

Finding Compassion in Divorce

by Susan Allan

This year 70% of all U.S. marriages are expected to end in divorce. The Holmes Schedule of Stressful Events ranks divorce the second most stressful life experience, followed only after the death of a spouse. While some marriages end amicably, many end with partners feeling angry, resentful, or overwhelmed with emotional pain. When it is understood that more than half of all divorces render one or both partners homeless, clients admit that divorce is one of the most challenging experiences they may face.

After my own "Divorce 911" in 1998, I founded www.thedivorceforum.com to ensure that no one need ever experience the terror; confusion and grief often associate with their divorce experience. By integrating Nonviolent Communication in my work, I found practical, powerful method to create peaceful divorce experiences. As America's leading divorce coach and the "Ask the Divorce Coach" columnist, I have offered NVC information and training to millions of readers and television viewers. As I continue to offer these skills to couples, we are creating a paradigm shift in divorce by acknowledging that it may be one path to enlightenment.

Marshall says, "The objective of Nonviolent Communication is to establish a relationship based on honesty and empathy. When others trust that our primary commitment is to the quality of the relationship, and that we expect this process to fulfill everyone's needs, then they can trust that our requests are true requests and not camouflaged demands."

When clients come to me to discuss their options of separation, reconciliation or divorce they rarely have this comprehension of the true possibility of marriage. When I have explained and demonstrated this, I often facilitate reconciliations, even in couples where the hope of this had not previously existed. I have been 99% successful in creating reconciliations even when only one partner is willing to do the work and receive training.

Using Marshall's "Feelings and Needs Inventory," many clients report that they are beginning to reconnect to their true inner "Self" for the first time in their lives. As they learn to identify their feelings and to connect each feeling to a need, an entirely new relationship often begins with their spouse.

Some clients contact me after separation or divorce, when they have realized the grief triggered by their partner's absence. For others, the financial necessity to return to a career may require practice with self-empathy so that they have enough inner silence to consider options to fulfill future needs. The average American marriage lasts only seven years. After a break-up, there may be feelings that linger after the divorce and self-empathy is an extremely valuable to allow clients to disconnect from their stories about the past and the future. Often, clients experience an epiphany after coaching has revealed the truth of Marshall's statement, "One of the secrets to life is to never have our needs be dependent on a specific person."

The Divorce ForumSM Coaching Program begins by allowing clients to see the possibility of a peaceful divorce using Nonviolent Communication. As this is completely new to most potential clients, I have created the "Motivate to Mediate(c)" component of "Marital Mediation(c) to meet my own needs for global peace. Clients are astounded when I let them know that it takes only one partner doing the work with me to turn the



relationship around. The following describe recent results for my clients using Nonviolent Communication:

1. Using NVC for Marital Mediation and to potentially avoid Restraining Orders during Divorce. One recent client was frightened by her husband's yelling and tears and was on the verge of filing a Restraining Order against him. While this strategy may be helpful in certain circumstances, many of my clients find that by learning to listen compassionately to their spouse, whether in person, over the phone or in my presence as a "third-sider" mediator, that they may create peace. After teaching my client the basics of NVC'S Self-empathy and Empathy, she began to have the ability to translate her husband's loud voice into the feelings and unmet needs that he had, and bring herself back to peace before responding to him. Once she began to actually hear what he was feeling and needing, he felt heard, and they began the process of conversation instead of confrontation.
2. Using NVC for Family Mediations to resolve long-standing problems: I created a Family Mediation with four adult siblings and their mother after learning that my client's family was struggling with issues that had been pending for decades. In addition to teaching my client the basics of NVC including Self-empathy and Empathy, I had 3 telephone sessions with her mother so that she could decide if the Family Mediation format would meet her needs. At the actual eleventh hour of the mediation, we created an agreement which each of the five family members signed. The mother was so pleased with the results that she declared me to be a "Miracle Worker" and her "third daughter." However, the miracle is the skill set of NVC, which allowed me to work with each person's needs instead of following their lead looking for a solution. Once I had uncovered that they shared needs for peace, appreciation, fairness, connection, and trust, we could begin the work of contemplating solutions to meet everyone's needs. The final agreement surprised the siblings but did not surprise the mother who supported my "outside of the box" ideas throughout.
3. Using NVC as a component of 12 Step Interventions: My client first contacted me after her husband said that he was planning to leave his sober living environment. She learned the basics of Self-empathy and understood that she felt scared and angry that her needs for peace, consideration, emotional safety and financial security would not be met if he left before he had acquired new skills to remain sober. She found it challenging to see her husbands' feelings and need for privacy, aesthetics, fun and connection with his family. Instead, she had been experiencing the "Enemy Image" of him when he drinks. Since then, I have had a number of sessions with the husband to clarify his unmet needs and to allow him to begin to express these needs to his family instead of feeling hopeless that his need for understanding could ever be met so that he can create more successful ways to meet his needs for connection, communication and appreciation. I also spoke to his parents in order to mediate a peaceful solution for the family. After a few sessions with each spouse, the husband decided to come home and began drinking. I offered "emergency first aid empathy" to each spouse so that they could find enough peace to see one another's feelings and needs. Due to the consistent peaceful behavior of his wife and to the sessions of NVC training for the entire family, he has now entered a thirty-day alcohol treatment program. In addition, I have offered NVC empathy training to motivate each family member to support him to stay in this program rather than to use their previous habit of criticism and derision. Now that the parents and the wife have begun to understand what triggers him to pick up a drink, and the self-critical thoughts that stimulate him to continue drinking, there is the possibility to create real support for him at home once he returns from treatment.

