

# Choosing Life

The Practice of Compassionate  
Communication

*Richard Broadbent*

*'I have set before you life and death, blessings and pain.  
Therefore choose life, that you and your descendants  
may live.'*

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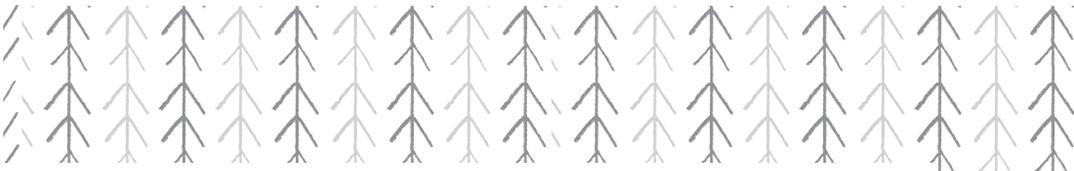
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# Foreword

At some point on most days we feel a degree of irritation or hurt at what we perceive someone to have said or done (or by what they have not said or done). At other times, we feel that what we are saying or doing is not understood or appreciated. These experiences can form a familiar and sometimes painful pattern, especially with those who are near and dear to us.

Compassionate communication is a practical exploration of how and why others hear us as they do, and why we hear others as we do. It offers an understanding of the dynamics of human communication that contribute to misunderstanding and sometimes conflict. This gives us a basis from which to make different choices, at least to some degree, in how we listen and express ourselves, and supports a more compassionate and enriching relationship with others and with ourselves.

Richard and Jill Broadbent set up the Centre for Compassionate Communication in 2009 to offer workshops and support groups in communication, relationship and self-knowledge. Since workshops were first offered, there have been many requests for a book or a manual to support those

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who want to learn and practice what is shared at the Centre. This book is the result.

If your interest is in connecting with others, in the sense of being able to see and hear them less judgmentally and in being seen and heard yourself, you will find here explanations, guidance and exercises to help you do so, and to support practical choices in how you communicate with and relate to others.

A companion volume, *The Spirit of Compassionate Communication* provides a deeper exploration of the spiritual aspects of compassionate communication for those who wish to pursue them.

The Centre offers regular workshops and practice groups where you can further your exploration in the company of others with similar aims. Further details of these workshops, and the Centre's publications, can be found on the Centre's website at [www.compassionatecommunication.co.uk](http://www.compassionatecommunication.co.uk).

# Acknowledgements

Individuals in workshops across the world who have role-played with me, shared with me their own explorations and who have helped me to see myself more clearly are too numerous to mention by name, but every one of them deserves my thanks.

I would like to record my gratitude to Robert Gonzales and to the late Marshall Rosenberg for all they have done over the years to develop and communicate their insights into human relationship.

I would also like to express gratitude to all participants at the Centre for Compassionate Communication over the last eight years, for the energy, courage and authenticity that they brought to the workshops on which this book is based. Thank you all.

Above all, none of this would have been possible without Jill, my wife and partner at the Centre, with whom I have lived, learnt and shared everything in this book.

**RICHARD BROADBENT**

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*September 2017*

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# Using this Book

This book has two parts:

## **PART 1 – Introducing Compassionate Communication**

This provides an overview of compassionate communication. It is not essential to read it before embarking on the practical sections in Part 2, but some readers will appreciate having a route map before tackling the exercises, or a summary to refer to afterwards.

## **PART 2 – Practising Compassionate Communication**

Part 2 is the core of the book and provides a practical exploration of compassionate communication. It is divided into nine sessions, each including explanation and practical exercises to support your understanding.

Some of the perspectives in this book may feel unfamiliar. This is a reflection of the way that most of us have been taught or socialised over many years to communicate and relate to others. It is best to practise on small things at first, choosing simple situations to experiment with. Do not try to deal with

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the hottest topic in your life straight away. Treat the exercises as explorations.

Like most things, communication and relationship have a lot to do with practice. Many of us are willing to devote a little time each day to yoga or music or exercise. We do not so often think to practise communication, yet it is at the centre of our lives.

