.

1. Static language - for example moral judgments.
2. Denial of choice.
3. The concept of deserve.

Anna might not get angry when she hears about the café, but instead
feel shame or guilt. If she does she is probably thinking something like
this: “That’s what I suspected. They never wanted me and that’s not
so strange, I’m always so complicated and I do not know how to keep
agreements. I should not have expected anything else ... Nobody wants
to be with me when it really comes down to it, I’m just not enough!”

1. **Anna uses moral judgments by making diagnoses and analyzing
   herself.**
   “... I’m always so **complicated** and I not know how to keep agree-
ments ... I’m just not **interesting enough** to work with.”

When we think of ourselves in the form of static labels and analysis,
we often give up on what we want and need. Static language can
easily lead to violence, whether it is directed inwards or outwards. It
is based on moral judgments of ourselves, leads to self-criticism and
self-fulfilling prophecies that pacify us.

2. **Anna restricts her own freedom of choice and tries to suppress
   or ignore her reaction to what has happened**
   “I should not have expected anything else so this is how it usually
goes ... when will I ever learn to stop dreaming ...”

   According to the norms, there are certain things that are appropriate
or normal. We have learned that if you do not follow these norms you may suffer for it.

3. The concept of “deserve” turned inwardly.

“I should not have expected anything else. I’m not interesting enough. I get what I deserve and there is nothing I can do about it.”

We deserve to be included or rewarded by being perfect, and/or normal, and if we are not we do not deserve to have others care about us. Both punishments and rewards keep us in place.

As I see it, a natural part of being human is to mourn a missed opportunity to help someone else. It is an entirely different process than that based on the idea that if we feel badly enough about ourselves, we will learn not to act the same way again. Hating yourself does not usually lead to the change we want to see.
DOMINATION MARINADE

1 LITER OF RIGHT - AND WRONG THINKING
1 BUNCH OF MORAL JUDGEMENTS
1 DOSE OF LIMITED CHOICE
1 KG DENIAL OF SELF-WORTH
1 PACKAGE OF DESERVE MENTALITY

Make sure everything is covered with the marinade to ensure high levels of passivity. To obtain really intense obedience by all parts, be sure they are marinated for a long time and make sure all parts are soaked.
PARTNERSHIP MARINADE
1 LITER OF NEEDS THINKING
1 BUNCH OF HONEST EXPRESSIONS
1 DOSE OF EMPATHY
1 KG FREEDOM OF CHOICE
1 PACKAGE OF MUTUALITY

Make sure to balance the desire for freedom with caring for others. Experiment freely with the ingredients to achieve the desired results.
Chapter 3
Anger, Guilt, Shame and Our Way of Communicating
Nonviolent Communication (NVC)

“Breathing is to life what communication is to relationships.”
Virginia Satir

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) has been immensely useful as I have explored anger, guilt and shame. NVC is a combination of ways to communicate, to think and to use our own power. It’s aim is to create a quality of connection between us humans, where our inherent willingness to listen to and try to meet everyone’s needs are stimulated. It is an approach where we see everyone’s needs as important. Mutual respect and free will are important concepts as they are valuable when we want to cooperate with someone, to build a close relationship and also when we want to be able to handle conflict.

We humans are built for connection. Human beings are mutually dependent on other people and on nature around us. A certain degree of vulnerability helps us to continuously connect with others and with ourselves. In this chapter I will describe four basic components (observations, feelings, needs and requests), two key elements (honesty and empathy), and some key concepts and principles of NVC. They can all be used to enhance our ability to manage anger, shame and guilt.

Looking Forward to the Next Time You Feel Shame, Guilt or Anger

“Now you’ll hear my secret. It is very simple: it is only with the heart that one can see properly. What is important is invisible to the eyes.”
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of NVC opened my eyes to the role that anger, guilt and shame play in our lives. I realized that it is possible to see anger, guilt and shame as signals that, if we pay attention to them, can help us live a richer life. Instead of seeing them as something we want to avoid, we can transform them and get a deeper connection with our needs.

I remember my surprise when I first heard Marshall Rosenberg saying that he looked forward to the next time he would get angry or feel shame or guilt. At first it seemed completely ridiculous, but I was curious enough to start looking into what he really meant.

Since then I have spent a long time exploring shame, guilt and anger. I have seen that they are signs that tell us when we have failed to pay attention to some of our life-serving needs. They are a strong signal that we have something more to learn about life. If we use them to become more aware of what goes on inside of us, instead of trying to avoid these feelings, they will inevitably enrich our lives.

An Approach That Leads to Connection

“NVC is an awareness process masquerading as a communication tool”
  Kit Miller

Many of the basic mechanisms underlying human communication become clearer when we look at them through the experiences of anger, shame and guilt. The principles, taken from NVC, which run like a thread throughout this book, can help us both build and preserve a culture of partnership and cooperation. Some of the basic principles are:

1. **Feelings and needs can help us become more aware of how we want to live**

   When we believe that every person’s inner life (feelings and needs) can enrich us, it makes us more interested in understanding what is going on in another person who, for example, is angry. If we are able to connect what anyone feels to what they need, we become more willing to listen to them.

2. **By connecting our feelings to our needs, wants and dreams, we have more power to make important choices**

   When we take responsibility for our feelings by linking them to what we need, we reduce the risk that others hear us as if we are trying
to blame them. Similarly, it is easier for us to listen to others, if we do not hear that we are the cause of their feelings. Our energy is not wasted in responding to criticism, when we connect what others feel to what they need.

3. It is easier to connect if we assume that behind everything we humans do, there is an intention to try to meet needs

If we shift from thinking that other people do things against us, to believing that what they do, they do in an attempt to meet their needs, we can more easily connect with them. Compassion is stimulated when we believe that whatever people do, originates in their desire to meet needs. We recognize ourselves in others and realize that they, just as we, have needs of community, freedom, love, meaning, respect and care. When our anger is stimulated by what someone else does, we can guess which of their needs they are trying to meet. It may help us to understand them, without necessarily accepting their actions.

4. We want to contribute to others when we experience it as voluntary

When we feel that it is optional to help others and not a demand, we feel more motivated to contribute. Demands, threats and language based on what people “should” or “must” do, makes it harder to cooperate. When our language does not limit anyone’s freedom of choice, anger and shame diminish, as these feelings arise when we consider that there are some things we must, or at least should do.

Let me describe four components that are valuable if we want to communicate in a way that will not stimulate anger, guilt and shame, or when we want to handle them if they have already been stimulated.

1. Observations

When we communicate what we’ve seen someone do or heard someone say, with the objectivity of a video camera, we have expressed an observation. It serves as a common platform for our communication with others. A video camera can film what happens, but it cannot
judge or moralize about whether the subject being recorded is normal, abnormal, good, bad, or that someone has ignored and manipulated someone else. Shame, guilt or anger are never far away when we confuse observations with interpretations. An interpretation often includes an idea of what intention the other person had with their actions. The interpretation may make us think that others are the cause of what is going on within us.

Enemy images of people and groups of people are created in every culture that are based on the idea of “right”. When we relate to people through static images of them, it is difficult for us to see the humanity in their behavior. We think we have the right to be angry and to scold them. Once we have learned to see the world through our interpretations they are almost impossible to ignore. As we also have learned that it’s not nice to judge others and to put labels on them, we further judge ourselves for judging them. If we have learned that we should not judge ourselves, we become ashamed and may judge ourselves even harder. It goes round and round in an eternal spinning carousel and we are in danger of going further and further away from being able to observe what is actually happening. If we communicate with someone on the basis of observations of what actually happened, instead of communicating our interpretations, it will sound very different and it will be easier to establish a connection with them.

Let’s consider Anna from the cafe story in chapter two and try to distinguish her interpretations from what actually happened. If she makes an interpretation based on what is right and wrong with her friends, she may call them “self-centered egoists”. If she, instead of interpreting, makes an observation of what has happened she could say:

“We have talked about starting a café together for the past five years. Now I hear that they have started a café without telling me anything about it.”
2. Feelings

Some of us may think that it is impossible to stick to observations when they we angry (even if we like the idea), because we get so upset. However, most of us agree that it is valuable to be able to express one’s feelings in the moments when one is upset - and with practice this can be learned.

When I use the word “feelings” I am referring to what can be experienced as sensations in the body. Being able to describe how it feels in our body makes it easier to get information about what we need and to describe it to others. When others get in touch with what we feel, it becomes easier for them to gain an understanding of our reality, because they can recognize themselves in it, as feelings are something we humans have in common.

Sometimes it feels as if our feelings “are taking over,” but the fact is that emotions change rapidly and that they only remain a few seconds, if they are not stimulated again. If we openly take responsibility for our feelings by linking them to our needs, it reduces the risk that others perceive our expressed emotions as criticism or blame. Similarly, our ability to connect the feelings of others to what they need, rather than to what we have done “wrong”, protects us from feeling guilt or shame.

All our emotions tell us about something we need. When you feel thirsty, you need to drink. If you are experiencing loneliness, it is probably a need for fellowship, support or love that is stimulated. The feeling of boredom helps you take your need for meaning or inspiration seriously. When we do not listen to what we feel, we miss vital signs that can help us meet our needs. It is in these situations that anger, shame and guilt gets stimulated. They serve as a kind of extra signal system so that we will not miss what is important to us.

In his best-seller, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman makes it clear how valuable it is to be in touch with what we feel when it comes to making constructive decisions and to relate to others.

We all have an inner experience and understanding of emotions, but sometimes it might be a challenge to find a way to express what we feel in a way that it clear to others. Connection with our feelings is of great importance for our wellbeing. Feelings will make themselves

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felt even if we try to ignore them, because they exist as support in serving life. They often become even stronger and even more difficult to handle when we try to push them away, or when we do not want to recognize them.

