

# Embedding Nonviolence / Deescalation

Working to defuse tense situations

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# What does the Embedding nonviolence / Deescalation team do?



## EMBEDDING NONVIOLENCE



Nonviolent action is about confrontation. By acting, we engage in conflict with others, intervening in their daily lives and disrupting them. This raises tension, which can increase the risk that somebody gets hurt. Nonviolent communication grants us the ability to engage with other people without causing them unintentional harm. It invites us to move away from notions of blame and judgement, to foster a quality of connection rooted in empathy.

In the context of a rebellious action, we can use this method of communication to manage tension during a confrontation between parties on the street. This can involve members of the public, police or protesters. By intervening in hostile encounters we may be able to recognise feelings of alienation and agitation and help them transform into solidarity and optimism.

We can provide training and **wear white hi-vis on the ground.**

A team focusing on Embedding Non-Violence & De-escalation is typically needed for longer actions, or when potential conflict situations are likely.

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# What is Nonviolent Direct Action / Communication?

## What is Nonviolence?

Nonviolence works because it inspires, builds trust and opens doors for large numbers of people to get involved and express themselves. It also models the world we want to live in by committing to causing no harm.

Beyond blame and judgement, nonviolence recognizes that all of us are part of this system and that we live interdependently (what happens to you affects me and vice versa) and all of our futures are at stake.

Some core elements of nonviolence are:

- Non-harming.
- Moving beyond blame and judgement to seek to understand the position and perspective of the other.
- Truth-telling from a place of courage, compassion and love.
- Interdependence.
- Self-connection or inner peace.

“Nonviolence is the courage to speak truth with love...and love is the full radical acceptance of the humanity of every person.” - Miki Kashtan

## What is Nonviolent Direct Action?

Nonviolent Direct Action (NVDA) is a strategy of organising in groups to put your bodies in direct contact with or to directly oppose a force that you see as destructive or causing harm. NVDA strategies as we know them now developed out of the Nonviolent campaigns to end British rule of India, most commonly associated with Gandhi, and in the struggle for Civil Rights in the US in the 50s and 60s, most commonly associated with Dr. Martin Luther King.

## What is Nonviolent Communication?

Nonviolent communication (NVC) is another expression of Nonviolence. NVC was developed by Marshall Rosenberg who drew on the humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers and the nonviolence of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, to develop the tools to approach actions and organising in a way that includes your own needs, while considering others' and the needs of the wider environment, so that unintentional harm is more likely to be avoided.

Some core elements of NVC are:

- Recognising that all humans share the same fundamental needs, no matter how different their strategies for meeting them might be.
- From this basis, seeing the possibility of connection with all.
- Moving beyond blame, judgment, 'should' & 'have to'.
- Communicating from a place of choice.
- Foregrounding the act of listening, as a precursor for speaking, including to de-escalate tense situations.
- Expressing yourself by trying to communicate clear observations which aren't disputable instead of emotion-laden and unconscious interpretations.

# BREATHE: De-Escalation Skills

The acronym below is a simple, five-step process that may support you to stay self-connected and in your intention to connect with the other, including in tense situations. It is adapted from the principles of Non Violent Communication explained on the previous page.

- Breathe. Ground. Notice your sources of support.
- Remember The Humanity of All.
- Empathy Before Education.
  - Reflecting Not Reacting.
  - Feelings Before Facts.
  - Connection Over Correction.
- Ask First and Authentically Self-Express.
- BreaTHE. Debrief with Support.

## NVC De-Escalation Step by Step

### 1. Breathe. Ground. Notice your sources of support.

High-intensity and conflictual moments can be extremely challenging. We are hard-wired to fight, flight or freeze during them. And if we wish to remain calm, self-connected and able to focus on connecting with the other, we need both preparation and support. The idea of this first step then is preparatory. Before you begin your 'work' as a de-escalator, between each moment you are active, whenever you have a second to replenish - breathe. Ground yourself. Connect to the fact that life is ongoing no matter what is happening in this present moment. Also: look around and name what support you have available; simply doing so can give you a sense of safety, solidarity, stability.

