

The 4-Step Communication Formula:  
How to Create Understanding and  
Empathy with the People You Love



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**R**eading this book can be one of two things: it can be a fun read-through of some slightly interesting stuff, or **it can be a turning point in your life. It can be the catalyst to move you to a new place where you never go back to the old way of relating.**

A friend of mine has a story she tells: One day she walked out the door and saw a snake on the driveway. She jumped back, her heart pounding like mad and she let out a yell. She's terribly afraid of snakes. Then she got all of her courage, grabbed the rake that was there on the porch and started to creep closer to the snake. She HAD to get to her car, you see. And as she got closer, she could see... it was a piece of rope! She picked it up and threw it toward the house, put the rake back on the porch, and hoped none of her neighbors had seen

Can you ever go back, look at the piece of rope, and try to scare yourself back into thinking it's a snake? No. Once you've seen it's a rope, it's what? It's a rope.

Likewise, once you learn the 4-Step Communication Formula, it will be hard to go back to building cases and taking things personally as you talk with others. You'll have a tool for building connection, encouraging compassion and expressing your own feelings and needs openly and honestly.

The 4-Step Formula is a powerful and awesome system to help you recognize the ways in which you communicate that are not-so-effective. And it will give you the skills to communicate effectively through almost any situation.

Once you've learned the 4-Step Communication Formula, you'll be able to

- Avoid upsets without avoiding issues
- Resolve conflict with compassion and confidence
- Talk about tough issues without taking things personally
- Bring back the trust, honesty and understanding to any relationship.

You can't keep a close relationship with somebody without being able to communicate your true feelings and needs.

And for most people that type of communication is difficult.

When you're faced with difficult or frightening communication situations, the 4-Step Formula will help you get express yourself effectively. You'll be able to rely on these skills to help you through almost any difficult situation with understanding and empathy.

Here's a tough question: How do you treat an upset adult if you want to save the relationship? The answer? You treat the *adult* like a *child*. If your child hurt their knee, and they came in the house crying, what would you do? You'd comfort them. The child would want to know that they're loved and that everything's going to be okay.

Adults are no different even though we pretend we are. We want to know the same things. We don't want an explanation. We don't want a lecture. We don't want to get fixed. We want to be loved.

If you want a relationship with your teenager, your partner, or even a co-worker to last and blossom you have to learn how to treat everybody like a child. I don't mean that you should be condescending toward anybody. That's no way to treat a child, either. You want to treat people with compassion and understanding – and that's what the 4-Step Formula will give you – 4 easy ways to create compassion and understanding.

What stops us from giving people understanding?

One day my daughter, when she was about 15, told me she wanted to go to a 'kegger' (a party with a keg of beer). Instead of asking her why she wanted to go and what needs of hers would be met by attending... or explaining what needs of mine would NOT be met by her attending, I gave her a preemptory 'No!' I didn't want it to even seem like I was entertaining the thought that she might be able to go.

But what would have happened if I had given her understanding? Would I have been still able to tell her I didn't want her to go? Of course I could have! I could have had compassion for her situation and understanding for her feelings and needs without ever AGREEING that she could go to the party.

As it was, I cut off all further connection between my daughter and myself by refusing to discuss the situation further. I cut off any possibility of becoming closer to her by understanding her feelings and needs. Really, I cut off my nose to spite my face, because ultimately I wanted a close relationship with her. I just didn't know how at the time. I didn't know the 4-Step Formula.

What stops person from giving understanding is that they think understanding equals agreement.

Understanding DOESN'T Equal Agreement. When we believe that understanding DOES equal agreement, we refuse to talk about an issue – we refuse to listen for fear that we'll be 'agreeing'. In the long run, though, refusing to listen cuts you off from the other person and drives a wedge between you. You haven't expressed why you don't agree and they haven't enjoyed the empathy and understanding that you could give.

All emotional communication comes down to being either an ‘act of love’ or a ‘cry for help.’ No matter how you communicate or what you communicate, either you want to express love toward somebody or you are crying for help. A cry for help is an expression that you’re in pain and need something.

All communication is either an ‘Act of Love’ or a ‘Cry for Help.’

I sometimes use the example of the destruction of the World Trade Center, 9/11. Was that an act of love or a cry for help? It was a big cry for help. The people who did that were in pain, and this was their cry for help.

I am not at all condoning their behavior. They chose an incredibly poor strategy to meet their needs. Yet it stands to illustrate how more desperate we are, the worse the strategy is that we choose when crying for help.

Another example would be your child throwing your chess pieces all over the floor. Was that an act of love or a cry for help? It was probably a cry for help. I would guess that the child has a beautiful need for recognition that isn’t being met – or for acceptance maybe.

Think of the last time you yelled at your spouse/ partner for being late or not calling. Was that an act of love or a cry for help? It was probably a cry for help. Here I would guess your beautiful need was reassurance, or maybe clarity and understanding.

If there’s a cry for help, and it’s met with another cry for help, then what results is an escalating fight. If you look at any sort of communication and think about it, you’ll see that it’s all either a cry for help or an act of love.

### **Who Bugs You?**

It’s important to relate what we’re talking about in this eBook to your life. In order to do that, we’re going to capture some unmet needs of yours -- and your communication around those unmet needs -- on paper.

Look at the page called “Who Bugs You?” It should be on page 4. If you’d like you could print out an extra copy of this page for yourself or a friend.

Now, to complete the worksheet take a moment to think about somebody in your life who is really bugging you right now. Put that down on your worksheet for number one.

Then write down what they did that upset, frustrated, angered, hurt or depressed you on number two.

## Who Bugs You?

*Think of a person who has done something that upsets you.*

1) Write who it is. \_\_\_\_\_  
(Parent, spouse, child, lover, sister, brother, friend, student, boss, co-worker, guard, parole officer, etc.)

2) What did they do that upsets, frustrates, angers, hurts, or saddens you?  
(Parent telling you what to do, spouse that doesn't call, lover that was unfaithful, brother that stole something, friend who expects too much, coworker who is lazy.)

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3) How do you feel about what happened? (Describe your feelings.)

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4) Write what it means to you. ("When he took my tools without asking it meant he didn't respect me and that he was going to keep them.")

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5) How did you let them know you weren't happy? (Write down what you said and did, even if it was nothing at all.)

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Here's an example from Paul's Who Bugs You? Worksheet: *I was really upset and disappointed with my dad because he would drink a lot. It was scary for me.*

Write down how you feel about your situation for number three: *I was really upset and disappointed... and scared.*

Number four is to note what that meant to you: *When my dad drank it took on a lot of meaning to me. It meant that he was out of control, and things were dangerous around the house. I felt scared and embarrassed.*

No. 5 is to describe how you let the person know your feelings and what you wanted them to do. Paul wrote: *With my dad and his drinking, I let him know that I thought it was stupid. I did not use nonviolent communication at all.*

You're done! Be sure to put this somewhere safe... where you'll be able to find it when you get to the end of this eBook. There's another activity you'll be doing based on this worksheet.