Emotions have long served us as guides, but with the thinking that we have been marinated in over the past eight thousand years, it has become harder for us to make use of their wisdom. We have learned to think that some feelings are good, appropriate and normal while others are bad, inappropriate and a sign that we are abnormal. This makes it harder to accept certain feelings and then we often push them away and miss their message.

Although emotions sometimes seem to live their own lives, they are intimately linked with our thoughts and our body. In order to efficiently deal with anger, shame and guilt, it is useful to distinguish between what we feel and what we think about what we feel. If we can distinguish between thoughts and feelings, we reduce the risk that we shame or blame ourselves or others.

Other people’s emotions affect us even when not expressed in words. Just imagine how you feel when someone at work or in your close family is experiencing strong emotions. It shows in their body

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<th>Feelings when needs are not fullfilled</th>
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language, facial expressions and gestures. If they are asked about what is going on within them, they say, “nothing special”. When it is unclear what a person feels, the attention of others (often unconsciously) is focused on trying to understand what is going on within him or her.

I have often asked people to think about situations where they have felt shame or guilt in relation to another person. When I have asked what they think the other person felt and the needs in these situations, they rarely know how to respond. Or they say that the person is angry or disappointed in them. They tell me that they feel shame when the other person looks at them with a certain glance, speaks with a certain tone, or uses body language that they are unsure of how to interpret. They read accusations in what they see and hear. When the other person’s feelings are clear to them the shame and guilt lessens.

If I think that others are responsible for what I feel, I express myself differently than I do if I take full responsibility for my feelings. As long as emotions are “positive”, many think it is fine to be “blamed” for being the cause of them. It may be flattering and even encouraging to hear: “I'm glad because you ...”, or “You make me happy”.

When we connect feelings that are not so positive to what someone else has done, many lash out and no longer want to see themselves as the cause of our feelings. It can become challenging to keep listening if someone tells you “I feel disappointed because you ...” or, “You make me sad when you do not ...”

People often say that they think we should talk more about feelings. And I have wondered why it seems to be emotionally charged to do so. One explanation I’ve found is that when we express what we feel, we often add responsibility for our feelings to others. I have much more confidence that others will be able to hear what we feel when we simultaneously connect our feelings to what we need.

“I feel sad because you’re never there for me”, can be replaced with, “I feel sad because I want to experience more support in my life than I have right now”. “I'm afraid. You just think about yourself” with, “I'm afraid because I have a need for care and support?”

Mixing emotions with what we think others do or have the intention to do, can also lead to guilt, shame or anger. This happens, for example, when we use words such as “manipulated”, “attacked” or “insulted”. If I express that “I feel manipulated” it is easy for others to
hear it as “you manipulate me.” They often resist or blame themselves and the connection with them is effected.

3. Needs

I refer sometimes to needs as the “common denominator” among human beings. Through them we can recognize ourselves in each other, which nurtures natural compassion. It increases our ability to understand what is behind someone’s actions. We all have the same basic needs, so we can recognize each other’s driving force, even though we sometimes would choose other ways to act ourselves.

Needs can thus be described as driving forces that are universally human, they are shared by all people, regardless of gender, culture, age or religious or political background. It is valuable to differentiate needs from the specific strategies used to meet them.

Here, the term needs is used to describe resources that life needs to sustain itself. Our physical well-being depends on our need for air, water, rest and nutrition being met. Our psychological and spiritual well-being is strengthened when our needs for understanding, support, companionship, honesty and meaning are met.

Unfortunately, there are only a few people who have learned from childhood how to clearly express needs. Instead, we have learned to criticize, demand and threaten in order to get our needs met and most of the time this has a very poor result as it only creates distance between us.

A basic assumption behind NVC is that behind anger, shame and guilt there are needs that are not being met. The problem in these situations is that we are not in contact with our needs. Instead, we focus our attention on what is wrong with ourselves and others.

Something that can help us to increase our awareness is to regard all thoughts based on right and wrong as signals that we do not have a connection to our needs. When we are in touch with our needs, we are not angry or ashamed anymore because anger has been transformed into feelings that are closer to our basic needs. This makes it impossible to hold on to shame or anger.
Some of our common human needs

Food
Air
Water
Safety
Movement

Autonomy- to choose my own dreams and how I want to reach them

Integrity
Trust
Creativity
Meaning

Peace,
Harmony
Balance
Beauty

Inspiration
Fun

Interdependence

To contribute
Acceptance
Respect
Support
Closeness
Community
Care
Empathy
Honesty
Love
Warmth
Understanding
To be seen and heard
“What They Did Was Wrong”

Let’s see how feelings and needs can be applied to the story of Anna in chapter two. If you were Anna, what do you think you would feel in her situation?

Different people feel different things depending on what they think in the moment, and what they value and need. Let us assume that the first feeling you feel is disappointment. Disappointment because you were so keen to be part of this project. Maybe you also feel worry or confusion because you want to understand more about why your friends have chosen not to tell you that they have started a café. Or maybe you’re sad because you had hoped to be part of something that would be really meaningful and that would give you hope. The needs behind your feelings could thus be inclusion, understanding, meaning or hope. These needs will be easier to get in touch with if you have any contact with what you feel. The feelings give us clues to find out what we need. Possibly you feel happy because you have confidence that you will be involved in the project when you get home - even if you, do not know for sure, because nobody has told you anything. Even if
you have the ability to rejoice, you might feel a certain sadness at not having been involved in the exciting start of the cafe.

Continuing with the story of Anna, you might think:

“Disappointed and sad, no I would get ANGRY!” She has to tell them that they have done wrong, you simply do not behave like that!”

This thinking behind anger leads us to a dead end. Let’s listen to how a dialogue might sound, when we have decided to focus on what others have done wrong.

Anna calls Eve, one of the friends who have started the cafe.
Anna: (Fast, hard and irritated.)
- How could you do this to me? How terribly selfish. You should at least have informed me, but you didn’t even dare to do this! Cowards, you should be ashamed of yourselves!

Eve: (Feeling attacked, answers irritatingly in a firm voice.)
- We are free to make our own decisions! You were not at home and
besides it has always be so difficult to count on you, as you always change your mind. (Now she is showing her “true self”. I’m happy that we did not involve her!)

Anna: (With an even sharper voice.)
- I should have guessed that you would blame me, but you just don’t act like this towards a friend. I will never forgive you for this and I will let everyone know that you have stolen my idea!
  (Hangs up.)

This was not what Anna had hoped for when she made the call. Many of us probably can recognize what can happen when we act according to right and wrong thinking, and when the internal pressure becomes so great that we boil over.

Anger and Needs

“Anger is a result of life-alienating thinking that is disconnected from needs. It indicates that we have moved up to our head to analyze and judge somebody rather than focus on which of our needs are not getting met.”

Marshall Rosenberg³

Many people feel that they are alive when they are angry. The physical sensation is very intense because of the adrenaline and other hormones flowing in their body. But I believe that we are not “fully alive” because we are not in touch with the needs that keep us alive.

Our communication becomes ineffective in this mode. When we get angry, we tend to focus almost exclusively on what we do not like and what is wrong with others, instead of focusing on what we want and how it could be possible for others to contribute to us. When we are angry we often ask others to stop doing something. If we do not clearly ask for exactly what we want them to do, or do differently, a change in their behavior might be equally as irritating to us.

When we are in touch with our human needs, we can no longer be angry. If we connect with the needs behind the anger, we will transform anger into feelings with the same intensity, and at the same time more clearly connect ourselves with life serving needs.

**Shame and Needs**

Shame is sometimes described as the price we pay for being part of a social context. However, I see that there are other ways to become aware that others’ needs are not being met than to feel shame. If we have continuous connection with our own and others’ needs, we do not need shame as an “alarm signal”. Connection with needs helps us to react before we are overwhelmed by shame.

**Guilt and Needs**

A response often heard when I ask people what they need, is that they do not know. And if they know they are usually still having trouble finding words to express it. Many people have learned to feel guilty when they express that they need something, especially if it seems to run counter to what others need. It tends to be a relief for them to realize that all people share the same needs.

Guilt is a sign that we are torn between meeting seemingly conflicting needs. It appears because we do not really know how to act so that all needs are met. We might have submitted to the idea that since the needs are in conflict with each other, however we act, someone will lose.
“It’s My Fault”

Anna may, like many others, feel guilty because she has become angry. She now “attacks” herself and blames herself for being irresponsible and tells herself she is to blame for the outcome of things.

That’s what I suspected. They took the chance while I was away as they never wanted me to be involved anyway. And that is not surprising because I am always so complicated and, as Eve said, really bad at keeping agreements. I should not have expected anything else ... I’m not interesting enough!

Another few months pass without any of her friends contacting her about the café and it’s now time for Anna to return home. When she gets home, Peter - one of those who started the café – is one of the first people she happens to meet.

Anna hopes that he will say something about what has happened, although she only talks about her time abroad, but thoughts about the café are constantly turning in her head. She tells herself that she should say something about the café, about what she thinks about her friends after what they’ve done and how this has been for her. But she cannot get herself to do it and in the end no one mentions the café at all.

When Peter meets Anna he is ashamed of himself, as he feels he should have contacted her about the café. But he smiles and pretends everything is fine. He says very little and lets Anna talk. After a while he calms down because the subject that worries him does not come up. Perhaps this café was not important to Anna he thinks when they part.

The Difference Between Needs and the Strategies We Use to Meet Them

In order to deal with guilt, shame and anger, it is useful to distinguish needs from the strategies we use to meet needs. One way to do this is to realize that we do not need any specific person to do a certain thing, at a certain time.

On one occasion when I was teaching NVC in a group at an inter-
national university in Austria, it became clear that needs - in this case, respect or dignity – are shared by us all, but the ways - strategies - to meet that need varies a lot. The group consisted of people from 28 different nations and the discussion became hot when we got into the topic of respect. It led to a meaningful exchange, when we focused on expressing what we wanted someone else to do if we started to cry in the group.

