

NEEDS/VALUES/MOTIVATIONS

A selection of Universal Human Needs, loosely grouped under
Sustenance, Safety, Rest, Community, Love, Empathy, Creativity, Autonomy, and Meaning.

SUSTENANCE air food/nourishment health movement/exercise nurturance physical well-being rest/sleep safety sexual expression shelter touch water SAFETY comfort emotional safety order peace predictability privacy protection security stability structure support REST balance calmness ease flow fun harmony laughter peace recreation relaxation silence stillness	COMMUNITY belonging congruence cooperation family help home inclusion mutuality participation shared reality sharing support teamwork trust LOVE acceptance self-acceptance affection appreciation (?) self-appreciation care self-care self-esteem closeness dignity friendship gentleness giving from the heart nurturing passion romance to matter togetherness warmth EMPATHY CONNECTION acknowledgment clarity closeness communication communion companionship	EMPATHY (continued) compassion consideration cooperation self-empathy sexual expression equality (fairness) harmony inclusion intimacy kindness mutuality openness presence reassurance respect to be heard to know and be known to see and be seen to understand and to be understood understanding self-understanding warmth CREATIVITY beauty discovery growth humor joy learning order play pro-activity self-expression self-generation AUTONOMY authenticity choice freedom honesty integrity	AUTONOMY (continued) self-expression space spontaneity self-worth power in your world / influence (independence) presence responsibility transparency MEANING adventure aliveness awareness celebration celebration of life challenge choice of dreams, goals, values and how to fulfill them clarity (competence) consciousness consistency contribution effectiveness efficacy efficiency gratitude (?) hope inspiration interest mourning order productivity purpose self-awareness spiritual communion stimulation (success) to enrich life to matter understanding
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WHY THE WORD “NEED”

Marshall Rosenberg would say that the list of universal fundamental human needs was the best way that he ever found to describe what it is to be alive and human. He did make the comment that there are other ways and suggested that some poets, perhaps, can get even closer with words to describe the human experience. Since Marshall did not see himself as a gifted poet, the list of fundamental human needs was the tool he used. He would say that needs language was an attempt to describe in words the “life energy” that is always moving in us.

I’ve never believed that a list of needs can provide a full description of what is going on in a human life, fundamentally. However, I have found that it does take us a long way towards understanding our own values and motivations and those of other people.

It deepens our understanding of what moves us to take a particular action or respond to a particular action. It also gives us a powerful insight into what our emotions are trying to tell us, if we play with the idea that anything that you feel relates to the degree to which your human needs are being met or not met in that moment.

My personal investigation continues into what it means to be alive, and to be conscious of being alive, who or what we are, and what lies behind or beneath our choices. That’s a conversation for another place and time than this document, but meanwhile, I expect I’ll continue to find the needs list a valuable tool in making sense of my life and of the world, and helping me to connect with myself and others.

WHY THE TITLE “NEEDS/VALUES/MOTIVATIONS”

These three words give us three different ways of referring to the reality that underlies the list of human needs - the “life energy” within us.

I sometimes add “things that are important to human beings” as an alternative title for the needs list.

I DON’T LIKE THE WORD “NEED”

The word “need,” in particular, often creates a problem of disconnection between people. NVC is a system of thought and communication that holds connection as a primary goal, perhaps the primary goal. Accordingly, we want to use words that support connection. The word “need” does this with some people, but not with others.

Example 1

One man told me that in the industry that he’d worked in for decades, when carrying out a business negotiation with another company in the same field, the first thing they would say is: “First of all, let’s get our needs out on the table.” What this meant, in practical terms, was: “Let us get our demands that are non-negotiable out on the table, so we know what’s left that we can negotiate around.” This is clearly a different meaning for the word “need” than the meaning given to it in NVC.

The “needs” he was discussing were things like “The head office of the new company we’re forming must be in Cleveland, Ohio” or “My group must own over 50% of the new company.” You’ll not find any mention of Cleveland or percentages on an NVC needs list, so the man I was speaking to was pointing at what NVC would call non-negotiable “strategies” - people, locations, actions, timing, or objects that provide ways to meet fundamental human needs.

Unfortunately, old habits of thought don’t disappear easily, so this man responded routinely to the word “need,” even in domestic discussions or conflicts, as if it meant “demand” or “you have to do what I say or else!”