As another example, here's a case that one of our students shared with us on her "Who Bugs You?" worksheet:

*"I'm thinking of a colleague who often comes unprepared or does not carry through on tasks she says she'll take on. I tend to experience frustration and anger. But I get a little puzzled when I try to look at what it means to me.*

*I feel that our agreements are being dismissed, so I feel sad. I'm still not quite getting this.*

*I guess I think she's a complete slime bucket, irresponsible and unreliable."*

That's pretty clear. That's what being unprepared means to this woman: that the person is unreliable, "a complete slime bucket."

The student also said that in this situation she never let the person she was talking about know how she felt. They worked together day to day and never discussed this issue that was holding her back from really trusting her colleague.

She said she hadn't even rolled her eyes at her colleague. *"That's usually one of my primary strategies, but I haven't used it. That's very interesting. It distresses me to such a degree that I'm completely underground about it."*

We're going to take a side road here and discuss this issue a little bit further – just because it's an interesting case.

If you look at the 5 Relationship Wrecking Communication Mistakes, Mistake Number 2 is Story Telling. This is when there's a story you're telling yourself... plus you *believe* the story.

When I won't tell Paul what's going on for me, or he won't tell me what's going on for him, that's when we're believing our story.

When you're hiding your true thoughts and feelings, you're also believing a story that the *strategy* you're employing – avoiding a confrontation about the issue – is going to work. You think it will reduce the possibility of a big blow up. You believe that if you were to say these things directly, you'd have an even bigger mess.

That's what keeps anybody silent in their relationship. It's the Silent Treatment Trap – you feel like you've got to shut up or you'll be attacked, and yet the *ONLY* way that anything is going to get resolved is if you talk it through.

It's also the culprit that gets us into “nice relationships,” where you're not interested in connecting emotionally. These tend to end up as nice, *dead* relationships.

N.I.C.E. = Not Interested in Connecting Emotionally

At home with Paul, if each night we didn't do just one or two dishes and let those dishes accumulate, what would happen after a couple of months? All the dishes would end up being dirty. We'd end up eating out. The kitchen would be so messy we wouldn't even want to go in there.

The same thing happens with relationships. When things get too messy at home, spouses begin to look somewhere else to get their needs for intimacy and understanding met. They have affairs, or they leave the relationship. The kitchen at home has become too dirty. There's too much painful stuff accumulated because **they didn't have the tools or skills to discuss the issues.**

But never fear! Paul and I will give you the tools to take on even the gnarliest conversations so you can **have an alive, vibrant relationship** with the people you love. You don't *have* to always use these tools, but you'll have them whenever you *DO* want to use them.

Einstein said, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting a different result.”

We say, “Insanity is communicating the same way over and over again expecting a different result.”

The tools we teach are based on the work of a man Paul and I both truly admire, Dr. Marshall Rosenberg. His system is called Nonviolent Communication. Paul studied with him in Sweden. I've studied with him here in the US.

This incredibly complex thing called 'communication' is like a complex 2,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. When you don't have the picture of what it's supposed to look like, what are the chances of putting those 2,000 pieces together?

Slim to none. What Marshall Rosenberg did was to give people the picture so that we can see how the different pieces of communication fit together. And now we'll pass along this picture of how communication works to you.

### The 4-Step Communication Formula

Look at the page called "The Communication Choice." Communication is made up of eight pieces. There are four on the "Building a Connection" side, and there are four on the "Building a Case" side.

In any decision that you have to make, you want to know what possibilities exist so that you can make an intelligent decision. In any decision about how to communicate you'll want to know the choices you have available, too. That's why we're going to discuss the 'Building a Case' side of communication, even though it's a type of communication we wouldn't recommend.

And there will be days when you DO choose to build cases. Sometimes I tell myself, "Today's my day for building a case. Forget connection. Forget compassion. I'm going to be a jerk!" I'm just revealing the truth here.

The other side of communication is 'Building a Connection.' This is when we want to show we care. Building a Connection is made up of four steps: an observation, the feelings experienced, the needs those feelings are attached to, and a request.

1. **Observation** is, as they said in *Dragnet*, "Just give me the facts, ma'am. Just the facts." The observation is what you can see, hear and touch.
2. What **feelings** came up? "When I saw that, I felt this."
3. What **needs** of yours were either met or not met in this situation?
4. What **request** do you have? You always want to end on a clear and present request.

Here's a little more about how the four steps correlate. This may seem like a subtle difference, but it's a *transformational* difference.

Your feelings are driven by your needs either being met or *not* met.

# The Communication Choice

**Building a Connection With**  
Creates understanding, compassion & connection

the two sides  
of compassionate communication

**Speaking Honestly**

It's not what you say  
*It's how you say it...*

**1) Observations**

"When I saw/heard..." "When you saw/heard..."

**2) Feelings**

"I felt..."

"Were you feeling...?"

**3) Needs**

"Because I was needing..." "Because you were needing...?"

**4) Requests**

"Would you be willing...?" "Are you wanting...?"

**Building a Case Against**

Creates fear, distance & defensiveness

Communicating to gather evidence for evaluation, diagnosis, judgment, & deciding who deserves what.

**1) Evaluations**

Good-Bad, Right-Wrong, Too Much-Too Little

**2) Thoughts**

Abandoned-Manipulated-"I feel that you are"

**3) Strategies**

Fixing - Withdrawing - Attacking - Defending

**4) Demands**

Must - Have to - Should - Punish or Reward

or

Your feelings are driven by your needs either being met or not met, rather than the person in front of you. It's easy to think that your co-worker is the cause of whatever feelings you have because they've shown up unprepared. But really what's causing your feelings are that your needs aren't being met in that moment.

You'd like those needs to be met, so you want to ask in a way that the listener will want to give you what you need -- rather than demanding it from them. If you demand it from them, the last thing they'll want to do is give it to you.

The crux of Marshall Rosenberg's whole method is to have you connect your feelings to your needs. When we talk to other people, no matter where they're from or what they believe, we can connect on the basis of our needs **because we are all human.**

We all have the same basic human needs.

We all have the same basic human needs. When our needs are met, we feel joyful. When those needs are not met, we feel sad, disappointed and upset.

This is how you can communicate to even the densest, most cut-off person about absolutely anything -- by bringing everything down to the basic human needs and the feelings that arise from them.

If you look at the Feelings list on the **Feelings and Needs Side-by-Side printout**, it's made up of the full emotional spectrum. The feelings go from 'excited' and 'happy' to 'confused' and 'frustrated.' When your needs are met, you feel good. When your needs are *not* being met, you don't feel so good.

If you feel thirsty, what's your need? Liquids, maybe a tea, or just water.

If you're hungry, what's your need? Something to eat.