Two women from Scandinavia said they would find it respectful if someone would stop doing what they did and instead gave the crying person their full attention and support. Some men from West Africa then exclaimed that this particular behavior certainly would not satisfy their need for respect. If they, an impossibility they felt, would start to cry in front of the group, they would like that the others would just pretend like nothing was happening and that they would not be noticed or tended to. It would be the way that they thought would most meet their need for respect. There were besides these two opposite opinions, all kinds of variations of how people wanted to be treated if they should start to cry. Opinions also differed between individuals from the same country, the same sex and of the same religion.

When we saw that there was a difference between the actual experience of respect and the way we wanted to be treated, we could more easily describe our common denominator: the inner experience of dignity. It contributed to closeness in the group to connect with the understanding that we all shared the same need for respect. Many also expressed that it contributed to a sense of freedom to see that there are so many different ways to meet the same needs.

When we can distinguish between needs and strategies, we deal with guilt and shame in a more efficient manner. We do not blame anyone else for what is going on within us, or blame ourselves for what is going on in others. Instead we clarify our needs and tell others what they could do to help us to meet them.

A strength in realizing that needs can be met in different ways is that we become freer to choose how we want to act to meet needs. We are no longer at the mercy of someone who must act only in a certain way if our need for respect is going to get met. If we want to experience respect, we can even get that by responding to the other person in a way that we think is respectful. When we want to experience empathy, our need can sometimes to be met by listening to others with empathy.
4. Requests

When we want to propose a strategy or ask for something, we want to be as specific as possible. This makes it easier for others to understand what we are asking from them. In addition, we want to be sure that what we are asking for is really doable and that it is possible to say “yes” or “no” to in the present.

To ensure that our requests are clear and to minimize the risk that others perceive them as demands, we can use the help of these two questions:

- What do I want someone to do? To do differently?

- What do I want their intention to be when they do it?

When we do not make requests, but demand something from others, we can ask ourselves if we are prepared to pay the price for that type of communication. When someone does something we ask for, not because they want to but because they are afraid, or want to avoid shame, guilt, or to be punished, it will damage our relationship. It can take a lot of energy to repair the connection if this type of communication has been going on for a long time. Others might have lost the joy of contributing to us if they have experienced coercion.

If we do not express any requests at all, express our requests vaguely, or have just expressed our request through an expression of feelings, it is easy for others to misunderstand what we are asking of them. Perhaps we think we are clear and do not understand why others do not understand us or how they can feel guilty by merely listening to our requests.

For instance we might say, “I feel lonely” and think that we have a desire for companionship. But it is not at all certain that it is clear to another person what we are asking for. Some people will understand it and act to meet the need, but for others it is not at all clear, and nothing happens. When we express what we feel (loneliness), what we need (companionship) and what we want from the other person (would you come over for a coffee?) It maximizes our odds of getting the support we want without others needing to be mind readers.

We can divide our request into “contact-oriented” and “action-
oriented” requests. The latter means asking someone to perform a specific action, “I want you to move your bike to the other side of the street, okay?”

A contact-oriented request is based on questions about what the other person is feeling and needing. Asking about how someone feels could sound like this:

- Would you like to tell me how you feel when you hear that I’m frustrated seeing your bike parked in front of the door?

Checking if you made yourself clear second could sound like this:

- I’m not sure I was clear about why parking the bike elsewhere is important to me, so I wonder if you would like to tell me what you heard me say?

Guilt-inducing Communication

Shame and guilt-inducing communication is a powerful weapon as it threatens people’s self-respect and their place in a group. Both guilt and shame can make us fall silent and either shy away from or agree to things we do not really want to do.

A friend told me about a situation that had lasted for a couple of years at the hospital where he works. Every morning the night staff would report what had happened that night to the day staff. It was therefore important that the day staff arrived on time in the morning, so that the night staff would be able to get home to rest. One person from the day group, Donald, would storm into the room five minutes after starting time and then begin to explain why he was late. The other members of the staff used to sit there waiting restlessly for him to finish and send knowing looks at each other, sometimes staring irritably at him. Both managers and employees had brought Donalds tardiness up with him several times and each time they had communicated in a shame inducing way. As many times as they had talked, he had always promised not to be late again. And it had worked! For about three days. Then he started to arrive late again. And each time, his explanations were even longer because he was even more ashamed. The situation
worsened rather than being solved by them talking to him.

This is a typical result when we are trying to motivate someone to change their behavior by shame or blame. When we say something and other people hear it as criticism, they have not heard what our needs are. If we want to see something change permanently, shame or guilt is the last things we want people to experience. When people feel guilt or shame, the change will usually not come from them connecting to an internal motivation and therefore will seldom last.

When I say something that I think could be heard as criticism or blame, I end up saying this:

- If you hear something of what I have said as criticism, I would like to hear it, because then I guess I have not been clear with what I want to say.

If others hear what we need, they cannot hear what we say as criticism or that it’s their fault. They hear that we are asking for help and it might increase their willingness to contribute, but it will also help them to feel free to say no to what we are asking of them.

Another way to prevent people getting the idea that I want them to feel responsible for my feelings, is to ask them to reflect back what they have heard me say. That way I know which version of what I have said is within them and I can decide if I want to try to clarify what I have said.

Remember that in the end it is always up to the listener whether they choose to hear what we say as guilt or shame inducing. However, we have the opportunity to make it easier for them not to, and thus strengthen our connection with them.
Communication That Often Leads to Shame and Guilt

Expressing what I feel without requesting something of the other;

*I feel so lonely.*

Connecting what I feel with what someone else has done:

*I feel sorry because you ...*

Suggesting that someone should do something without requesting it:

*Nobody cares anyway.*

Expressing what I feel, need and want through sighs, facial expressions and gestures.

Mixing what I think is somebody’s intention with what I feel:

*I feel run over, neglected, abandoned, manipulated.*

Never Do Anything to Avoid Shame and Guilt

When we do something out of the joy of contributing, and not to avoid shame or guilt, it enriches our relationships. It is safe to take a pause and feel the shame and guilt - they will be transformed if we take the time needed to get in touch with our needs before we act.

I was at a party where a couple, got into an argument. He wanted to dance and she wanted to talk and just hang out with him. Since I’ve learned that shame and guilt can show the way if we just stop and listen inwardly, I asked the man, whom I knew best of the couple, if he wanted to talk with me. He told me about how he wrestled with lots of thoughts about what he should do. The strongest idea was that he should be at his partner’s side although he would prefer to dance and socialize with others.
He realized that he was desperately trying to avoid feeling guilty. It helped him become aware that he was torn between meeting his need for freedom and his need to contribute. Trying to avoid the guilt he had became more and more confused. When it became clear to him how important it was to both feel free and to contribute to his partner, he could make more aware choices to meet his needs. He chose to spend part of the evening with her and a part of it introducing her to his friends. What led to the shift was that his realization that he had a choice how he wanted to spend the evening, and that he did not have to do what his “should-thoughts” told him to.

Humor or Empathy

Humor is one of the most common ways to deal with shame. Jokes used by stand-up comedians are based almost entirely on things that bring shame. And the more that people are ashamed the funnier the show gets. When you can laugh at yourself and about what makes you ashamed it tends to be easier to deal with the shame. Sometimes it takes a lot of strength and a certain self-distance in order to do so.

Humor can really be a big help when we feel shame, but we cannot all be comedians. It is much easier to train our ability to respond to and deal with shame with empathy. Listening to someone with empathy is a powerful tool in helping a person to deal with anger, shame and guilt.

Empathy

“The biggest deficit in the world today is the deficit of empathy. We need people who can walk in others’ shoes and see the world through their eyes.”

Barack Obama

In NVC, the term “empathy” or to “listen with empathy,” are used to describe a specific approach to connect with someone. Listening with

empathy can be described as our ability to perceive another person’s perspective in a given situation. We try, as Obama mentions in the quote above, to “see the world through the eyes of others”. Empathy researcher Teresa Wiseman has summarized the ability to empathize.\(^5\)

1. Being able to see the world through the eyes of others.

2. Understanding another person’s feelings and needs.

3. Being able to communicate our understanding of others’ feelings.

There are ways to show understanding of what others feel, other than to agree with them or to feel sorry for them. We can focus on being present with how someone feels, without considering whether it is good or bad. Empathy occurs when we no longer focus on judging people or what they have done but instead really listen with an open heart to what they feel and need. We focus on what is going on in the other person rather than on what we think they are or should be.

Empathy is more than words, but our words are a way to confirm that we are really trying to understand what is going on within the person. Focusing on people’s feelings and needs tends to stimulate our compassion. We therefore try to hear what people need, what they dream of, long for and want to see more of in their lives, and what they want to help create, rather than on their weaknesses or on what they do not have.

**Empathy Versus Sympathy**

- *She could really understand me!*
- *He was there with me!*

These are some common reactions from people after they have been heard with empathy, but also when someone has been heard with sympathy. The difference between empathy and sympathy is that when I listen with sympathy, I either agree with him or her, feel sorry for him

or her or share some similar experiences of mine to show them that I understand what they are going through. When I listen with empathy, I try to connect with how someone is feeling and what they need and how the process he or she is going through is affecting him or her.

When we feel shame or guilt and are treated with sympathy, it is likely that we will still feel either feel lonely and not understood, or that we start feeling sorry for ourselves. If we are angry and others respond to us with sympathy, we can become less angry for a while, but often the anger comes back, with increased force towards the person that we are judging and are angry at.

Sometimes sympathy can be perceived as “talking behind someone’s back”. It can also be seen as an attempt (often unsuccessful) to provide support to someone you care about. It may feel good to get sympathy because it gives you proof that someone is “on your team”. In long run, things usually get worse with sympathy because of the risk of further locking positions in a relationship.