If I were in frequent communication with this man, I would remove the word “need” from my vocabulary when speaking with him, because it’s a word that generates more disconnection than connection. I’d still be referring to words from the needs list though.

Example 2

For many people, the word “need” is associated extremely closely with the word “neediness.”

Conversely, some people will hear a religious or spiritual teaching on the importance of “service” or “generosity of spirit” or “putting others before ourselves” as meaning “You must have no needs of your own; you must only serve others.”

In traditions where “enlightenment” is perceived as the goal, the idea of “having no needs” can become seen as a key requirement of reaching that goal.

If I say to such a person “My need for acceptance and kindness are not met as I hear what you just said to me,” there’s a high likelihood that I’ll hear back, “You’re so needy” or “Why are you making it all about your needs?”

So, again, if I were in frequent contact with such a person, I’d probably use other words than the word “need” when speaking to them.

I might instead talk about “values” and find that the word “value” is used within their system of thought to point at the very things I’m intending to point at with the word “need.” Their belief system might say, “We must meet others with kindness and not judge them,” and this is their way of saying the same thing I’m saying when I say, “Kindness and acceptance are fundamental, universal human needs.”

WHY DO YOU HAVE SOME PARENTHESES AND QUESTION MARKS ON YOUR NEEDS LIST?

appreciation (?) & gratitude (?)

Marshall Rosenberg taught that “gratitude” is not a need. The underlying need is “to enrich life,” but when the other person expresses gratitude for our actions, that’s one strategy by which we get confirmation that we’ve met our need to enrich life. For example, I bake you a cake with the intention of somehow enriching your life - i.e., the intention that the cake will meet needs for you. If you thank me for the cake, and I trust your thanks, that confirms for me that my cake-making action did indeed enrich life.

Since the words “gratitude” and “appreciation” are often used to mean the same thing, the implication is that appreciation is also not a need. I even have audio of Marshall saying that appreciation is not a need (Anger workshop - Oakland, CA - 2005). However, appreciation appears in the needs list of the 2nd edition of Marshall’s book *Nonviolent Communication - A Language of Life*. Gratitude does not, but appreciation does.

My sense is that this is because Marshall also uses the word “appreciation” to refer to the felt sense of enjoyment of something as it shows up in our life, as distinct from the expressing of appreciation/gratitude for something someone has done. I could also use “gratitude” in both ways.

My practical compromise is to hold appreciation/gratitude as meaning both things, and to keep these words in my needs list, but with a “?” against them for anyone who’s curious to learn more or confused by why they’re there.

(fairness), (competence), (success)

Any expression of a need, especially an unmet need, can be interpreted by the person you’re speaking to as an insult, or a demand, or a judgment, or blame, or in some other way that stimulates pain or irritation or some similar feeling for them.

In short, people will sometimes not like what you just said, even if you were attempting to use NVC. Indeed, a person might not like the way you raised an eyebrow at them.

The other person is interpreting your words or nonverbal signals in ways that do not meet needs for them.

I’m singling out “fairness” and “competence” as words that are frequently used in everyday language as being needs, but which can be very quickly and easily heard as judgments.

“What you’re saying does not meet my need for fairness” can be spoken in many other ways, but in all of them the use of the word “fair” or “fairness” is likely to be heard as the judgment “I think you’re unfair.”

Similarly, reference to the “need for competence” is very likely to be heard as “I think you’re incompetent.” In both cases, connection is likely to drop.

NVC provides other ways to talk about these things without using those words, but I keep them on my needs list, in parentheses, because I used to receive a lot of questions about why these words were not on the list.

(success)

Success is often a subjective judgment of a situation or person and is easily heard as that even if you're not intending it that way, e.g., "Lin's life is so much more of a success than his brother's."

I love the word but try to use it in a way that does not move me into the habit of dividing life into a dualism of "good/bad," "right/wrong," or "success/failure."

Any of the needs might turn out to be a steppingstone to another need or set of needs. I find this is very likely when someone says their need is "success." I ask them "And if you meet your need for success, what other needs will that meet for you?" That way we find out what lives behind or beneath the word "success."

(independence)

I question whether any of us ever meets the need for independence. I don't grow the food that sustains me, for example, so I don't see myself as independent of the whole system through which I receive and cook that food.

Independence, as a need, tends to be very clearly a steppingstone towards other needs. If someone says their need is for "independence" in their relationship with their parents, I'll tend to ask, "If you get that independence, what other needs will that meet?"