If you're tired, what do you need? Rest.

If your need for rest isn't being met, are you a happy, joyful person? No, you might feel a bit cranky.

And it's the same thing that happens when we're hungry. I know you must have seen somebody at some point go crazy for food.

It's the same thing if our need for support isn't being met. We'll feel cranky. If our need for safety isn't being met we'll feel scared. All of these are feelings that arise out of our needs being met or not.

The difficulty with expressing your feelings is to make sure that you don't get caught up in telling somebody your thoughts. It's an easy trap to fall into because in our language, we say things like, "*I feel like* you should clean the kitchen."

That's not a feeling, that's a thought. My *thought* is Paul should clean the kitchen. Maybe I'm *feeling* frustrated because my need for support isn't being met. My strategy for getting that need met might be to have Paul clean the kitchen, or at least to ask him. Having him clean the kitchen isn't my actual feeling, though.

## How to Create Empathy

Look at the Communication Overview on page 9. You'll notice that under Building a Connection each of the 4-Steps has two sides, either Speaking Honestly or Listening Empathically (with empathy).

Miriam-Webster's Online Dictionary defines empathy as, "The action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; *also* : the capacity for this."

That's a bit lengthy, but basically they're saying that empathy is the ability to understand and be sensitive to the feelings and thoughts of another person. Then the end of the definition implies that this happens without those feelings and thoughts being fully communicated.

Dr. Rosenberg uses the term empathy in a bit of a different way, though. He created a way that you CAN fully communicate, explicitly, that understanding. That's what the 4-Step Formula is. It's a way to create empathy, understanding and connection between yourself and another person by asking a couple of questions.

The best way to create empathy is to find out what's going on for the other person – what's 'alive' for them to use Dr. Rosenberg's language. So in the 4-Step Formula we ask the other person, "Are you feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because you're needing \_\_\_\_\_?"

The Formula, Phase 1:  
"Are you feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because you're needing \_\_\_\_\_?"

Let me give you an example of creating empathy in a situation that would usually create violence. If somebody were to walk up to me and say, "You're a \*%\$@# bitch," the best way for me to handle the situation is totally counter-intuitive. It would be to connect with their feelings and needs at the moment. Even though I'd want to strike back on impulse, I can over-ride and use the 4-step Formula.

The comment this person made doesn't tell me anything except that they're having a bad day. So, in order to build some understanding, I'll ask, "Are you feeling \_\_\_\_\_ because you need \_\_\_\_\_?"

Let's use an example from when I was in the classroom. A 17-year-old girl came up to me while I was passing back essays and said, "You're such a bitch."

When you think about that, remember that we said earlier that all communication is either *an act of love* or *a cry for help*. That was definitely a cry for help.

And luckily I heard it as such. Most people would have heard it as an attack and would have become defensive. They probably would have sent the student to the principal's office.

What feeling do you think this student experienced when she looked at her paper and saw a grade a lot lower than what she thought she should have gotten? What might I have guessed her feeling to be? I would guess 'upset' or 'angry.'

I said, "Are you feeling angry?" Then I connected the feeling to a need. What was the student needing? Look at your list on the Feelings and Needs Side-by-Side printout on page 11

She might have needed love or comfort, or understanding, or information and clarity.

And that's exactly what it turned out to be. I had marked her essay a lot lower than I had marked another student's. The girl had read them both and couldn't see why hers was so much lower. I reread it, and, embarrassingly, she was right. Maybe I had been in a bad mood when I graded the paper, or was sleepy. But she definitely had done a better job than the grade reflected.

The student had a need for clarity as to why her essay was marked so much lower. I changed the grade and then talked with the class about strategies for getting your needs met when a teacher has miss-marked something. Is it effective to call the teacher a 'bitch'? The student spoke openly about the frustration that had gripped her and she understood that making a verbal request might have been more effective than a verbal attack.

Do you recall the unprepared co-worker incident from above? Let's connect the feelings and needs of the co-worker in *that* situation. We're going to give her empathy. Which begs the question: why the heck would you give somebody empathy when they've done something 'wrong'?

Well, when you communicate to her your two basic choices are to Build a Case about how wrong it is to show up unprepared, or to Build a Connection with her as a human being. Which of these two methods do you believe will most influence her toward wanting to cooperate with you?

<b>Feelings</b>	
Are you feeling <b>Confused?</b>	Are you feeling <b>Proud?</b>
Are you feeling <b>EMBARRASSED?</b>	Are you feeling <b>HAPPY?</b>
Are you feeling <b>Frustrated?</b>	Are you feeling <b>EXCITED?</b>
Are you feeling <b>HOPELESS?</b>	Are you feeling <b>Hurt?</b>
Are you feeling <b>Disappointed?</b>	Are you feeling <b>CRANKY?</b>
Are you feeling <b>WORRIED?</b>	Are you feeling <b>Angry?</b>
Are you feeling <b>Scared?</b>	Are you feeling <b>Sad?</b>

<b>Needs</b>	
BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>RESPECT?</b>	BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>Trust?</b>
BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING SOME <b>Acknowledgement?</b>	BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>Honesty?</b>
BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING SOME <b>Appreciation?</b>	BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>CHOICE?</b>
BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING TO <b>CONTRIBUTE?</b>	BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>CLARITY?</b>
BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>Understanding?</b>	BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>Safety?</b>
BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING TO <b>Connect?</b>	BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING SOME <b>Support?</b>
BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>Empathy?</b>	BECAUSE YOU ARE NEEDING <b>INFORMATION?</b>

You guessed it: empathy.

So for right now, imagine you yourself have just arrived at a meeting and your coworker has come in late and unprepared. Can you guess about your coworkers' feelings might be? Refer to the sheet **Feelings and Needs Side-by-Side**.

She might feel worried. She might be nervous or scared or even embarrassed.

What would her needs be? And here, you'll want to refer again to the **Feelings and Needs Side-by-Side page**.

Maybe she's needing support or understanding?

So the best thing to do would be to ask her, "Are you feeling worried because you need some support for getting these projects done?" You're finding out what's going on, what's 'alive' for her, and connecting with her as a human being.

Remember: you're only guessing what she's feeling and needing and that's all you want to do at this point. You don't want to **tell** her what she's feeling – you don't really know and that's not very respectful. So you're just asking.

And if you guess wrong, the coworker can easily correct us. In fact, it's a lot easier to get in touch with your own feelings and needs when somebody else has offered you an idea., because then you can check that against your own feeling.

"Let me see...am I feeling worried? Hmmm... No I'd say I feel more  
'concerned,' not really 'worried.'

It's amazing how easily people can get in touch with what they're feeling once you ask. But without asking they may not even think to check in with themselves.

And don't be afraid of negative reactions to asking. The act of asking itself is such a sweet 'reaching out' that most likely the listener will respond positively. And their reaction will be even more positive when they know they've just done or said something that was not too nice or might be considered by some to be 'wrong'.