It is often much more supportive to listen to someone with empathy than with sympathy, especially when it comes to anger, shame and guilt. However, there is a pitfall here too. If we listen to someone with empathy, without afterwards telling something about what we feel and want in this situation, it is common for them to think that we agree with them. They may believe that you also think that your “common friend is a traitor” or that “all men are like this or like that”.

**To Be Met with Sympathy**

Anna sank down onto a couch at a friend’s place after she had accidentally run into Peter (page 52) without having said anything about how painful and frustrating the experience with the café has been for her.

Anna: (Exclaims firmly.)

*I am so disappointed in myself! I didn’t even dare to mention what I thought. What a coward I am, no wonder they ran all over me... (Then sadly.) ... I let myself be treated like shit, as a damned doormat.*
Friend:
Don't think like that. It's not your fault. You haven't done anything wrong.

Anna:
Maybe... But it was me who came up with the idea to start that café and it's the only thing that really feels fun to me. (With sadness in her voice.) Why do I always have such bad luck.

Friend:
What bad luck ... I think it's fortunate that you are not working with them, they are selfish idiots who do not deserve someone like you as a friend and colleague! You deserve much better than that.

Anna:
Yes, they apparently think only of themselves. And I don't think they will manage. They know nothing about running a business.

In the last line of the dialogue the judgments start going outwards again, which is a common reaction when someone has received sympathy. When you treat someone who is angry or disappointed with sympathy, it's like “putting out fire with gasoline”. The reaction often increases, because the sympathy serves as a confirmation that there is something wrong with the “other person”. The risk is that the person who receives sympathy continues to talk about others, instead of with them.

If one day we communicate our disappointment with the person you were talking about after receiving this type of support, there is a risk that it will be even harder to make contact with them than it was before the sympathy. It becomes more difficult because our static images of how and what the other is (a coward, selfish, and so on) have been confirmed and now lie in the way of seeing things as they really are. Our thoughts that they are responsible for what we feel might also have been amplified. When we experience it as if the power is in their hands, we do not act our self to change the situation. Powerlessness can change into anger expressed as threats or demands.

To be able to communicate in a way that is most likely to lead to
connection in a charged situation, we need a lot of support. We can get this support from others if they listen to what we feel and need and avoid pep talks, analyzing, comforting, or giving us advice or sympathy.

Empathy and Shame

Empathy melts away what has prevented us from getting a deeper inner connection. Empathy and shame can be seen as opposites, while empathy opens us up, shame closes us down. For shame to be reached by empathy, vulnerability is needed. Empathy occurs when we dare to show our shame and when we trust that we are being received and heard. A characteristic of people who quickly recover from shame is that they have a great ability to feel empathy for both themselves and others.6

When we are given advice, a pep talk, reprimands or sympathy when we open up, it makes it difficult to experience empathy in a way that melts away shame. When we are vulnerable and open to someone else, we want to be treated with understanding. To be treated with compassion by someone else is often what is the turning point so that shame will not continue to run riot within us.

Empathy and Anger

When we are angry, if we are treated with compassion, the anger often quickly shifts to a different feeling. With support from the listener, if we can get in touch with the needs behind the anger, we will not be angry anymore. We will feel intense emotions, but we will be able to let go of the guilt induced thinking that made us feel angry. We can use these intense emotions to get in touch with our needs on a deeper level. We will not necessarily get our needs met, but we will be more okay about that when we are in touch with the essence of our needs.

Empathy and Guilt

When feeling guilt, if we are treated with compassion it helps us become free from the internal struggle of whether to act in one way or another. We will have greater access to mourn the needs that were not met by what we have done or not done. Guilt can be an unconscious habit where we are constantly trying to force ourselves to do more of what we think we “should”. Empathy can help us end this torture and find more constructive ways to handle a situation.

To Be Met with Empathy

Anna: (Since she could not get the words out when she met Peter (page 27), she expresses her desperation to another friend.)

I am so disappointed in myself! I did not even dare to mention what I feel, when we met. As cowardly as I am, it’s no wonder that they ran over me ... (Now, sadly.) ... I let myself be treated like a door mat.

Friend:

Sounds like you are really disappointed and want to be understood in how hard this has been for you?

Anna:

Yes, but ... I have been creating it myself. I simply get what I deserve.

Friend:

So you mean that you are really sad and would have liked to have made other choices?

Anna:

Yes, it is so difficult to deal with this and move on, it is killing me and I am accusing myself too, because I did not dare talk to them.
Friend:

Is it that you long to get clarity about what happened? And at the same time are you afraid to talk to them because you need to trust that you will be able to connect?

Anna:

Yes, but I do not know what to say, what would you say in a situation like this?

With the help of this empathetic support Anna might get in touch with her own feelings and needs enough to be able to raise this with her friends. She might also begin to understand that her friends took this action to meet their needs, even if they have hers left out. The enemy image of them can switch into a picture of flesh and blood people - with the same feelings and needs as she has.

In the end of this chapter you can read how a dialogue might sound if Anna was more aware of what was going on within her on the level of needs. If you want to create the conditions for yourself to be heard, often it is useful first to try to understand what needs the others wanted to meet with the strategy they chose, whether we like their strategy or not.
Labels and Moralistic Judgments - Tragic Ways of Asking for Empathy

- *You are so pushy!*
- *What do you mean by pushy?*
- *You are always in such a rush and want it your way!*
- *OK! But you have no right to call me pushy just because things don’t always work!*
- *Look at you, now you are being pushy again. Calm down, we’re just talking.*

During my childhood my dad and I often quarreled (as in the dialogue above). It often started with one of us putting a label on the other - or demanding something - and then the battle was on. Labels often led to self-fulfilling prophecies and the anger grew with every exchange of words.

When we can’t manage to carry all the shame or guilt that we feel, we often “dump” our emotions onto someone else. The creation of enemy images and seeing “evil” outside of ourselves sometimes seems incredibly liberating. It relieves the pressure so that we can cope with our situation, but if we think it will solve our problems, we will be disappointed. Instead of changing their behavior people usually defend themselves against judgments and analysis of how or what they are. Their energy is spent not on the connection between us or in learning new ways to handle similar situations, but on defending themselves.

Swedish research on empathy has established that one thing that stands in the way of our ability to relate emphatically is that we see others as objects. When we put labels on people it turns them into objects, and we stop seeing them as human beings. Then it is easy to not treat them with care and respect.

When the effectiveness of soldiers during the First and Second World Wars was evaluated, it was discovered that many bullets missed their targets. Up to and including World War II the firing rate hovered at 20%-25% of soldiers in direct combat. As long as the soldiers

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saw human beings they missed them, consciously or unconsciously. Therefore American soldiers that went to Vietnam were trained to see the enemy as objects and not as human beings. The result was scary - with a lot fewer misses. Josh Stieber, former American soldier in Iraq in the 2000s explains how training for the invasion of Iraq created soldiers without compassion. “We were taught not to see Iraqis as people. We were trained to shoot first and ask questions later.”

One way of dealing with labels is to remember that behind all the judgments are needs that are not being met. While it can be challenging to hear when others use labels, we can, by transforming them, get in touch with their underlying needs. As soon as we hear judgments, whether it is ourselves or others who judges, we can assume that the need for empathy is not being met.

9. Miki Kashtan. Beyond Reason: Reconciling Emotion with Social Theory, UC Berkeley, 2000. Once studies documented the prevalence of non-shooting strategies, military training was changed drastically, with the specific intent of making more soldiers killers. Current military training actively desensitizes soldiers to the effects of killing, and conditions them through simulations containing immediate rewards for killing, to acquire behaviors which are almost conditioned, so that when in battle they will simply repeat the sequence before having a moment to reflect. The net result of such training was that the shooting rate during the Vietnam war rose sharply to about 95%.
My Longing Is

My longing is mutuality; I call you selfish.
My longing is connection; I call you inaccessible.
My longing is security; I call you irresponsible.
My longing is acceptance; I call you narrow-minded.
My longing is warmth; I call you cold.
I yearn for meaning and call you superficial.
My longing is integrity; I call you boorish.
My longing is trust; I call you unreliable.
My longing is care; I call you inconsiderate.
My longing is intimacy; I call you absent-minded.
My longing is creativity; I call you square.
I want you to listen to me, and call you deaf.
My longing is honesty; I call you untruthful.
My longing is encouragement; I call you discouraging.
My longing is trust; I call you careless.
My longing is self-worth; I call you stupid.
My longing is support, I call you spineless.
I so much want to be noticed and call you blind.
Katarina Hoffmann

Empathy Instead of “Sorry”

*Empathy is understanding how it is to walk in another’s shoes, at the same time as you know that they are not yours.*
Szalita

Shame and guilt can paralyze us and make us do or say something in a way that does not lead to connection. We can be so shocked by the shame that we do not even apologize when we have made a “mistake”. And if we apologize, it is in a way that seldom leads to more connection. It is therefore useful to find other ways to do it and the first step is to listen with empathy. It will help others feel understood in how our actions have affected him or her. When we use the approach of empathy, it is never “too late” as we start where we are. Whatever the other person says, we listen and try to connect with the pain he or she is experiencing. Here, the phrase “better late than never” is really true. The effect may not come as directly, and it may take a long time to repair the trust when a lot of pain has been triggered over time, but it is possible.

As a second step, we express how it affects us to hear the other person’s pain. We might say that we regret the way we chose to act, now that we understand the consequences of our actions for the other person.

Usually, at some point, the other person wants to hear why we acted as we did. The third step will be to tell what needs we tried to meet in doing what we did, even though they might not have been met. We go to the third step for the sake of clarity, although we now - in hindsight - would act differently.

Unfortunately, an apology which does not contain these three elements can be seen as a way of trying to “smooth things over”. It is important that I really am willing to take in how my choices affected the other person for the apology to have any effect.