If you can find another person (or group) to share this book with, it will help to bring the exercises to life, but don't worry if you are tackling it alone. All the support you need lies within these pages, and life brings an endless series of opportunities to practise. If at first things are not clear, go back and try the session again. Practise whenever you can. And of course you are welcome to join a workshop at the Centre if this book moves you to do so.

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# PART 1

## Introducing Compassionate Communication

# 1. An Intention to Communicate

Relationship brings both joy and pain into our lives.

Compassionate communication is about how to nurture our relationships so that they bring us more fulfilment and a greater capacity to deal with challenges. The principles apply whether we are relating to partners, family, work colleagues or to people we don't know at all.

We are always looking for solutions to our difficulties out in the world, rather than looking for them within ourselves. Our lives are held back by habituated thinking about life that is focused on concerns about 'self' and what is best for us, rather than drawing strength from what truly matters. The place we live from is tied to the outside world but our true home, the place that can anchor us in life, lies within us. If we can shift our focus from events in the world to what lies within us, life can begin to flow.

Compassionate communication helps to guide us from outside to inside: from where life animates us. From this place we can more easily let go of the contracted and critical energy that tends to be our default. Our intention is to create a quality

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of connection with ourselves that allows compassionate giving and receiving to take place naturally.

The challenge is the same for all of us and it consists of this:

- We tend to project criticism and blame onto others when things are not as we would wish; and
- We tend to hear criticism and blame in what others say, which stimulates a reaction in us.

Because we experience the world in this way, we tend to express ourselves, especially when we feel a little stressed, in ways that are hard for others to hear without them also feeling criticised or blamed. This is the root of most difficulty in communication.

The power of compassionate communication lies in a simple and beautiful insight made by Marshall Rosenberg, the creator of Nonviolent Communication\*. Everything anybody says or does is an attempt to express a living value, some deep longing; and at some level these are values or longings that we all share, because they are essential qualities of life.

To access this reality, compassionate communication begins with an intention to communicate from a more heartfelt

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\* *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, PuddleDancer Press, 1999.

place. This means suspending judgement to create space for something more authentic to emerge. It does not mean being nice or being passive or giving up what is important to us. It means re-framing events in a new context, where what matters to us and what matters to others are brought together to support different choices in communication and action.

To communicate from a more heartfelt place means seeking to hear what matters for the other person, rather than focusing on the words or behaviours they are using to express themselves; and seeking to connect with and express what matters to us rather than habitually reacting, generally with judgement and blame. This is the core practice of compassionate communication.

The root of our tendency to express and to hear criticism or blame lies in our thought processes, which is where we turn first to establish a basis for listening and speaking differently.

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## 2. Reactive Thought

Most of us can describe in general terms what it is we would like to experience differently in our communication. We would like to be able to express ourselves in ways that mean we are heard and understood; and we want to be able to hear and understand others without necessarily being hurt, angered or otherwise stimulated into tension or conflict.

What this means for each of us specifically is a function of our own life experience. We may wish that we could express our feelings more freely; or keep them under better control; or get less provoked into irritation; or express what matters to us without fear of being hurt. It may be something else. But at the centre of it all is a wish to be seen and heard and to be able to see and hear others.

In practice, something seems to knock us off course. We get caught in a pattern of communication that tends to be judgemental. We wish the other person were different in some way – that they were more affectionate, more interesting, had different opinions, agreed with us, talked more, talked less, talked with less or more energy, or many other possibilities. We may also wish that we could express ourselves differently.

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We make these judgements about people and situations because it is a natural function of our minds to do so. Our mind is designed to be discriminating because part of its job is to keep us out of harm, and guide us towards what we need for our wellbeing. The essential nature of this aspect of our mind is judgemental, distinguishing between personal good and bad, right and wrong.

Whenever someone says or does something that is not in alignment with our views, our expectations or maybe just our mood, we experience some discomfort. This is also true when someone does not say or do something that we wish they would. This is happening almost all the time in life. The events of the world, what others are doing and saying, have an impact on us.

Our discomfort is rooted in the fact that our hopes and fears, our perception of what we like and dislike, our sense of right and wrong, have been built up over years of personal life experience and are wholly subjective. We give names to the discomfort we experience when we see or hear something that does not align with our view of the world: we say we feel hurt, upset, anxious or irritated.

