

# Compassionate Communication Reference Guide

Cultivating Compassion · Feelings · Faux Feelings · Needs

## Cultivating Compassion

*Compassion is best understood not as a feeling or a need, but as an emergent state — a quality of presence that becomes available when we are no longer in reactivity. It is what NVC is designed to cultivate: the capacity to meet suffering, our own or another's, with openness rather than flinching.*

NVC practitioners Robert Gonzales and Ike Lasater describe this as a “quality of connection” — distinct from feelings, which signal unmet needs, and from needs themselves. Gonzales places compassion in a class of life-serving states alongside generosity, curiosity, and openness: not emotions that arise automatically, but values made present through awareness and practice.

The science is clear that compassion — warm, motivated care — sustains us in ways that empathy alone does not. Neuroscientist Tania Singer showed that empathic distress (feeling what another feels) activates pain networks and leads to burnout, while compassion activates reward networks.

And, compassion can be cultivated. Across multiple studies, brief daily practice produces measurable changes in the brain's neural networks, stress hormones, immune function, and prosocial behavior.

Compassion is our orientation for constructive conflict resolution.

## Feelings

*Feelings are genuine internal emotional states. They arise directly in the body and heart — not as judgments about others or situations, but as signals pointing to our needs.*

### When Needs are Met

#### Joy & Aliveness

delighted · elated · jubilant · exhilarated  
ecstatic · radiant · enthusiastic · vibrant · playful

## **Feelings, When Needs are Met (continued)**

### **Peace & Ease**

calm · serene · content · relaxed · tranquil · at ease · centered · grounded · fulfilled

### **Warmth & Connection**

affectionate · tender · loving · moved · touched · grateful · appreciative · warm

### **Engaged & Interested**

curious · fascinated · absorbed · alert · stimulated · inspired · intrigued · eager

### **Confident & Empowered**

secure · proud · strong · capable · hopeful · optimistic · courageous

### **Relief**

relieved · refreshed · restored · reassured · unburdened

## **When Needs are Unmet**

### **Fear & Anxiety**

afraid · terrified · anxious · nervous · apprehensive  
uneasy · dread · panicked · startled

### **Sadness & Grief**

sad · sorrowful · grief-stricken · despairing · heavy · heartbroken · melancholy · tearful

### **Anger & Frustration**

angry · furious · resentful · irritated · annoyed · outraged · exasperated · bitter

### **Confusion & Disorientation**

confused · baffled · puzzled · torn · ambivalent · overwhelmed · scattered

## **Feelings, When Needs are Unmet (continued)**

### **Disconnection & Loneliness**

lonely · isolated · alienated · withdrawn · distant · bored · numb · detached

### **Embarrassment & Shame**

embarrassed · ashamed · humiliated · self-conscious · flustered

### **Exhaustion & Depletion**

tired · exhausted · drained · burnt out · lethargic · depleted · weary

### **Disgust & Aversion**

repulsed · horrified · uncomfortable · disturbed · troubled

## Faux Feelings

*These are words people use in the format “I feel” that actually describe what they think others are doing to them, or judgments about a situation — not internal emotional states. True feelings reside underneath faux feelings.*

The test: if you can substitute “I think” and it still makes sense, it’s probably not a feeling.

### Faux Feelings That Imply Someone Is Acting on You

abandoned · attacked · betrayed · bullied · cheated · coerced · cornered · criticized · diminished · dismissed · ignored · insulted · interrupted · intimidated · invalidated · judged · manipulated · misunderstood · neglected · patronized · pressured · provoked · punished · rejected · smothered · used · violated

### Faux Feelings That Are Evaluations or Labels

inadequate · incompetent · unworthy · like a failure · stupid · inferior · superior · right · wrong · victimized

*“I feel abandoned” = “I think you left me / don’t care.” The actual feeling underneath might be lonely, scared, sad, or hurt. NVC asks you to go one layer deeper.*

*Note: guilt occupies an interesting middle ground — it can be a genuine feeling, but in NVC it is often treated as self-judgment in disguise. The word “hurt” is similarly contested.*

## Universal Human Needs

*Needs are universal, positive, and belong to no one person. They are never about what another person does or doesn’t do. All human beings share these needs — they are what the feelings are alerting us to.*

### Subsistence & Physical Wellbeing

air · water · food · shelter · rest · sleep · movement · touch · safety · health · comfort

### Connection

affection · appreciation · acceptance · belonging · closeness · community · companionship · cooperation · intimacy · love · mutuality · nurturing · partnership · presence · support · warmth

### Understanding & Being Heard

clarity · awareness · empathy · honesty · to be seen · to be heard · to be known · meaning

### Autonomy

choice · freedom · independence · space · spontaneity · self-determination · dignity

## **Meaning & Purpose**

contribution·creativity·growth·learning · self-expression · challenge · competence · mastery · participation · celebration of life

## **Play & Joy**

humor · fun · play · laughter · pleasure · ease

## **Peace & Harmony**

beauty·order·inspiration·communionwith nature · simplicity · space · equanimity · integration

## **Honesty & Integrity**

authenticity·trust·fairness·consistency · reliability · transparency

## **Mourning & Acknowledgment**

acknowledgmentofloss · grief · celebration of what was