Remember that for a child who has just done something that hurt someone else or has broken something, it may be difficult to say anything at all. When the child turns a blind eye we can see it as a sign that they are overwhelmed and probably not very susceptible to hearing more just then. Depending on the child’s age it may be more constructive to wait a while before you talk more about what happened. On the other hand, I once got a warm apology from an adult three years after an event, so perhaps it is not just children who need time to recover from what the shock of shame often does to us!

**Apologize with NVC**

Step 1. Listen with empathy to the other person. Really take in how what you have said or done has affected him or her.

Step 2. When you have listened to what is expressed, express what happened in you when you understood how your actions affected the other person.

Step 3. Express what needs you were trying to meet with the hurtful action. You express what drove you, and if you now, having realized the consequences, might choose other ways to act.

**Self-Empathy**

Sometimes we have no one else who can listen to us with compassion. Then we need to listen to ourselves in ways that connect us to our Shame, guilt and anger make us experience ourselves as separated from ourselves and others, therefore it is important that we find ways to
reconnect. Shame especially allows us to be painfully self-conscious. The sense of separation and painful thoughts about being locked out can be overwhelming and it’s useful to have an internal dialogue that supports us.

When I listen to myself with empathy I do almost the same as when I listen to another person. First of all I admit to myself what evaluations or demands I have of myself or anyone else. Then I focus on hearing the feelings and needs behind them and, lastly, clear up how I want to move on.

**Mourning Without “Getting Lost”**

To mourn the “mistakes” we have made is a natural process that occurs if we are in touch with our feelings and needs. We humans have an innate concern for others and shame is a common expression when we realize that we have violated limits. When we allow the shame to show the way, we can use it to ascertain what we need to grieve.

It is said that we learn from our “mistakes”, but I see many of us making the same mistakes over and over again. If we learn anything or not from a mistake, depends on how we handle it. In order not to get caught up in judgments about ourselves and to learn something new from a “mistake”, it is useful to be able to feel grief for that which has occurred in an effective manner. It is only when we grieve in a way that brings us in touch with our needs that learning occurs. One of my friends told me about an occasion when she had been ashamed in a way that she really learned something from:

“I remember how more than 20 years ago I wrote a letter to a person that I then thought behaved in a way that was completely inexcusable and quite stupid. I used irony and certainly some superiority too, to make it really clear to this person what I thought of his actions. The other day I remembered this letter and found myself terribly ashamed of it. I began to think of how I would feel today, if anyone found and read it. This letter for sure did not create connection as it was not formulated in a way that considered either his or my need for respect. What I did was to consider my need for integrity, I was not going to allow him to bully me in any way,
and I wanted to stop him. While thinking about this, I got in touch with what needs were not met then and with the needs I was trying to meet. This brought up a feeling of great sadness. I realized that I could actually have met my need for integrity without giving up the need for respect and care.”

If we want to transform shame, it is important to get in touch with the needs that were not met when we did what we are still ashamed of. Then we connect with the needs we were trying to meet in doing what we did. We allow ourselves to feel the feelings that are stimulated when we connect with these needs. When emotions get more space than our evaluations, mourning occurs and this leads to completeness and closure. To mourn in this way helps us to see how we can act differently in the future to take better care of our own and others’ needs.

As long as anger, shame and guilt have us in their grip, we are unable to take in others’ needs. We create nothing new, because everything is about us and about how horrible it is to feel what we feel. We are easy to manipulate and control if we let these feelings take over our mind. It is only when we use the emotions as keys to a deeper place within, that we become fully accessible to ourselves and to others.

The Shame-inducing Word “No”

Sometimes it is challenging to ask for what we want. The fear of getting a no can make us lower our ambitions and to refrain from expressing a clear preference. But what exactly is it that makes it so awful to be met with a no? Many of us hear no as criticism, even if we logically know that it’s just a sign that someone does not want to do what we ask for.

Expressing present requests is a challenge if we have learned to interpret no as proof that there is something wrong with us. Spinning off from this also gives undesired results in the other direction - if someone asks us to do something and we are ashamed or feel guilt at the thought of saying no. We want to acknowledge people and are afraid that they will associate us with someone who lowers their worth.

The three statements in the box below help me deal with no, whether it is my no to others, or their no to me, in a way that minimizes the anger, shame and guilt.
Three Precious Assumptions About “No”

1. Behind every no there is a yes to something else.

2. Saying no is an invitation to further dialogue.

3. There are always several ways to meet needs.

Let me demonstrate how I use these three claims.

1. Behind every no there is a yes to something else.
   If I ask if you want to go to the movies with me and you say no, I know that you have needs which you do not believe will be fulfilled by this. Your no may mean a yes to your need for rest, or perhaps movement.

2. Saying no is an invitation to further dialogue.
   If I hear your no as an invitation to further dialogue, I can confirm that I hear that you are in need of rest or what I think you need most. Since I still want to have my needs (in this case, community and fun) met, I continue to communicate about them; but now, include what you need.
   - I hear that you have a real need for rest. And I would like to keep talking about how you could have that need met without me giving up on my need for fun. Are you willing to spend five more minutes on that?

3. There are always several ways to meet needs.
   When I hear that your need is for rest or movement, I propose a strategy I think will meet those needs, which can simultaneously meet my needs for companionship and recreation. For example, it can sound like this:
   - I go to the movies with someone else and you stay at home and rest.
   - We both stay at home and socialize in a way that can meet both our needs.
   - We take a walk together. (Maybe to the cinema)
The Language of Needs Leads to Connection and Compassion

In the start of this dialogue Anna is still angry because her way of thinking is partially changed. In the end, she gets more in touch with what she needs and is more willing to listen.

Anna:

- How could you do this to me? What idiots do something so horribly selfish. You could at least have informed me - but you are too cowardly! (Continues to think that she certainly will show them what happens to those who behave as they did!)

Cafe Friend: (Thinking that she has been attacked and responding in a firm voice.)

- We are free to do what we want! You were not even there and besides, you were always changing your mind! You are so fickle.

Anna: (Taking a few deep breaths and reminding herself that behind everything people do, there is a desire to try to meet needs, she decides to try to get in touch with the needs the others are trying to express with the label fickle.)

- I'm guessing you’re frustrated when you call me fickle and I wonder if it’s because you want me to understand how important it is for you to be fully able to trust those who you work with? And perhaps especially in a project that is as important as this?

Cafe Friend: (Now, tentatively, as she hesitates wondering whether Anna really wants to understand.)

- Yes, you … you always have so many wild ideas ... it is not easy to determine what you really want half of the time, if you really are going to be part of something or not?
Anna: (Glad that she tried to understand, instead of arguing because she notices that it creates more connection.)

- You mean you do not want to worry about whether things will be done; you want to be relaxed with everyone doing what they have said they will do?

Cafe Friend: (Now calmer.)

- Yes, we have actually planned to make a living out of this, so it's not just a fun thing that you can play around with and then let go of when it does not fit you any longer. (Then, with hesitation in her voice.) But ... but I understand that it may not have been so nice to hear that we started without you ...

Anna: - Oh, what a relief to hear that you understand that this has been hard for me. It has been tremendously hard, actually. I wanted so very much to be a part of this and I did not understand what happened. Do you want to tell me more about why it was that you did not tell me that you were going to start the café? I’d love to hear about it.

Now the connection is established (even if it is fragile), and there is room for more honesty and creative solutions. When this type of connection has been created there is usually enough creativity to find ways to meet everyone’s needs.

With Anger and Shame Transformed

Anna begins a conversation with her friends and says she wants to be heard in how sad and disappointed she felt when she found out that they had opened the café without her. She is careful to stick to the observations and avoid expressing any interpretations. She also clearly expresses what she feels and needs, and concludes with a request.
Anna: - Part of my frustration is that I still do not fully understand how come none of you talked to me about how you were going to start the cafe. Over time, I understand that my disappointment and anger came from the fact that I had been looking forward to doing this together with you, to experience community and meaning. I’m afraid that what I am saying is not clear or that someone will hear it as blame or criticism of you, so I am wondering if anyone would like to tell me what you have heard me say? (She puts it in a way that she hopes will minimize the risk that the others will hear what she says as a demand, criticism, or as if she wants them to be ashamed and feel guilty.)

One of the cafe friends: - I hear you saying you are disappointed because you wanted to be with us in the project?

Another:
- I hear that you are longing for meaning and community.

Anna:
- Yes, and I still do. And I’m grateful to hear your words, they give me confirmation that you have heard some of how this is for me. So I wonder if I can continue, or if there is anyone else who wants to say something first? (What she says is met with silence, so she continues.)

- Even if it feels unsafe to ask, it is so important to me that I want to do it anyway. I wonder if there is anything I can do that would make you say yes to my taking part in the project now?

Here, the answers can be more challenging to hear. Anna can continue to listen to the others expressing needs that have not been met, in relation to her. The dialogue needs time because there are several things they have not previously communicated with each other.

One of the cafe friends:
- Yes, when I hear you now, it feels easier. Though I would like to be honest and say that I do not fully trust that you really will do what you say you are going to do.
Anna: (Listening, determined to understand what they feel and need as she reflects what the other has said with a genuine desire to understand.)

- *Mm, I hear that you are not sure and maybe worried as you want to trust that things that are decided on will be implemented?*

The dialogue continues and now the communication between them is important, not only the end result. It may take time for all parties to repair their wounds and to restore trust. But when there is mutual connection, they are able to arrive at a completely different approach that takes everyone’s needs into account.
Revealed, jealous, rejected, betrayed, defeated, disappointed, naked, shy, put down, stupid, bad, bad character, bad conscience, poor self-confidence, egoist, a fake, poor, false, locked, cowardly, wrong, ugly, silly, contemptuous, prohibited, loser, ridiculed, humbled, humiliated, embarrassed, greedy, helpless, intruders, ignored, impotent, clumsy, criticized, insulted, sensitive, ridiculous, power-hungry, powerless, manipulated, measured, awkward, unintelligent, immoral, unreliable, unsexy, inadequate, irresponsible, paralyzed, perfect, neat, private, disrespectful, sexy, selfish, ashamed, guilty, beaten, dirty, hurt, wounded pride, losing face, broken, mannered, nerdy, inferior, weak, vulgar, worthy of scorn.