When we feel discomfort in this way, which to a greater or lesser extent is a lot of the time, our thoughts step in to try to protect us. They seek to do so by offering an explanation for the

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discomfort as a basis for taking action that we hope will make it go away. The explanation offered is generally that our discomfort has been caused by something outside us, such as what another person has said or done. We believe the explanation, and this leads us to blame the other person. Or we may blame ourselves. But the essential nature of the mind is to judge and to allocate responsibility.

If we blame the other person, we are likely to let them know it – subtly or not so subtly – in what we say or do. If we blame ourselves, we are likely to withdraw from expressing ourselves fully or at all.

Our tendency to respond in this way is reinforced by everyday life. We are trained to respond this way from a young age, when differences between perceived right and wrong are, sometimes necessarily, reinforced. When we reach an age where we can fend for ourselves, the habit of judging everything in this way and of looking outside ourselves for explanations is deeply ingrained. We continue to be immersed in the same dynamic among friends, family, work colleagues and especially the media, which is now largely engaged in fault-finding and allocating blame.

The reaction becomes habitual because we are seeking to avoid re-entering experiences we think of or remember at some level as being uncomfortable. The consequence is a

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circular and repetitive pattern in communication. The reactive thoughts that underlie our tendency to blame have a magnetic attraction because they feel familiar; they feel energising and they shield us from our fear. But no argument is ever 'won'. Temporary resolution does not translate into sustained change. The pattern does not resolve the issues of life.

If we look closely at our thoughts, we will usually find at least one thought that is deeply familiar, that recurs often and in different situations. Examples might be some version of 'It's not fair,' or 'I can't,' or 'They shouldn't do that,' or 'I'm to blame.' This familiar thought is part of a story we tell ourselves about life. Our habitual reactive thoughts gradually coalesce into a pattern that defines how we see the world. We take the interpretation created by our reactive thoughts for reality itself. Ultimately our repeated responses begin to influence what the world really does bring us.

It is not a coincidence that life seems to keep bringing experiences that stimulate our favourite thought. We are bringing our interpretation to whatever arises in life. And life responds in kind.

There is nothing wrong or bad about these thoughts. They are trying to help us by explaining and suggesting ways to fix our discomfort. But becoming familiar with our thoughts, particularly with the recurrent ones, loosens their grip and

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allows us to look more closely at what is going on underneath them. To understand what is taking place we have to slow down and look more deeply within ourselves.

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### 3. Qualities of Life

When the world is not in alignment with our hopes and expectations, we experience discomfort, and this triggers the mind into seeking explanations and ways to change the situation to make the discomfort go away. The discomfort is an indication that something that matters to us has been touched.

The discomfort we experience is real, but discomfort and the reactive thoughts it prompts are different things. At the root of our experience is something that is not a thought or a feeling. Our thoughts, emotions and physical sensations are the tools through which we experience life, but there is another dimension of life which we experience as values or a longing to dwell in a certain quality of life.

The qualities of life that manifest in us as values or longings can be expressed in words such as love, significance or growth, although no definition can do more than point to them since our experience of them flexes as they resonate within us.

What marks them out is their universality. They are not opinions or in any way partial. At some level, these qualities

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of life are shared by all human beings. The way they resonate in each of us is unique, but the qualities themselves are an integral part of being human.

It is the resonance of these qualities, seeking expression through us, that we experience when we feel fulfilled, and that we are trying to connect with in the best way we know how when we try to do or say something that we feel is important. This is why, when an aspect of these qualities is touched in relationship, we come alive. It is why we devote energy to seeking their manifestation in life. It is why we experience discomfort in circumstances in which they are not present.

When we experience an event in life that touches one of these qualities of life within us, it resonates, and we experience the warmth and joy of that resonance as if life itself was resonating within us. When we meet an experience in life that does not resonate with these qualities, we experience discomfort. We are upset, hurt or in pain. This is the discomfort that triggers our reactive mind into action.

Although at times it may seem hard to see, everything anyone does or says is rooted in these qualities of life that manifest in us as longings or values. All criticism and judgement, indeed all violence, is an attempt to express these qualities, however misguidedly. Everything anybody says or does is in

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service of a quality of life that at some level we all share. It is this reality that offers the possibility of communication even in difficult circumstances.

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