



FROM REACTION TO RESPONSE

Creating a little more room for communication

We react because we are human. A text lands badly, someone says something that hurts, we feel misunderstood, receive criticism, or find ourselves in a conversation that touches something tender. Our nervous system responds, our mind begins making meaning, and sometimes we are already preparing the reply before we have had time to understand what is actually happening.

The goal of this practice is not to stop reacting. It is to create a little more space between what happened, what happened inside of us, and what we choose to do next. That space can change a conversation.

When something feels difficult, judgment often arrives quickly. We may decide that another person is selfish, dramatic, careless, or wrong; just as easily, we may turn that judgment inward and decide that we are too sensitive, too much, or somehow failing. Judgment can point outward or inward, but neither direction tells us very much about what is actually needed.

Instead of immediately asking, "Who is wrong here?" we can practice asking, "What is happening here?" Nonviolent Communication invites us to listen beneath the words for feelings and needs. Anger may be connected to respect or fairness. Defensiveness may carry a longing to be understood. Withdrawal may be trying to protect safety. Frustration may be asking for cooperation. Grief often points toward something we deeply value.

Understanding what matters underneath a reaction does not make every behavior acceptable, and it does not require us to abandon a boundary. It simply gives us more information. We can listen for needs without excusing harm, and we can stay curious without surrendering ourselves.

Do not only listen to the words. Listen for what matters underneath them.

Compassion and cooperation can make room for clearer problem solving.

HOW TO USE THE PRACTICE

Start with yourself. Notice what happened, name what you feel, locate the response in your body, wonder what it may be touching, identify the need or value underneath it, and then choose the response that best reflects who you want to be. Sometimes the only answer you have is, "I am activated and I should not answer this yet." That is useful information too.

Once you have a little more awareness of what is happening in you, you may have more capacity to get curious about the other person. Ask instead of assuming. Listen for what matters to them. And remember: a clear response can still be a boundary, a no, a pause, or an honest acknowledgment that you see things differently.

The practice is not perfection. The practice is choice.





REFLECTION BEFORE REACTION

A practice for clearer, more connected communication

A strong response is information. It is not necessarily an instruction.

1

NOTICE What actually happened?

What did I hear, read, see, or observe? Can I separate what happened from the story I am already telling?

2

FEEL What am I feeling?

Name the feeling rather than describing what you think the other person did.

3

LOCATE Where is this happening in my body?

Jaw, chest, belly, throat, shoulders, face, hands. Am I bracing, rushing, collapsing, freezing, getting louder, or wanting to disappear?

4

WONDER What might this be touching in me?

A past experience? An assumption? A fear? Something I deeply care about? What do I not know yet?

5

NEED What value, need, boundary, or longing is here?

Safety, respect, fairness, belonging, autonomy, understanding, honesty, recognition, justice, space, connection, to be believed, to matter.

6

CHOOSE What response aligns with who I want to be?

Listen? Ask a question? Clarify? Speak honestly? Set a boundary? Repair? Learn more? Take action? Pause?

Sometimes the wisest response is:

I need more time with this.





WHAT MIGHT BE UNDERNEATH THIS?

A quick reference for common human needs

When the word “need” feels difficult, think of it as what matters underneath the reaction. You do not need the perfect word. The purpose is simply to move beneath blame or judgment and toward clearer self-understanding and communication.

CONNECTION

empathy • community • seen • heard • understood • felt

SAFETY & SUPPORT

safety • soothed • rest • sustenance

AUTONOMY & INTEGRITY

autonomy • honesty • meaning

ALIVENESS & EXPRESSION

creativity • space • choice

TRY SHIFTING THE SENTENCE

“You are making me angry.” → *“I am angry, and I am realizing how important it is to me to feel heard.”*

Understanding a need does not make you responsible for meeting it.

Empathy and boundaries can exist at the same time.





BEFORE I RESPOND

Making a little more room between reaction and response

WHAT I KNOW

What actually happened?

When I heard / saw / read...

Begin with what you observed rather than your interpretation of another person's intentions.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN ME

What am I noticing?

I'm noticing I feel... | I'm noticing my body... | I think this matters to me because...

Taking responsibility for your experience does not mean taking responsibility for everything that happened.

WHAT I DON'T KNOW

What could I ask instead of assume?

Can you help me understand what you meant? | Can you tell me more? | What am I missing?

Curiosity does not require agreement.

WHAT I NEED TO SAY

What would clear communication sound like?

What I need right now is... | I'm willing to... | I'm not willing to... | I hear you, and I see this differently.

Understanding another person does not require abandoning yourself.

A FEW THINGS TO REMEMBER

- Curiosity over certainty.
- Listening over assumption.
- Humanity without excusing harm.
- Boundaries without abandoning yourself.
- Understanding does not require agreement.
- Pausing is a response.
- Changing your mind is allowed.
- Repair is possible.

The goal is not to never react.

The practice is becoming more able to notice our reactions, understand what they are telling us, and choose what we want to do next.