2. Remind yourself of a situation where you used this word, or heard someone else use it. What did you feel? What did you do?

3. Describe how you would have acted in that moment of shame if you chose to move in each of the four directions of the compass of needs.

4. Imagine meeting one person who was sensitive to your feelings in that particular situation.
   What would he or she have said to help you manage these feelings in a way that would be helpful for you?
   What would help you to experience empathy?
   What would help you to be honest?
   What would help you to get in touch with your needs and desires?

5. What did you need in this situation?

   Please use lists of feelings and needs at the end of the book as support.
   Take the time to get in touch with your inner self.
Chapter 7
The Surprising Purpose of Anger
Rapid Transformation

“Anger is not possible unless you think you have been attacked and therefore your attack is justified and you are not in any way responsible for it.”

A Course in Miracles

My three-year-old son broke a glass. While I was sweeping up the glass, he dumped a bag full of sandy toys onto his bed. While I was removing the sand, he took his cloth toy swimming in the toilet bowl, pouring water onto the floor and his pants. And then, some seconds after I had changed his trousers so that we could finally go out, he took them off again. It was clear that he was messing with me! He wanted to test my limits!

Anger came over me. I shouted at him to put his pants on again! He, who was not accustomed to anyone raising his or her voice at him, looked wide-eyed at me and said gently, Now I feel really surprised. All my anger disappeared. It was suddenly absolutely clear that he had been totally immersed in his fantasy games and hadn’t had the slightest idea of standing in the way of my plans. It was my own idea that he was trying to annoy me and being uncooperative that had made me furious, not what he had actually done.

We sat down and I took him in my arms and after we had talked for a while I began to cry. I told him that I had been stressed and that I was sorry for what I had said, and the way I said it, and wondered what he felt now. He stroked my cheek and said, you will learn, Mom. Next time I’m sure you will do it differently. The warmth of his words made me cry even more. They helped me realize how much I want to remember to appreciate connection, and not to let meeting a goal prioritize connecting in the moment.

This was an example of how we can damage relations, when our thinking fools us into believing that our feelings are the result of what someone else does.

The first step in the process to fully express anger, is to understand that anger does not depend on what someone else does. When we are angry and get in touch with the needs behind the anger, it will be

transformed into one or several other emotions, of the same intensity. There may be strong disappointment, sadness or fear, but what they have in common is that they show us better than anger what we need. If someone meets our anger with empathy this transformation can move with the speed of lightning. Empathy helps us gain a deeper connection with ourselves, contrary to what superficial accusatory anger does.

**When you are angry - remind yourself that**

1. You are angry because some of your needs have not been met.

2. You are angry because you are blaming someone else for not getting your needs met.

3. If you express yourself when you are angry, chances are that you do so in a way that does not help you get what you need.

**The Core of Violence**

“It is more important to root out the violence latent in the structure of society than to make peace when open violence breaks out.”

-Jayaprakash Narayan

For many years I have heard people expressing fear and frustration at seeing so much violence in our society. Some people worry about young people who act violently, others about men who abuse women or children, and women and girls who fight. People who work in schools express fear over the amount of violence and abusive language that occurs there. Others are most concerned about street violence and vandalism. People talk about how we use our language in a way that does not feel acceptable and about children and young people having lost all respect for authority and adults.

There is a common core in all of this. We cannot access this core just by focusing on the group or individual who does the things we perceive as signs of disrespect. It would be useful for us to relate to
violence in the same way that we relate to viruses or epidemics.

We can choose to see violence or anger as an individual’s fault or responsibility, but then risk seeing that most of us need support in handling situations surrounding anger. In order to deal with violence, we need to change our view of human beings, see how interdependent we are and to treat each other with respect. Many of us prefer simple solutions over complex ones. We may choose to think that burnout is due to an individual’s inability to manage the balance between activity and rest, or on the individual’s ignorance of how stress affects us.

Then we make programs to help these individuals, which may be supportive. But in doing this, we risk missing the social values and norms that say it is good to work hard. Actually the harder the better. We should be more productive at all costs. One time I held a training on stress management for a staff group. One of the participants refused to do the relaxation exercises I suggested. He commented, “so now our employers want to teach us how to manage stress so that we can work even harder.” I learned a lot that day.

We may get the idea that once we have made a diagnosis of someone, that we understand the cause of the conflict and that therefore we have the situation under control. It may provide some individual peace, but at the community level we are still missing the point that change is needed too, as in this example, to prevent burnout for everyone. The starting point is to see people’s limitations and possibilities. The same applies to our view of violence and how anger, shame and guilt occur. If we choose to see them as problems at the individual level, we then risk missing important and essential social changes that are needed.

Entertainment Violence

“In the United States at the time children are watching TV the most, between 7 and 9 pm, in 75 percent of the programs, the hero either kills someone or beats them up. So by the time the average child is fifteen years old, they have observed thirty thousand beatings and murders by the good guys.”

Marshall Rosenberg

2 From the article “Anger and Domination systems” by Marshall Rosenberg. www.cnvc.org
Probably the numbers are about the same in many European countries as in the example above. Many children begin early on to see TV shows and movies where violence and competition are prominent. This is true for Pokémon, Dinosaur King, Tom and Jerry and most or all of the Disney characters. My son was only three years old when he came home from kindergarten and told me about Pokémon³, which all his friends seemed to like. So I sat down with him to see what kind of show he was talking about. I was shocked at the amount of fights, sarcasm and ideas about right, wrong, good and bad, prevalent throughout the show.

Have you thought about when fights and murders in a movie are the most intense? They take place at the climax of the program, when everything is the most exciting and you want to see how the plot will be resolved. In a systematic way we learn, from a young age, to be amused by violence and to see it as a constructive way to deal with problems.

Each system or culture needs a myth, a story that explains how things have become as they are. A story that is told enough times and that is confirmed repeatedly in everyday life ceases to be a fairy tale or a fantasy and instead becomes accepted as reality. And when that has happened, people accept the story, even if it means a lot of pain for them. One of the myths we have learned in our culture, amongst many other things, is that people are violent, lazy, selfish, evil creatures. And many of us never consider this a myth, or a world view, but see it as the truth.

In recent decades, violence has become more and more commercialized. In Hollywood, you can clearly see how an inflation in violence and the number of murders in movies has increased by several hundred percent.⁴

Movies are powerful carriers of myths. In many movies the ones who are known as the heroes are often those who during a movie succeed in damaging or killing the most and in the most brutal way. All under the banner of good against evil. Those who at the end of the film have proved most effective in using force to wipe out the evil powers are called action heroes or superheroes. Are these the values that we want to convey to future generations? Is this the message we want to

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³ Pokémon is Japanese TV-show and movie.
give to our children?

Do we wish to endorse the idea that the adult way to handle conflict is by resorting to violence?

There are cultures where you do not look at people who hurt others as evil or bad. They simply have forgotten their true nature. If a person in such a culture has done something that has harmed others, people around him or her focus on reminding them of their true nature. They show them “how it is to be human”, as it is believed to give greater results than punishment, if you want them to learn something from what has happened.\(^5\)

I wonder what would happen to our culture and to us if we could watch as many movies based on a myth that people are cooperative beings who care about each other, rather than the movies we now watch, based on the belief that people are aggressive creatures.

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The Lost Way of Using Anger

“I see anger as a result of violence-provoking life alienating thinking.”

Marshall Rosenberg

In many contexts anger is seen as something bad, abnormal, or something we should try to get rid of. When we regard anger in this way we might try to hide our anger, which often makes it even stronger.

When we use the intensity of the anger to be clear about what we need and want, the energy serves our relationships. It is when we use the intensity to blame what we feel on others that we risk damaging our close relationships. To put into words what we feel and need before our anger has exploded, is an effective way to handle it.

It is never too late to learn this, but wouldn’t it be wonderful to live in a system where our children would get support with this from the time that they were little? Imagine a society where we all have the ability to put into words what we feel and need, and where everyone

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\(^5\) See the article on *Anger and Domination* (www.cnvc.org) where Marshall Rosenberg talks about a group of people called the Orang Asili or read Benedict, Ruth (2006), *Patterns of Culture*. Mariner books.
knows how to listen for this in others. It would be a different society than the one we live in. In such a society anger would not be taken personally. We would try to understand what the anger wants to tell us.

Adolf Hitler seems to have understood that the ability to feel and to be able to put words to feelings was a threat to a system based on coercion. He sensed that people’s ability to express their feelings and needs would lead to an inner freedom that would make people difficult to govern. So he forbade teachers in German schools to train children to express their feelings.6

Human beings who are in touch with their feelings and human needs will never easily become controlled puppets.

Anger – an Alarm Bell

Let’s compare anger with the red oil light on the dashboard of the car that signals when the oil is getting low. The actual light itself is not important, but it signals that there is something essential we need stop and examine, and perhaps get assistance to sort out.

We need to take a look under the hood. If we believe that the goal of anger management is merely to turn the warning light off, it can have devastating consequences. If we push the important messages away, we are misunderstanding the reason for the anger - and we will only work to get someone to calm down, to calm their anger. When we do this, we miss the important things - like putting oil in the car - which if we do not do can cause the engine to break down. When we miss the message behind anger’s signal, we ignore the needs waiting to be met.

It is valuable to learn to transform the judgments and demands that stimulate one’s anger. If we do not, anger will often take over and lead us to make choices that we later regret. This often means that in the end we have even more needs that have not been met.