### 2. Remember The Humanity of All

A commitment to nonviolence begins from the premise that all of us matter. It recognises that we are all fundamentally similar. It also holds that none of us is intrinsically 'bad', even when and if we do things that are painful for others. A critical starting point for practicing nonviolence, therefore, is to connect to the humanity of all. We can do this by attempting to put ourselves in another person's shoes. In the context of a protest, imagine yourself as a frustrated commuter, a policeman, or an angry demonstrator. What are you feeling? Why? Sink as deeply as you can into what it must feel like to be that person, how you would feel if you were them. Judgements and evaluations of the 'rightness', 'wrongness' or 'deservingness' of the other will block our compassion for them; imagining ourselves as them can help to melt those judgements away.

### 3. Empathy Before Education

When people are upset, empathy can be supportive. They don't want to be told that they'll be OK, that this isn't a big deal, that you've had it worse or have an answer for them. They also don't want some 'rational' engagement where you seek to shift their state through the force of argument. What they want is to be understood - to have someone get what they're feeling and why. Think of the times when you are upset - isn't that also what you want?

Truly listening to someone is a powerful gift that can foster a real sense of connection. It also supports people to re-centre themselves, taking the immediate charge out of any anger. At the very core of our de-escalation will be ongoing empathy. It is the lifeblood of NVC and will be essential to maintaining peaceful connection at protest actions. It is also likely to be fundamental to any growth in this movement, since all the latest psychological research suggests that people are not often persuaded to change their worldviews but instead open to change through the pathway of connection.

### 4. Ask First - Is the other person ready to hear your perspective?

This helps to build a nonviolent culture of consent and choice. If you want to be genuinely heard by the other, they need to be ready to hear you. And they are unlikely to be ready if they are triggered and angry and don't first feel heard by you. This is why empathy first is critical. And then, when there is connection between you, respect that person's space by asking them whether they are open to hearing what's alive for you. Asking for consent prepares them in a small way for listening, so they are more likely to take on board what you are saying.

**A is also for Authentic Self-Expression.** In other words, how can you express what is alive for you in ways that are authentic as well as compassionate and connecting.

Before you do this, spend a moment to connect emotionally with your reasons for being involved with XR. What is it that deep within you is motivating you to spend hours, days, weeks organising and going to the streets, with the consequences of arrest if you get arrested?

### 5. BreaTHE - Self-check in. Notice your sources of support. e.g. empathy, movement, checkin. Plan to access them.

Don't forget that protests, and conflict within them can be intense, energy-sapping, scary and many other things besides. You may well need empathy of your own or other support to sustain your nonviolence in and beyond them. When they are over, make sure you bookend your contribution with a debrief. Ground yourself again as you did at the start. Seek support and access it.

# De-escalation in Large Crowd Situations

## Theatre, Fun, Music and Song

These can all be used to entertain and change the energy.

- If the energy is getting too excitable, music and especially drumming can be used to first meet the energy of excitement and then gradually calm things down by slowing the beat until it is the same as a calm heart-beat.
- When tension is building, start up a calming song, and invite others to join in. Teach and then sing it slowly and calmly. You can find some examples [HERE](#)
- If arrests are starting to happen, or if tension is rising for another reason, ask any musicians playing to slow things right down and play something calm, or with a slow heart-beat type rhythm. You might want to ask them to stop altogether, so the crowd can be together in song.
- Be careful not to be over-zealous with calming music and song; some people need the upbeat rhythms and to be able to let off steam so make space for this whenever possible - otherwise frustrations will build.

## Establishing Silence

In large crowd situations where the tension is rising, it can be really helpful to establish silence, because it can be calming in itself and because it will enable you to initiate other tactics, with everyone aware and joining in. However, establishing silence does require a high level of responsiveness and may not be possible in really large or dispersed crowds. If it feels too difficult, don't waste time on it, but move on to the next tactic.