When you ask about feelings and needs and the ones you've guessed don't really 'click,' the best thing would be to guess again. Feelings are so messy. We are never taught to really express ourselves with our feelings. It's much easier if somebody asks, "Are you feeling sad because you need some empathy?" Then they can listen to that and say, "No, that's not it either."

Keep offering until they can latch onto something and tell you, "Yes that's it. That's where I'm at right now."

It works the same way if we feel that someone's gotten upset with us, and it hasn't been brought up. This is especially true when you think about teenagers who seldom bring *anything* up. You might ask, "When I see you quiet like that, I wonder if you're feeling a little discouraged because you need some support and respect from me?"

Even in the case of a customer who is standoffish and doesn't express themselves over the phone, you could use the same technique. You'd say, "Are you feeling frustrated? Because you're needing some help in getting this software working?"

### Accepting Blame and Disempowering the Listener

One thing to be very careful about in asking about feelings and needs, though, is **not** to say "Are you feeling \_\_\_\_\_ *because I did or said* \_\_\_\_\_."

It's so tempting to ask, "Are you feeling upset *because I* let you down?" That makes it easy for the listener to say, "Yes, that's it. It's *your* fault." And blaming everything on you doesn't do any good for either one of you. Because there are two humans involved, then both of you had a role to play in the situation and both of you are responsible for the situation.

Blame is a very destructive thing for the individual who's doing it. It places all of the power with the other person (in this case, you – and even though it's tempting to accept the power, remember you will be **disempowering** the other person).

Instead of saying, "Are you feeling upset because I let you down," it would be more effective to say, "Are you feeling upset because you need a different level of support or understanding?"

When you connect the listener's feelings to **their own needs** instead of **your actions**, it's much more empowering for both of you. The result is that you won't be as worried about *initiating* the conversation because you'll be less likely to get beat up. When you say, "Are you feeling awful because I did this to you?" then you're inviting an attack.

And what's more, it turns the conversation around so that it's about them and their feelings and needs. It's not about you. You're not the person in pain here. When we're dealing with another person and their issue, we want to keep the conversation focused on them.

The whole point of the communication is that *it's all about them*. It's connecting **their feelings to their needs**. It's their life.

### Who's in Pain Here?

What we do a lot of times is like somebody showing up at a car accident where there's a bloody person lying on the ground with broken legs. The passer-by gets out of the car to

help and says, "Oh my god! I'm so afraid of blood. I'm going to faint! I need some attention over here! Get me some oxygen!"

It's not about you. *It's about them.* Connect *their* feelings to *their* needs, don't connect them to you.

Another example of this is asking somebody to spell a word correctly. As an English teacher this one threw me for a loop for a long time. I thought I was asking my students to spell correctly 'for their own good'. But in the light of Nonviolent Communication, do we ever really do something in total altruism? I'm sure we do at points, but for the most part we usually do things to meet a human need. And so getting in touch with that need very much clarifies the situation for all involved.

Paul doesn't have the greatest spelling in the world. When we first got together and before I was at all familiar with Nonviolent Communication, I told him he *should* spell a word the *correct* way. I was TOTALLY in the world of right/wrong, good/bad. As far as I was concerned, misspelling that word was *bad*.

Paul used the most loving nonviolent communication at that point to help me see that I was the person in pain around his spelling, not him. He gave me empathy for the pain I was in, guessing that my need was for respect. Who would respect an English teacher whose boyfriend can't even spell? He had nailed it. I was totally in pain around a fear of judgment by others.

And so then, acknowledging that I was the person in pain in this situation, I asked him sweetly to change the way he had spelled the word for ME, not because it was 'for his own good'. And he was happy to comply.

### Sincerity and Authenticity

What's more -- and this is probably extremely obvious -- there needs to be sincerity in the question when you ask, "Are you feeling \_\_\_\_\_? Because you're needing \_\_\_\_\_?"

We can't just go through the steps of asking these questions without **truly having concern, compassion and a desire to connect with this person.** Otherwise, a lovely opportunity for connection can be distorted into a manipulation.

People can use the 4-Step Formula to make it look like they're connecting with their partner. But if you're not coming from an authentic place, you're not going to get the desired results.

### Self Monitoring

Another point about this method is that you definitely have to be able to stick to it and keep your own ruffled feathers out of the way in order to be effective. It's so easy to get

sucked into the argument, the Case Building, and the name calling. It takes a lot of self-discipline to remember that you want to use the 4-Step Formula... and that no matter what they say to upset you, you're going to persist with, "Are you feeling\_\_\_\_, because you're needing \_\_\_\_\_?"

The desired result of using the 4-Step Formula is **not** to get your way. It's about trying to find a way that **both of your needs** get met.

Your ultimate goal in using this Formula is to discover what the underlying needs are for both you and your partner...in order to create a level of understanding.

Not agreement, but understanding!

When Paul and I are talking through an upset, he has to understand that his needs are as important to me as mine are. Then everything else flows. As soon as he understands that I'm not going to try to get my needs met *at the expense of his*, then we have that heartfelt connection.

It almost doesn't matter if you follow the exact formula. The formula we're giving you is like training wheels to get you going, but there are many different ways to create that heartfelt connection.

The ultimate purpose in learning the 4-Step Communication Formula is to create connection. The system is just a system – even though it's the most reliable and the best one we've ever found.

You have to understand that the 4 Steps are *not* the nonviolent communication. It's the *connection* you create when your heart is open to that other human being, and you really care about them getting their needs met, that is the nonviolent communication.

### An Example: The Sponge Wars

Paul and I have a bit of a war around our house about the sponge being in the bottom of the sink.

You might recognize it. It's similar to the wars that go on in every household in the world. There are the tinsel wars (how to correctly hang tinsel on a Christmas tree according to Paul's dad), the cushion wars (how to correctly place the cushions on the chaise lounge) and the how-to-make-the-bed wars (do you tuck the flap at the feet or leave room for a person's toes to breathe?). There could be sex wars or whatever battle you have at home. We just happen to have the Sponge War.

It usually goes something like this:

Kristin: “Honey, when you finish washing the dishes, would it kill you to pick the sponge up out of the bottom of the sink and put it on the side?”

Paul: “I just cooked dinner. I washed the dishes. Would it kill you to say thank you for that before you start lecturing me about what to do with the sponge?”

And then it goes on and on. In the spat above, we both were expressing cries for help. Neither of us was showing any empathy for the other person’s feelings and needs. And you can tell from the way it was going that it was about to escalate.

Now here’s the same little spat again, only this time Paul will try to connect with what I’m feeling and needing:

Kristin: “Hey, would it really hurt you to rinse the sponge out, squeeze it out and put it on the side of the sink when you’re done washing the dishes?”