Anger can help us become clear about what is important to us, but to understand this we need to be curious about what it wants to tell us. When we blame others, we lose part of our power to find out what is important to us. When we instead take responsibility for the anger

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5. In the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem are several decrees by Hitler around this subject.
and the thoughts that cause it, we can use our full power to implement the changes we want to achieve.

“By assessing our behaviors in terms of our own unmet needs, the impetus for change comes not out of shame, guilt, anger, or depression, but out of the genuine desire to contribute to our own and others’ well-being.”
Marshall Rosenberg

When the anger has served its purpose - once you have used it to pay attention to your needs and what you value - it will be transformed. This is not the same as to repress it, and also something more than to calm down. The emotions you feel when you get in touch with your needs can be as intense and painful as anger, but they have a different taste.

Count to Ten

If we could say that our brain gets kidnapped when we are angry, the old saying to “count to ten” before you act when you get angry is valuable. If we want to find the needs behind those feelings, we have a great advantage in giving ourselves time to connect inside. Behind anger, there is useful information.

Most of us have thoughts that lead to shame, guilt and anger and an important step towards making friends with these thoughts is to stop, let the internal violence have space - but only within ourselves - long enough for us to be certain about what we need and how we want to act in the situation. It may feel strange because we usually react automatically when we get angry.

Many of us try to censor and push away anger, which makes it either eventually explode or we push it down and might get depressed. Counting to ten is a very good advice as in moments when we are angry we so often need time to make choices that serves us.

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From Shame to Anger to Violence

Based on his research and other expert opinions, James Gilligan\(^8\) in his book *Preventing Violence* concludes that,

*"the most potent stimulus of aggression and violence, and the one that is most reliable in eliciting this response is not the frustration per se, but rather, insult and humiliation."*

So it seems like the most effective way to provoke someone to become violent is to insult them - it may indeed be the only way for most people.

If we summarize the investigations about the school shootings that have become increasingly common in North America and have now also taken place in Finland and Germany, we find that a need for respect has been central in all of these tragedies.

My assessment is that the level of shame rose so high within the perpetrators, that they no longer could handle it, and then it turned to anger and violence. Nobody explodes into deadly violence, if she or he has not been experiencing humiliation.

That we learn to catch the feeling of shame before tragic consequences occur, is a central part of how we can prevent violence. But we need to do something more than just work to support individuals who have already gone over the shame level they can tolerate. We need to do something about the very ethos, world views and structures that breed violence. The first step is to find ways to accept the feeling of anger instead of seeing it as something wrong. Only then will we have a chance to access the shame that lies beneath it.

When We See Anger as Something Wrong

*"Now you're angry!"

My five-year-old draws his shoulders up, leaving me behind with firm steps, obviously displeased. Angry and tired, I plead with him;

*"But wouldn't you be mad if I broke your toys?"*

\(^8\) Gilligan, James (2011). *Preventing Violence*. Thames & Hudson
My indignation had arisen in connection to the fact that he had hit a hole in the car ceiling. Later that evening he was going away with an adult friend of ours and he whispered (but so loud that I heard it) to this person:

“I dare not leave because then mom might break my toys.”

My heart broke. It was not how I wanted him to experience it, as a threat that made him insecure. This was a clear example that we rarely reach someone’s heart by asking them to imagine themselves being in a similar situation as ours. It is more likely that they will hear threats or demands than that they will understand us.

Within domination cultures, anger is a sign that someone has done wrong and needs to be punished. In cultures that focus on nurturing life, anger is seen as a sign that important needs are not being met.

We have as little use in finding out whether anger is normal or not, than we have of deciding whether the feelings of thirst, joy or fatigue are normal. What is important is that we benefit from listening to the feeling in order to do something about what causes it. I like Marshall Rosenbergs word about it.⁹

>To fully express anger requires full consciousness of our need. In addition, energy is required to get the need met. But anger takes all the energy and directs it to punish people, instead of meeting our needs.

At an NVC-training I held in Sri Lanka, a group of Catholic nuns attended. They sometimes spoke so silently that it was difficult to hear them. When asked about what they wanted to focus on during the training some of them looked down at the floor. To my surprise, they one after the other expressed shamefully, almost in a whisper that they wanted to learn to deal with their anger. During the training, I learned more about this. They had been taught to see anger as bad, as a problem. This meant that they hesitated to say anything at all when they began to feel upset. Restrained anger can be like a volcano that eventually erupts. For these women, the restrained anger led to situations where when they eventually expressed themselves, they did

not do it in a beautiful way.

It took a while to show them that anger is a valuable signal to pay attention to, and that there is nothing wrong with feeling angry. The majority found that there were needs behind their anger. They also realized that if they got in touch with these needs, they would be able to handle situations in a way that would be easier to accept and even to enjoy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Steps to Accepting and Dealing with Anger</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Allow yourself to give clear space to all</td>
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<td>judgments and demands. Observe what happens</td>
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<td>inside you when you embrace your judgments</td>
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<td>(rather than trying to battle them with more</td>
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<td>judgments).</td>
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<td>3. Connect with the needs behind the</td>
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<td>judgments and demands.</td>
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<td>4. Connect with what you feel. When the</td>
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<td>feeling changes from anger to another,</td>
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<td>equally strong feeling, you are connected</td>
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<td>to your needs.</td>
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<td>5. Express the feelings, as well as the</td>
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<td>needs that are not being met, and a request</td>
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<td>that you believe will help in meeting the</td>
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Give - But Only If It Is Voluntary

Anger is, as I have mentioned before, intimately connected with all thoughts about what someone should or should not do. Any idea about what is one’s duty and what is right and wrong are also common ingredients in what stimulates anger. One of the basic assumptions of NVC is that human beings enjoys giving, but only if we feel that it is voluntary and not something demanded of us. At one point I got a painful lesson in how important it is to give only when it is voluntary. It happened in a relationship with a friend that I repeatedly had said
yes to in situations where I really wanted to say no. I had been stuck in the idea that when you’re someone’s friend, you are generous, sharing and always there for your friend, whether you like it or not.

Each time I said yes when I meant no to this person, my irritation and my inner enemy image of him grew. In the end, he was a monster, but I still politely said yes when he asked for something. During a visit, he took a small mandarin from the fruit bowl that stood on the kitchen table without asking if it was okay. From MY fruit bowl, WITHOUT asking if it was okay with ME! The intensity of my reaction came as a shock, because I usually appreciate it that my friends feel at home when they come to my place. I was shaking with rage and had all sorts of violent thoughts about things I wanted to do to him. It was almost unbearable for me to watch as he peeled and ate the mandarin. Yet I could not say anything.

He left without us talking about the situation. After I had calmed down a little, I realized that I had said yes too many times and that I needed to be more honest about how his choices influenced me. I got support from some friends in sorting out what I wanted to say to him and asked him to come around for a talk.

We had a conversation about it and how we wanted to relate to each other. I received the valuable realization that if my yes is not a real yes and if I do not give voluntarily, both others and I pay for it.

Let’s go back to the story of Anna in chapter two, to see how this aspect is reflected in her situation. If she angrily threatened and tried to force her friends to let her join the project, they might finally have said yes. But this would probably have led to a situation of constant uncertainty for Anna, because all of us instinctively know how important it is to give because we choose to do so. She would perhaps have been plagued by doubts and thoughts that, they do not really want to have me, and the joy of the café could easily have been clouded by this nagging.

If her friends were suffering from guilt because Anna seemed so disappointed and then agreed to do something that they really didn’t want to do, there is the risk that their thoughts and doubts would all come out eventually. It might have come in the form of snide remarks, sarcasm, or as general resentment or even aversion towards Anna.
Behind the Anger Shame Is Lurking

“Anger, however, coopts our energy by directing it toward punishing people rather than meeting our needs.”
Marshall Rosenberg.10

The deepest feelings of shame are often handled by first dealing with the anger or guilt that comes with the shame. Chapter five - on the compass of needs - shows that, along with others, Nathanson thinks we always feel ashamed before we feel anger.11

He believes that nobody explodes into violence without first having experienced an humiliation of some kind. When someone is acting in the direction of the compass which leads to attacking others, they usually have tried other ways to deal with their shame, but finally have seen no alternative but to blame what they feel on someone else.

This can be a very quick process or one that extends over a long period. We want to avoid feeling the shame and blame others in an attempt to liberate ourselves from it. Whether it is always the case or not, I have discovered that often a shade of shame comes before anger. When the need for respect and dignity are not met, it can lead to violence of various kinds, because we do not know how to deal with the humiliation other than with harsh words, self-hatred or fists. Dealing with shame is therefore also a way to deal with anger. They go together like opposite sides of the same coin.

Angry Women

There are many names for angry women. We have seen in history how the women in bloodless movements of freedom - for example in the women’s liberation movement - have contemptuously been called this and that, while in bloody showdowns between men, those who “win” are often known as heroes.

I asked some of my friends how many words they could think of

11 Nathanson, Donald L (1992), Shame and Pride. W.W. Norton & Co.
for an angry woman and for angry men. The list of words for angry men was very short, but there were an enormous amount of words for angry women. Maybe this amount of words for angry women is an expression of how the image of an angry woman falls outside the norm of how a woman should be. Being angry then is quite a difficult inner battle.

When a woman gets angry, it is often more threatening and inappropriate than when a man gets angry. I think it is one of the reasons why women sometimes have difficulties in expressing their anger. A woman who gets angry is intimidating because she breaks the habitual patterns of how we believe that a woman should behave.

But there is a lot of power that is lost with this suppression. I see the high intensity in the feeling of anger - from anyone - as a sign that deep-set values are being threatened. If we can hear what the person values, we can easily respect the person’s anger, instead of claiming that their anger is inappropriate.12

### Children’s Anger

There are many that argue that anger is natural and interpret certain behaviors in infants as anger. There are many studies showing that boys are often angrier than girls. Research on identity development shows that girls are treated with different expectations and attitudes than boys. Several studies where adult responses to infants were observed, have shown that the adults perceive children differently depending on prior information about the sex of the child13. Depending on whether they had previously received information that the child was a boy or a girl, they reacted differently to the child’s crying. Some reactions were,

- She was crying because she was sad and scared.