When clients call about avoiding divorce or to create a more peaceful divorce, the skills of NVC can be used in various combinations. The first step may be to learn to return themselves to a calm state in the face of a partner's anger. Then the conversations of pre-divorce or divorce development often are replaced with



reconciliation. Often, once a spouse uncovers his or her own feelings and needs and practices enough self-empathy to find peace, then their pain is diminished so that they can begin to hear what the partner had been saying, often for years.

The old "he said; she said" dynamic of divorce can dissolve very quickly when even one client short circuits the complaining and blaming behaviors that have been building up. By replacing these with hearing a partner's feelings and unmet needs and reflecting them back with NVC'S version of active listening. The following results are completely consistent with Marshall's words that "twenty minutes after each party expresses his or her needs and the other partner hears them and reflects them back a strategy will find them!"

4. Using NVC as a Divorce Coach during Divorce Mediation: Last year, I was called in as a divorce coach to support a divorce mediator who felt concerned that her need and her clients' needs for peace could not be met. During the first session, the wife requested that I become her divorce coach and the husband did not. After ten telephone sessions which focused in great part on teaching her self-empathy and empathy, she agreed to discuss her financial situation with my referred expert. She continued coaching with me and discussed her needs for companionship, intimacy and love that she hoped her husband could meet one day. Though she was not successful in having her husband receive any coaching sessions with me, they have now reconciled based on her own new skills of thinking, listening, and speaking. When she contemplated the benefits of life with her husband and life without him, she decided to choose the former and so did he.
5. Using NVC to prepare my coaching client for Divorce Mediation: Last month, a client had 12 coaching sessions in order to prepare for her collaborative divorce mediation. As her spouse had hired an attorney before she contacted me, and due to pending legal issues, I referred a local attorney who has also received my training. My client really mediated her own divorce, and within the mediation, she asked for a caucus with her husband who was on the phone from another state. After a one hour caucus using NVC, having spent only six hours in mediation, a settlement was reached. How was she able to accomplish this? When we first spoke she was overwhelmed by her need for financial security and respect and felt extremely angry. Receiving empathy and coaching, she saw that her grief was due to her need for affection and connection and that her fear of the future was triggered by her thoughts about being alone after the divorce. As she created the habit of "waking up" to these feelings and unmet needs instead of speaking with anger, fear and grief, she was able to understand her husband's needs, too. Slowly, the habit of NVC thinking replaced the emotional outbursts and her divorce was transformed into a peaceful collaborative experience. This saved her thousands or tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees and eliminated the litigation which the husband had demanded.
6. NVC impacts University curricula: I have been asked by the head of the Los Angeles Bar Association's Dispute Resolutions Service if I would help create the curriculum and participate with the faculty of Cal State University Dominguez Hills for a course on Collaborative Law, divorce and divorce mediation.
7. NVC may be included in television programming: A television production company has begun working with me to create a realty television series about my work!

With Nonviolent Communication SM skills clients may see themselves reflected in a new mirror. When they have transformed the fear that is triggered by the need for support and the grief that wells up when they consider living alone in the future, clients may feel inspired to move beyond old limitations, discovering



their true power. Since love is the “evolving door”, they often discover that they have become like the genie in the bottle, unlimited and far more powerful than they ever believed possible. “Peace isn’t going to find us; we have to find peace” is the mission statement of www.thedivorceforum.com and thanks to my great teacher, Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D., that is now a reality that we offer to millions.

Susan Allan, America’s leading divorce coach, is the founder of www.thedivorceforum.com. Allan has been seen on Fox News, MTV, and local television news programs on both coasts promoting Nonviolent Communication™ and peaceful divorce, and writes the “Ask The Love and Relationship Coach” and the “Ask The Divorce Coach” columns. Allan is the author of *101 Divorce Secrets, A Survival Guide*, and the upcoming book *Divorce The Marry-Go-Round or How to Save your Money, your Sanity and your Life!*