What do you think I’m feeling and needing right now? Maybe I’m frustrated or feeling a little hopelessness. Maybe I’m just cranky.

So Paul might ask me, “Are you feeling cranky? Because you’re needing help or appreciation?”

Paul: “Honey, I’m wondering if you’re feeling a little frustrated and maybe disappointed. Do you need some appreciation and support?”

Kristin: “Yes, I work hard around the house. I try to keep things nice.”

Paul: “It sounds like you’d like some acknowledgment for how much you contribute.”

Kristin: “That would be nice.”

Paul: “Is there more?”

Kristin: “Yes, you know when you spit your toothpaste in the sink in the morning? Maybe you could rinse the sink out, too.”

Paul: “If that would really help you, if it would be a gift for you, I’ll do it.”

Kristin: “That would be a gift to me.”

Paul: “I’d like to do that.”

One point to note here is that if Paul hears this with critical ears, then he'll hear that I'm making a demand on him, that picking up the sponge from the bottom of the sink is something he *should, have to* or *must* do. Those are Case Building words. On the other hand, if he puts on his loving ears, he hears that this is an opportunity to give a gift.

How many of you love giving gifts to the people you love? In the spat about the sponge, Paul needed to translate what I said and hear my beautiful need, my cry for help, as a chance for him to do what he loves to do the most. Paul, like most men, loves **to give** to the woman he loves.

Paul says, "How tough is rinsing out a sponge or wiping out a sink? It's a piece cake if it makes me her feel better. I'm not doing it because I'm BSW (Bad, Stupid or Wrong). I'm doing it as a gift for her. It's my choice. **That's what relationships are about, giving and receiving.**"

Another point is that I could have asked Paul for this favor in a different way. We'll get to that in a second – it could make things a lot easier to hear. The way I *did* say things, Paul needed to have had his loving ears on to hear it as a 'cry for help' rather than as an attack.

Can you see where you might have been sucked in and heard it as an attack? Where you may have met that cry for help with another cry for help? A very normal, common response from Paul might have been, "Nobody talks to me like that. I need some damn respect around this house. You don't appreciate anything I do. Why should I appreciate what you do?"

## Baggage Handling

In the case of the Sponge Wars, it could be that commenting on the sponge in such a critical way is my attempt to create an argument and a change around something deeper with which I'm having trouble.

In a case where there's a lot of discord over something as seemingly insignificant as the sponge... it leads you to believe that they are having issues with something bigger. It's very possible that the Sponge Wars could be a strategy to reach out to get deeper issues resolved.

There was a great TV commercial on for a while – it was the guy walking around, asking, "Can you hear me now?" That is exactly what we're always asking our friends and families and other people on the planet.

That's what 9/11 was. Can you hear me now? If we don't hear somebody, what do they do? They get louder and grow meaner and angrier.

If somebody is not feeling heard in an area, it might blow up into an argument... and it might blow up about something totally unrelated to the issue. It's like when you're

watching TV with your partner and you switch channels...and they attack you. You think, "What was that?" That was all of those other issues you didn't talk about ... those issues that you didn't hear them about.

Some people say, "Why does my partner always yell?" They might ask themselves, "*Why does my partner need to yell to be heard?* What is going on inside of me that stops me from hearing them in a way that they actually get that they're being heard?"

So, in situations in which it's clear that it's not just about the sponge... that it's about history and past pains from other experiences... how do you negotiate that?

The secret is to negotiate what is alive in the present *about* the past.

I've gone through three divorces. Paul's gone through one divorce and two broken engagements. We have a lot of history. We laugh because we met on Match.com where there were so many ads that said, "Looking for a person with no baggage!"

You'd need to have had a frontal lobotomy not to have any baggage. If you've grown up with parents, you have baggage. When you're in an upset you're always dealing with your history.

The best way to handle that baggage is to discuss it with your partner – even though that may be excruciatingly painful. If you want a truly open, intimate relationship, your partner is going to have to know that you carry some baggage.

You can say, "Honey, this is not about you. This is about my history, but man, is it present right now. The way you looked at that woman scared me. I thought that you wanted to leave me."

When things come up, I try to take responsibility for it. And at the same time, I don't ignore it. I'm compassionate with myself around my history. And I try to be compassionate with my partner's history. I know that this is not about me. I'll stick with him as he works through these issues.

And what's more -- I won't rub it in his face that his issue is not about me because it's linked to his past. That doesn't help him.

And even if it *appears* that their history is about you and that it's *you* they're upset about – **it's not about you.**

It's never about you, no matter what the history is. If I had 10 affairs, it's not about that. The real, underlying issue is that my *partner* has a need for trust. I'm trying to connect *their* upset to *their* need that wasn't met, rather than to me or our shared history.

I might say, “I’m scared. I have a need for trust and understanding. When I saw you look at that woman that way, it brought up a lot of stuff.”

Do you want to create a relationship that has intimacy? Will you allow your beloved to see into you?

That’s what it will take to work with the baggage that both of you bring to the relationship. Acknowledge the baggage and accept your partner’s baggage as part of who they are. That is the most loving, compassionate thing a partner can do.

## Giving and Receiving

Paul and I ask each other 10 times a day, “Do you still love me?”

Let’s do this quick exercise. When somebody says, “I love you,” what do you normally say back?

“I love you, too.”

And then your partner says, “Love you, too.”

“No, I love you!”

“Uh huh, love you, too, sweetheart.”

We end up giving our love back and forth, but nobody is actually *receiving* it. We have two people trying to give, and nobody receiving. Let’s switch that around by using the 4-Step Formula.

“Honey, when I came home and dinner was cooked and the house smelled good (Observation), I realized how lucky I am to have you (Need). I love you so much (Feeling).”

“That feels really good (Feeling). It meets my need (Need) for appreciation. Thank you, sweetie.”

I don’t say, “I love you,” back. Both of us emphasized which of our needs were met by the other – and this makes the ‘thank you’ *land* with the other.

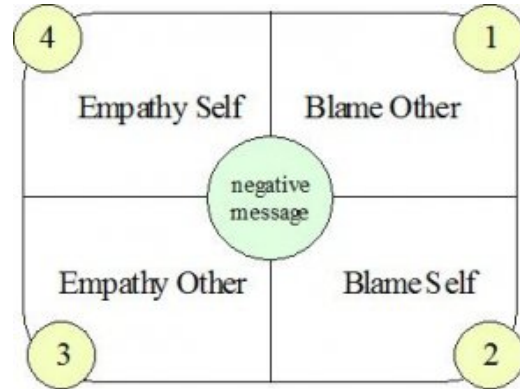
## The 4 Choice Points in Communication

There are four ways that we can typically respond to a negative message.

**No. 1:** We can blame the other person. That's the easiest way and it's the most immediately gratifying, too.

Paul might say, "I have so much other work to do. It's not my fault I didn't squeeze out the sponge. I have to do the kitchen and the bathroom. I do all this stuff around the house. You just showed up and had dinner."