And if they thought the same child was a boy:

- He cried because he was angry or annoyed.

12. Research by United Minds (2007) shows that 55% of Swedish women felt shame about having been angry while only 25% of the Swedish men felt shame over this.  
To Protect Rather Than to Punish

When things are get hot sometimes words are not enough to reach someone. We might even be worried that someone will be harmed. In such a situation we can use our power in other ways than with words alone to try to stop a conflict. To maintain a good relationship, it is important that we intervene with the intent of protecting the person and not to punish them. After doing what we can to protect anyone from coming to harm, it is important that as soon as possible afterwards we have a dialogue with the intention of creating connection and mutual respect.

If we are angry, it is an indication that we are not thinking clearly enough to have a focus on protecting and not punishing. The anger is fueled by precisely the energy that comes from our judging someone and then thinking we have the right to punish them in the way they deserve. When we are angry, our head is so full of judgments that we usually are not open to other people’s feelings and needs.

One of my friends is a single mother and her life is sometimes economically tough. All extra expenses are a challenge. Her son started playing with a ball indoors, and she asked him to stop so that nothing would get broken. When he continued, she asked me for advice. I suggested that she could ask him to do what she wanted him to do, telling him why, rather than asking him to stop doing something or what she didn’t want him to do. She then asked him to roll the ball on the floor and explained why. He continued to bounce the ball. After hearing her a few times trying to treat him with compassion, and sometimes asking him to roll the ball without results, I suggested she could rather take the ball away from him to protect their resources.

“But I want him to feel free,” she replied wearily. Cautiously I watched how she continued asking him to roll the ball a few more times. She became, however, more and more irritated. In the end she had had enough, and with a fast and angry move took the ball away from her son putting it away high so that he could not reach it. He was, of course, disappointed and expressed it loudly. As she was at this point annoyed, it was difficult for her to meet him with empathy and care.

We talked about this a few days later and she realized that she had waited so long to act that she had lost connection with her own needs.
She wanted to be heard. She became angry because she had not stood up for her own needs for security and taken the ball away earlier.

She realized that she would have been much more able to respond to her son’s disappointment with understanding and tenderness if she had not waited to act until she was angry. If she had intervened earlier to protect, she could have taken the ball, still being in touch with herself and at the same time saying something like, “Now I’m so worried that I will take the ball to protect things from breaking. I will take it and put it away and I would like to hear how this is for you? Is there anything else we can play with that would be fun?” In that case she would still have had contact with her own needs, and would also have found it easier to be available for the child to help him manage his anger and disappointment.
Summary of Assumptions That Can Help us Deal With Anger

- Anger gets its energy from other underlying feelings.

- Anger is a result of an approach that does not serve us.

- How I choose to look at a situation affects whether I get angry or not, and it also affects my ability to change the situation in the direction I want.

- Instead of judging anger as wrong, we can see it as an alarm that helps us see that we are focusing on judgments and not on our feelings and needs.

- We become angry because we judge people and their way of acting. When we pay attention to these judgments it will help us take responsibility for our feelings, instead of blaming what we feel on others.

- All thoughts containing demands have the potential to provoke anger. They are recognizable because they contain words such as should, must, right, your duty and my rights, wrong, appropriate and inappropriate.

- We can take responsibility for our feelings, even when we express ourselves intensely and with power, by linking our feelings to our needs.

- If we connect with the thoughts and the needs behind the anger, it can sometimes be transformed without any other external change having occurred.

- We can express anger, while taking full responsibility for it, by expressing what we are feeling and needing, rather than expressing our judgments about what we think is right and wrong.
• We can deal with anger and the thought process that causes it, by focusing on trying to understand the other person’s action. Something that effectively transforms our anger is if we can listen for the needs that someone is trying to meet through their actions.

In chapter three, I argued that, when we are in touch with our needs, we are not angry anymore because anger has been transformed into other emotions that are closer to our needs. I have often used this assumption to detect if the anger has been transformed or not.

Practice Anger Management

What Makes You Angry?

Make an inventory and write a list of things you see others do that stimulates anger within you. Ensure that what you write are observations and not interpretations or analysis. Use the list to learn to manage your anger. It can serve as a reminder in situations where you might need to be extra attentive.

Being able to distinguish between interpretations, judgments, analysis, and actual observations of what has happened is a useful first step in handling anger. When we can see things as they are, without filtering them through what we think and feel about the situation, it is easier to connect with the needs that were met or not met. This is an important step in dealing with our anger-producing thoughts. It is often more efficient to not say anything at all when we are angry, because what we say most often is colored by a desire to blame or punish another.

As support to find what makes you angry, you can complete the following sentences:

• I hate people who ...
• People who ... should ...
• I get mad at people who ...
• It makes me so angry when I see people ...
• Situations that piss me off are when ...
Transform Your Anger

1. Think of a situation when another person did something that stimulated your anger. Briefly describe the situation with the same words you would use if you wanted to talk about it to an understanding friend. Allow yourself to use language that matches your experience. Choose a situation that feels meaningful for you to immerse yourself in.

2. Now describe the observations of what the other person did. Translate interpretations of what happened, to observations of what actually happened.

3. What do you claim is the cause of your anger? What judgments do you have, and what do you tell yourself that someone should do.

4. Make yourself human by connecting with the needs you would want to have met in this situation. Use the judgments and demands you discovered in section 3 to be clear about the needs. For inspiration, get support from the list of needs on page 47.
5. What do you feel when you connect with these needs? Do you feel any other emotions than anger?

Take plenty of time for this step and really get in touch with the needs to see if the feeling changes, without trying to force it. If the feeling does not change, you may need more time, or to go through the steps above again. You can also continue and explore if the following steps will change the anger.

6. Make the other person human. Try to familiarize yourself with what the other may have felt or needed when he or she acted as she or he did (2). Formulate a guess that includes the feelings and needs of the other person in this situation.

7. Focus your attention on both your own and the other’s needs. What do you feel when you do so?

If you are still angry, please repeat the process from 3.

8. If anger has shifted and you are connected with the needs behind the “new” feeling, is there anything you want to ask of yourself or the other person that might meet needs?
Express Anger After Having Transformed It

Before you communicate with others, you can ask yourself:

“Is it clear what it is I reacted to?”

“Am I connected to what I feel and need?”

“Do I have a guess at what the other feel and need?”

One important question is,

“Is it clear to me what I want to happen next?” If this is not clear to you, it may be more fruitful first to do the exercise “transform your anger”.

If you have answers to the above questions it might be time to communicate. Do not share any of your judgments with the other person, because they might get in the way of your connection, rather communicate what you feel, need and want to happen.

It is likely that the person you’re communicating with also has a great need to be heard. Remember that just because you are listening to what the other person has to say, does not mean that you agree or are willing to do what they are asking for. If you clearly show that you are trying to understand what they have to say, you’ll probably be surprised at how fast they begin to trust that their needs are important to you. A common result of this is that they also become more willing to listen to your needs. Presumably they will also be open to handling the situation differently if they have confidence that their needs will be included in the decision-making. It is equally important why people do what we ask them to do, as that they do it. When people do something out of duty, guilt, shame, to get a reward, or out of fear of punishment, the relationship will always be charged. It may be at the expense of trust, goodwill or confidence. Use the points below to become clear on how you want to express yourself.
1. Write down what you might say to the other person by expressing your observations, feelings, needs and requests.

2. Write down how the other person might respond.

3. What feelings and needs are expressed by this person through what he or she says and does? Formulate a empathetic guess where you try to connect to the other person.

4. Continue writing exchanges as long as you find it meaningful. Shift between listening with empathy and expressing your own feelings, needs and desires.
About the Author

Based in Sweden, Liv Larsson, is a CNVC-certified trainer and passionate mediator. Trained by Marshall Rosenberg, founder of NVC, she has worked internationally sharing leadership, communication and mediation skills for the past 20 years.

Exploring shame has led her to realize how often she used strategies to avoid it. This awareness has contributed to a greater ease in being more open and vulnerable, but also to a greater sense of choice and power in her life.

She has written 13 books on NVC, including two for children. Her books, *A Helping Hand, Mediation with Nonviolent Communication*, as well as *Relationships, Freedom without Distance, Belonging without Control*, are both very useful for mediators as well as for anyone wanting to live a fuller life. Many of her books have been translated into several other languages. As the mother of a son, handling kids’ shame has been an ongoing interest for her over the past few years.

For more information about Liv’s Books: www.livlarsson.com
For more information about Liv’s trainings: www.friareliv.se/eng
The most important of all questions in this book might be that one about how you want your relationships to be. If your answer to that question is clear, it will be much easier to know how to act and what to request of the other.

Imagine that you are well prepared to go on an important mission in Paris. You have rented a Vespa, learnt some key phrases in French, you’re in time and you have a city map in your hand. But whatever you do everything seems to go wrong. However fast you drive, you still do not arrive at your destination. But you have learnt that it is important to have a positive attitude so you smile, shake off your frustration and try to find it again. After a few hours, you discover that the map you have in your hand is a map of London ... Not Paris.

The same is true in relationships. All tools in the world becomes redundant if you do not know what you want to use them for. Your positive attitude will make it easier to stand challenges but will not take you to the goal. This booklet will help you inspect, repair, and tune the relationships that you want to see flower. With dedicated passion, you can use the tools in this booklet to create clarity and make your relationships with others what you dream of.

Liv Larsson has been studying relationships for more than 20 years, as a mediator and coach. She regularly leads trainings on relationships and is a certified trainer in Nonviolent Communication. She has written twelve books on communication, many of them published in different languages.

Do you long to see your intimate relationships blossom?