

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.