That's blaming the other person.



**No. 2:** Blame yourself.

I say, "Honey, squeeze out the sponge when you're done washing dishes."

Paul may think to himself, "Man, I'm always screwing up. I never get anything right. I try so hard, and it's never right. I am such a loser."

That's blaming yourself.

**No. 3:** Give empathy to the other person who's bringing the negative message.

I say, "Hey, Paul, squeeze out the sponge."

He might respond, "Honey, are you feeling frustrated and disappointed? Do you need appreciation?"

That's giving the other person empathy for what they're feeling and needing in the moment.

**No. 4:** Give empathy to yourself after you've been brought a negative message.

I say, "Paul, squeeze out the sponge."

Then he might say this quietly in his own head: "Wow, when I hear her say that, I feel sad and disappointed. I try so hard to contribute. I really would appreciate some acknowledgement for all of the things I do around the house. That would feel really sweet right now."

When attacked it is very common to become defensive. That is blaming others. Usually, when we're being defensive, we'll come back with, "Well, *you* didn't \_\_\_\_\_."

What I want you to be clear on in this whole exercise is that you have a choice. Sometimes I hate having a choice. Sometimes I *want* to be a victim of the circumstances. It's so much

easier to blame my partner, life or the telephone company. It's the little kid in me – sometimes I just don't like the idea of having a choice.

Think about it: what kind of relationship can you create if you acknowledge that you really DO have a choice and live that way? You can see how much different that would be than doing it in the old way... with shame, blame and yelling.

### It May be Simple, But It Won't Be Easy

Is the 4-Step Formula simple? Well, it might be simple, but it won't be easy.

Here's a description of basketball: It's a simple game. You have this round ball and bounce it on the floor. Then you throw it through the hoop. Then you do it again. That's the game. It's simple, yes, but it's not easy. You should see me try to throw a basketball through a hoop! I would have to practice and practice.

And anybody trying to learn the 4-Step Formula will have to practice and practice, too. Read this eBook through to the end and do the practice exercises. And then you'll probably want to read it again. There are subtleties you won't get the first time through. You might even want to read it five, six or 10 times.

Every time Marshal Thurber comes to town, Paul goes back and re-takes his basic seminar. It's not rocket science that he's teaching, but refreshing his memory helps him to use the skills Marshal teaches.

It's the same with the 4-Step Formula.

### Observations and Requests

We've discussed the two central parts of the 4-Step Formula. The first is connecting the other person's *feelings* with their *needs*.

The next part is to add an observation and request to the feelings and needs.

To begin your communication, first give an observation. Present the facts so that you and the listener are talking about the same thing.

You want to be careful to give **just** the facts, though -- no judgments or evaluations -- so your listener doesn't 'shut down' if they disagree.

If I say to Paul, "You left the stupid, stinky, soggy sponge in the bottom of the sink again," He won't be very likely to listen. I used a lot of adjectives and evaluations in that phrase and you can imagine he probably doesn't agree with them.

I could have said, “You left the sponge in the sink.” That’s good enough that he’ll know what we’re talking about. We don’t need to argue over the evaluations – that’s just a waste of time.

After the observation has been stated, then we go into the feeling and need as we discussed above.

And the last thing to do is to make a clear and present request. **All communication is ultimately a request.**

For example, my mom used to come down stairs while we watched TV. She would bring a laundry basket full of clean clothes from the dryer. She would throw them on the sofa and pick up something to fold and then, without saying anything, she would sigh... loudly.

That was a clear request. We were supposed to get off our butts and start folding.

If someone walks up to you on the street and says, “Hey, how’s it going?” That’s a request. It might be a request for connection or for acknowledgement.

So, to make our communication very clear and precise, we want to make a clear and present request. We don’t want the request left hanging up in the air and open to interpretation.

The other person shouldn’t have to guess what you want [Oops! There’s that *shouldn’t* word!].

Here is another presentation of the Sponge Wars and this time we’ll pay attention to the observation and request.

Kristin: “Honey, would you really mind picking the sponge up from the bottom of the sink and putting it on the side?”

Paul: “When you saw the sponge in the sink, [observation] did you feel frustrated, and disappointed [feelings] and in need of some help? [need] Would you be willing to tell me what you just heard me say?” [request]

Kristin: “Yeah, you said you thought I felt discouraged and needed some help.”

Paul: “What came up for you when you heard that?” [another request]

Kristin: “It felt good. I didn't think you recognized I might need some help.”

So you can see, we’re always trying to get to the understanding part. As the request we can ask, “Can you tell me what you heard me say? Can I tell you what I think I heard?”

Let’s go back and this time I will end on a request.

Kristin: “Sweetie, when you leave the sponge on the bottom of the sink, I feel a little discouraged. I need some support in trying to keep the place nice. Would you tell me what you heard me say?”

Paul: (Being sincere) “Yeah, you think I don’t help around the house, and you don’t appreciate all the hard work I do. It’s never good enough for you.”

Kristin: “Oh wow! Thank you for telling me what you heard. I was hoping you would hear I wanted support in keeping the house clean, not all the other stuff. What I was trying to communicate is that when you leave the sponge in the sink I feel discouraged. I would like some support. How does that make you feel to hear me say that?”

Paul: “I feel bad. I’m trying to help. But I’m confused... I’d like to know what I’m *not* doing. What could I do more of?”

There are two levels of requests. The first level of request is to check for understanding: Can you tell me what you heard me say?

The second level, once you’re sure that you’re both talking about the same thing, is to make a request around a strategy that will meet both of your needs.

Only make a ‘doing’ or ‘strategy’ request when you’re sure that both of you have your needs on the table *and that they are clearly understood.*

To make a request before the feelings and needs of both parties are understood by both parties is to put a band-aid on the wound. It doesn’t really heal anything. You risk meeting your own needs at the exclusion of the other person’s needs. And you don’t want a relationship like that.

If discussing the sponge brings up an issue around acknowledgement for the work you do, then stick with the acknowledgement issue until BOTH of you have your feelings and needs on the table.

Don’t make any further suggestions about what to do about the situation (strategies) until BOTH of you have your feelings and needs laid clearly on the table. It’s too easy to want to rush off and begin diagnosing and coming up with strategies to fix the problem without ever being clear about both people’s needs.

## Roadblocks

When using the 4-Step Formula, be careful about saying, “Do you understand me?” Many times people *think* they understood you, they say, “yes,” and you never know that they actually *hadn't* understood. They may have heard, “She thinks I’m a lazy slug!” Instead of, “I could use some help keeping things picked up.” In the case that somebody says they understood, but really didn’t, you’re back to the same place you were before: misunderstandings and upsets.

The reason for asking if the other person could repeat what you said to you is not because you don’t think they can remember anything. You’re just wanting to make sure you were clear. You may need to say that in so many words if somebody is offended. Take the responsibility upon yourself: “I want to be sure I said that clearly. Would you tell me what you heard me say?”