Two methods:

- One person falls quiet and raises their hand, whilst inviting the people around them to do the same. This works well if enough people are practiced.
- Project without shouting and say 'Clap once if you can hear me' and then clap once. Say 'Clap twice if you can hear me' and then clap twice. Say 'Clap three times if you can hear me' and then clap 3 times. Each time, more people around you should be joining in, until everyone has clapped 3 times and then fallen silent, waiting for what's coming next.

You can then very briefly and calmly let people know what you'd like to do next and why (why nonviolence and de-escalation are important), invite people to join in with a song or use one of the

tactics below.

## Sit Down and Invite Others to Sit Down Too

This can have a very calming effect.

Make sure there is plenty of space around the violence / conflict, especially a free route to withdraw.

It can also be helpful to fall silent. .

## De-escalation Line

This is especially useful for conflict between lines of police or riot police and activists when tension is building too much.

- Explain to the police that you will be asking activists to give them space and reduce tension.
- Form a line of people between police and activists with one person facing toward police, one facing towards activists, alternating.
- Invite activists to take two steps backward to give the police some space and then sit down.
- Remind rebels that through this action rather than 'giving in', they have enhanced their nonviolent stance and strengthened the held space.
- Withdraw the line when all is well.

## Gentle Singing / Chanting and “Stop” Hand Gesture

- Ideally, first get the crowd to be quiet (see above)
- Everyone takes up a gentle chant such as “peace, love, respect” and assumes the “stop” hand gesture towards the aggressive action, arm outstretched. The hand gesture is palm facing towards the situation, fingers pointing upwards.
- The stop hand gesture can be softened by everyone placing their left hand over their heart area (top of chest). Left hand over heart activates the right brain associated with connection and wellbeing.
- Keep the song going.
- We are not shaming and blaming angry people. There’s a lot to be angry about, so we want to support the people in not venting their anger in unhelpful ways. Make sure that there is plenty of space for the people to withdraw from the crowd.
- Lots of other possibilities here. Make up your own, keep it simple. Or you can just use a ‘hummmmmm’.

## We are non violent, how about you?

This next one is only appropriate to use when engaging with aggressive police and other aggressive people.

- Get quiet.

- Sing “We are nonviolent. And how about you?” to the tune of the John Lennon chant “Give peace a chance”.
- Then begin saying “We’re nonviolent. How about you?” Think about how you are delivering this. Does it sound gentle and suggestive or confrontational?
- This was used **as a spoken chant** against violent police at the Seattle mass mobilisation against World Trade Organisation. If chanted it comes across as very challenging and should only be used in extreme situations - **when there’s a need to meet a high energy level with similar intensity - and especially towards aggressive police.**

Try it out and compare the effect with the sung version. At the International Rebellion in October ‘19 it was sometimes used inappropriately when police were behaving with respect - so then it created tension where there wasn’t any before. See [4 min film](#).

## Encountering Extreme Anger or Threatening Behaviour

If you can’t deal with it, get help elsewhere (including the police if necessary).

- This is a last resort to be used if someone is going to be hurt.
- The intention is not to inform on people or create difficulties in people’s lives.
- The intention is to keep people safe.

# So, I Want to be a De-escalator - What Next?

## Join The Telegram Chat

Join the [telegram chat](#).

Please don't be put off if you can't get Telegram though - you can still volunteer in person by turning up at an event and asking for the Deescalation team.

## Complete the Recruitment Form

Signup to the [Deescalation email list](#).

## Join a Training Session

Trainings publicised on Facebook (no need to have an account)

<https://www.facebook.com/EmbeddingNonViolence/>

Training workshops and drop-ins to be scheduled soon for 2024.

And we run face to face training before large events, which typically last 1 hour.

## Other Action Support Roles

There are a whole range of other [Action Support](#) roles within the Action Support Circle.