## The Un-Natural Speech Problem

Does the 4-Step Formula sound alien and mechanical? Does it strike you as something you wouldn’t hear as part of normal conversation? I guarantee you use this language every single day. Think of the last time you called a friend and left a message with a teenager. They say, “I got the message.” You ask, “Can you tell me the phone number I just gave you? Do you have a pen in your hand? Can you feed that back to me?”

What are you trying to do? You’re trying to make sure it was understood. If you have ever placed an order with a credit card over the phone, what do they do? “Let me tell you what I think I heard.” They are trying to get understanding before they move on.

One objection we often hear about the 4-Step Formula is that it’s a lot to remember. People are usually excited about the possibility this communication could open up, but overwhelmed with making sense of it and applying it.

It would be very easy, in the middle of a heated argument, to go off on a tangent and get back into old habits.

For example, one of our students told us that the sponge-wars issue is similar to issues in their household. She said, “We have a long history and have communicated so poorly. There are major stories on both sides. It makes it more challenging to start cleaning up your communication and not do a lot of storytelling on both sides. I can see him saying, ‘You’ve already told me a thousand times that you think you do the majority of the housework. I’m not falling for this one.’” She’s afraid that he won’t be willing to listen to her even if she uses this new communication technique.

And it’s true – having a lot of stories that have built up over time is going to make it more complicated to communicate about the issues. Mostly you’ll have to make sure that you

follow the 4-Step Formula very strictly. Never begin discussing a new issue until you've worked your way through a complete communication about the first issue.

Also, use the 'stilted and mechanical' aspects of the communication to your own benefit. Your partner will definitely hear that you're doing something strange, so BEFORE you launch into using the Formula, tell your partner what you're up to. Take full responsibility for your lack of communication skills in the past and tell him/her that you want to do better in the future. Explain that you'll be doing something new and to please have patience. How could anybody fault you for that?

I know: there are people who can always find a way to fault their partner about anything. But there's freedom in that. If they're going to find fault no matter what you do, then do this for yourself knowing that it's done in the spirit of making the relationship better.

Another point is that you can definitely make the 4-Step Formula better fit your conversation style as you get better at using it. Don't try to be too relaxed with it at first, but as you work with it you'll see ways you can fit it to your own style.

For Advanced Users Only: One thing to do once you are very proficient is remove the formal request. A lot of times when you say, "Are you feeling this because you need that," you can crop the formal request because asking "are you feeling angry" *is* a request for information.

Asking more formally if you've guessed accurately, however, is respectful and allows the coworker to say whether the guess is accurate.

Another Advanced Technique: To make a connection deeper with another person and to carry your communication even further, you can ask, "Can you say more?" The listener will be pleased that you want to know.

### A Technique to Use with Gnarly Problems

One way to work through particularly gnarly, old problems is to practice role playing. If you have your own Sponge Wars around the house, before you talk to your beloved about it, do a role-playing with a partner. Say, "I need to practice this enough so I don't go talk to my partner while I still see him as the enemy."

Get your friend to pretend they are he or she, complete with the defensiveness and attacks – and then practice remaining empathetic to his or her needs. You and your friend can work together to guess what your partner's underlying feelings and needs are around the situation. Work on developing complete empathy for where they are coming from – and work on making your clear and present request AFTER the feelings and needs are on the table.

While you hold the image of “I’m right and they’re wrong” or “I’m good and they’re bad,” you’re not going to get the connection you want.

### Giving and Receiving, Revisited

It’s all about relationship. This is Relationships 505. And the secret is you’re either giving or receiving. That’s it. If you want to give a gift to somebody, do it in a way that they will enjoy receiving it. Don’t say, “Hey, you lazy slug, pick the sponge up from the bottom of the sink!” That doesn’t make it enjoyable for Paul to give to me if he hears it that way.

It’s all just giving and receiving. Don’t give to your partner if it’s not enjoyable – that’s not true giving. That would be bartering, like “I picked up the sponge, now you should mow the lawn!”

If you don’t enjoy doing the housework as a gift for yourself and maybe even a gift for your beloved, you have to look at that. Why are you cleaning the house if it brings pain?

### Requests and Fixing

In giving your partner a clear and present request, you can help people who have “fix-it-itis.”

Simply begin any emotional conversation with a request that clarifies how you want to be heard. Say, “Honey will you just sit and listen and not offer any advice? It would be an incredible gift just to be heard.” Then your partner knows what is expected of them, and who wouldn’t want to give that to somebody they love? It makes it easier to win in that situation and the relationship.

### Speaking Honestly Using the 4-Step Formula Stating Your Feelings and Needs, Not Asking Others’

In any given situation you need to decide if you are going to connect with your beloved by asking about his/her feelings and needs, or whether you are going to build a case by telling them what they should do.

If you want to build a connection, we taught you earlier to guess the other person’s feelings and needs and request that they tell you whether you’re right.

Now we’d like to add one further choice. If you’re working with someone who doesn’t want to talk, you could say what **your** feelings and needs are, instead of asking about theirs, in order to move the communication forward.

When you've been honest and vulnerable the listener may feel more secure about opening up with you.

Let's look back at the co-worker situation:

*"I'm thinking of a colleague who often comes unprepared or does not carry through on tasks she says she'll take on. I tend to experience frustration and anger. But I get a little puzzled when I try to look at what it means to me.*

*I feel that our agreements are being dismissed, so I feel sad. I'm still not quite getting this.*

*I guess I think she's a complete slime bucket -- irresponsible and unreliable."*

Can you see how you could state your feelings and needs, not ask the coworker about her feelings and needs (as we did earlier)?

This client could state her feelings like this: "When you arrived at the meeting today unprepared, I felt very disappointed and frustrated. I have a need to be effective and productive. When you're unprepared it slows me down terribly. Would you tell me what you heard me say?"

Check that she understands your feelings and needs, and then you might ask her about her feelings and needs. Once you have both of your feelings and needs on the table, then you might discuss a strategy for making the meetings more productive (that's this woman's true need).

Note: Your need is never for an other person to do something. You don't need the other person to do anything. Ever. What you do need is productivity, effectiveness, appreciation, etc. Often the other person can GIVE YOU THE GIFT of helping you get your needs met, but remember that YOU ARE ULTIMATELY RESPONSIBLE FOR GETTING YOUR OWN NEEDS MET.

In this situation, getting your needs for productivity met may require asking for somebody else to do the co-workers work. That's pretty extreme, though. By talking to the co-worker using the 4-Step Formula then she's aware of just how frustrated you are and what you're thinking. She'll know that something needs to change. Everything will be in the open and then something can be done to help the situation.

## The Difference between Strategies and Requests

Strategies are the things we do to get our needs met. If we have a need for food, one strategy would be to go hunting. Another would be to grow some veggies. Another would be to go to Taco Bell. The strategies to meet that need are endless. You may certainly

disagree with somebody's strategies for getting their need for food met, but you can't disagree that they have a need for food. That's one thing that holds true for all humans.

When you are connected with another on the basis of the human need you share, then it's easier to talk about strategies for meeting those needs.

When you talk about strategies with your beloved you want to make sure that you've connected as humans first.

For instance, in the case of the coworker, our student said she hadn't said anything to the coworker because she liked her. But, in the end, what she had was a dead relationship because they never addressed what was alive for our student around that relationship. She liked her very much, yet she was avoiding her. She wasn't willing or able to talk directly to her coworker about some of the issues.

Conversely, if you don't care about the other person in a situation, it's so much easier to address any issues that come up. There's no perceived risk to you because you haven't got a friendship or relationship to lose.

That's why it's so much more difficult to talk to the people we love. We think we risk losing the relationship – when in reality, discussing the underlying issues will bring you closer. By clearing up that thing which is preventing you from being who you truly are – saying what you truly think – you'll be much closer, emotionally, to the other person.

When you're talking about an issue that's crept up in a relationship, you're talking about a beautiful need you're trying to have met.

**Conflict** is when you have two needs and try to get both of them met *at the same time*. Very often it will look as if they are opposing each other. Let's say you have a need for connection *and* honesty with your beloved. And let's say you've also got some information that, if you shared it with your beloved, threatens to drive them further away from you. Do you keep the information to yourself so that you don't harm your connection? Or do you tell the person so that you're being honest and risk the connection?

At first blush it appears that you can't have both. But in actuality you can have both – but just not at the same time. At first when you tell your beloved this information they may feel less connected with you. And yet, in the long run, they will feel more connected because you've shown a vulnerable, beautiful and honest side of yourself. They will feel more connected to you.

If you learn *how* to tell the other person what you're feeling and needing, in general it's a beautiful message for this other human being and will bring you closer.

## An Exercise: Who Bugs You?, Phase 2

Look at your “Who’s Bugging You?” worksheet from the beginning of this book. Now that you know how to use the 4-Step Formula, let’s apply it to *your* situation. Print out the following “Who Bugs You? Translation Exercise” on page 32. Then referring to the lists of Feelings and Needs, decide what your observation is, guess at the other person’s feelings and needs, and make a clarifying request for that situation. Write all of these out on the translation page you’ve printed.

Remember to choose your words carefully and to keep the communication as short as possible. Saying too much only confuses the situation.

Once you’ve written that out, take a look at it with the Communication Overview page in hand.

- Does your observation begin with “When I saw/ heard...”?
- Are your feelings some of those listed on the Feelings and Needs page? If you’ve chosen a feeling that isn’t on the page, change it to one that *is* there. It’s so easy to mistake a thought for a feeling that it’s best to stick with the feelings on Marshall Rosenberg’s list.
- Next take a look at the need. Is it also on the list? And again, if it’s not, chose one that **is** on the list.
- Finally, look at your request. Really, the most effective request is to ask, “Would you be willing to tell me what you heard me say?” That’s because, whenever you talk about feelings and needs you’ll need to check for understanding. Don’t begin discussing a strategy until you’ve thoroughly discussed the feelings and needs of **both of you**.

Voila! Now you have a beautifully crafted communication to share with the person ‘Who’s Bugging You’ right now. It is nonviolent, it does not harm the other person or yourself, and it will bring the two of you closer through understanding and empathy.

The only other thing you’re going to need to make this communication truly effective is Courage – the courage to say these words to the other person.

But think about what you really want. Do you want a cold, dead relationship with the other person or do you want to be close? It will require that you be courageous and vulnerable to do this. But if you don’t do it, you both lose.

## Who Bugs You? Translation Exercise

- 1) Observation – Write down what happened with as little judgment or evaluation as possible. (Just the facts, without attaching what the event meant to you.)

*When . . .* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 2) Feelings – Write down how you felt about what happened. (Make sure these are feelings and not thoughts or evaluations.)

*I felt . . .* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 3) Needs – Describe which needs of yours were met/ not met when the event happened. Refer to the Feelings and Needs handout.

*Because my need for . . .* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

- 4) Request – Write out what you are wanting them to do or say.

*Would you be willing to . . .* \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ ?

## In Conclusion

Communication is an act of love or a cry for help. To discover what the other person in any situation is feeling and needing so that you can truly understand them, ask them, “Are you feeling X, because you’re needing X?” Make sure that you have a clear observation of what the two of you are talking about and that you end on a clarifying request.

It will take practice to know all of the basic human needs and constant reference to the lists created by dr. Rosenberg. And it will take practice and fortitude to actually use this technique in stressful situations.

But, in the end, your relationships will be much deeper and more rewarding than they’ve ever been before.

## Some Comments From Our Students...

**Brian:** *The thing I responded to the most... is the sponge. I would get defensive. I would do exactly what you did. I think I’m not good enough. I do this and that, and I’m not appreciated enough.*

*What helps is when you ask, “Is this a cry for help, or is someone intentionally trying to inflict pain on you?” For me, it’s to not take it personally. Step back and say, “What’s going on here? What does this person need? Why are they treating me that way?” Try that rather than getting defensive and saying, “Hey, wait a second, you SOB. I did this, that and the other thing.”*

*I’m going to try to apply that. I noticed in my relationships with my roommate or coworkers that I need to stand back. Is this guy going through a bad day? Is this woman having a hard time? It really is a cry for help on some level.*

**Doug:** *A valuable point for me is to unload the emotion from the observation. The phrase, “Just the facts, ma’am,” seems to be applicable. Trying to describe the observation without the loaded terminology can be very helpful.*

**Anonymous:** *I was touched in the Sponge Wars when you said that, once you heard your partner’s needs, it was a chance to give a gift to the person you loved. It’s a choice to do something that makes your partner feel good. I thought that was sweet to look at it that way rather than one person wins, another loses. It’s a concession.*

## About the Authors

**Kristin Denton and Paul Sterling teach the Magic Relationship Method.** Kristin has been an instructor of language, literature and communication at the high school level for

the last 18 years, specializing in working with at-risk youth. She is the proud mother of one daughter who has her own healthy and loving marriage.

**Paul**, after dropping out of high school at the age of 17, spent 18 years as a commercial fisherman in Alaska. But he spent his off-seasons focused on learning communication skills that create great relationships— studying with many teachers, from Byron Katie, Anthony Robbins, and Marshall Thurber, to Bob Proctor and many more.

Both Paul and Kristin trained in the work of Dr. Marshall Rosenberg: Nonviolent Communication. They teach this simple, yet powerful, communication formula to prison inmates, at-risk students, university professors, therapists, counselors and of course couples. Visit their website at [www.MagicRelationship.com](http://www.MagicRelationship.com) .