

Sex and intimacy in NVC training. Certification Guideline.

This document is an attachment to the CPP as of Sept 20, 2021.

It has been updated with the feedback from the CT community on Jan 20, 2023

INTRODUCTION

This document is a **resource for the certification process of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) trainers**. Its aim is to support assessors, CTs and candidates in deepening awareness around the topic of sex and intimacy in NVC training - especially in relationships with power differentials. The intention is to ensure that the **focus of the training remains on learning** and to minimize the risk of harm, confusion, or trauma resulting from sexual or romantic relationships during the training.

The document includes requests for new trainers and provides a framework for further discussion and exploration of the topic in the entire community of CNVC trainers. In order to further address this issue, we recommend:

- Assessors share this document with candidates at the start of the assessor-candidate relationship
- Invite candidates to write journal entries and discuss the topic with peers and their mentors
- Encourage transparency and openness during the assessment process
- Include this document in the AIT guidelines
- Assessors collect strategies for bringing awareness to the topic and commit to training and understanding the topic
- Holding an event for Assessors/AITs to learn about key elements of the topic and practice addressing power differentials.

We see this document as a starting point. It has been handed over to the CNVC board, the Program Resource Circle and the newly formed workgroup revising the trainer's agreement to consider the following proposals:

1. Including a version of this document in the trainers' agreement
2. Creating a training program for current and future Certified Trainers and Assessors;
3. Offering a version of this document to participants in NVC trainings;
4. Setting up a body to investigate allegations of harm by CNVC trainers, for example an ombudsperson.

These proposals aim to address power dynamics within the context of the assessor-candidate relationship as well as within the relationship between CNVC trainers, organizers, and participants.

INTENTION

We want to **model integrity and responsibility** towards NVC workshop participants, Certified Trainer candidates, and communities to **ensure that the focus of NVC training remains on learning** and to **minimize the risk of harm, confusion, or trauma** resulting from any kind of sexual contact or romantic relationships between trainers, assistants, and participants; especially **across power differentials**.

Therefore, we aim to:

- **Raise awareness about how power dynamics** impact attraction and relationships between trainers, assessors, assessors-in-training, organizers, CNVC staff, and participants.
- **Increase understanding of the impact** that intimate relationships across power differences (e.g. between those with structural power and a participant) can have on trust, safety, and the ability to focus on learning within a group. And **promote responsibility** for the impact that comes with positions of greater power.
- Help trainers and assessors **understand the vulnerability** of people who may be entering emotionally charged environments for the first time and sometimes mixing the experience of ‘being met with deep empathy’ with ‘love at first sight’. We want to support them and provide a holding space for their experience.
- Ensure that trainers and assessors are **trauma-aware**¹. While most of us have been affected by ancestral, collective and personal trauma, some people with experience of harm may not be aware of their own vulnerability.

¹ Trauma - “a lasting rupture or **split within the self due to difficult and hurtful events**. This psychic injury, lodged in the nervous system, mind, and body, lasting long past the originating incident(s), **triggerable at any moment**. It is a constellation of hardships, composed of the **wound itself** and the residual burdens that the woundedness imposes on the body and soul: the **unresolved emotions visiting upon a person**; the **coping dynamics** they dictate; the scripts they live out” - definition by Gabor Mate “The myth of normal”. Trauma is a **universal human experience**, which **pervades our culture - from personal to systemic** levels. Given that “trauma is not what happens to a person, but rather what happens inside a person as a result of an event(s)” - the availability and the quality of a **post-traumatic event support is very important**.

The effects of trauma may reside below the threshold of awareness for individuals, and as NVC is an awareness-increasing strategy, impacts from old pain may rise to the surface in a workshop/training/coaching/mentoring environment. "Aware" means a basic understanding of trauma and direct experience with working with one's own trauma. It may also include awareness of the distinction between post-traumatic stress (which results in lack of resources to attend to the needs arising) and post-traumatic growth (the resource is available to attend and contribute to needs that arise).

As trainers, our **purpose is to serve personal development and support healing** - this is the implicit agreement we have with participants. This agreement has been made explicit for IITs and we want to make it explicit in regards to all NVC training.

If a relationship between a trainer and a participant becomes sexual or romantic, it may negatively impact the participant's personal development process.

Why?

Because such a shift in intentions, towards sex or other interests (such as friendship or business relationships), means the **trainer is also prioritizing their own needs** for pleasure, connection, or sexual expression, in addition to the need for contribution. We believe it is challenging to attend to both sets of needs simultaneously.

Also, feelings of infatuation and sexual attraction that arise from shifts in relationships can **obscure the needs that initially prompted individuals to participate in the training**. Agreements made by participants or trainers with their partners, families, communities, etc. may be disregarded in this state and agreements may be broken without consideration of potential consequences for specific participants, other participants, and those outside the training.

Additionally, such a **shift also impacts the whole group** of participants and can have a **ripple effect on the entire CNVC community of CTs**.

We ask all of us trainers to grow in awareness of this shift and its implications for our responsibility as CNVC trainers.

REQUESTS

Our **strong requests** are as follows:

1. Assessors, CTs, and candidates **refrain from getting involved in romantic or sexual relationships with participants** (including candidates and CTs) during a training or during the interim between "connected trainings" (e.g. 1-year or 9-month programs that include occasional retreats).

2. We recommend maintaining this responsibility **for 6 months to 2 years after the training** (if you are unsure about this recommendation, consult a mentor or supervisor with experience in this field).
3. If a trainer or assessor develops romantic or sexual feelings for a participant, or if a participant expresses such feelings for a trainer or assessor, we ask the trainer (assessor, etc.) **to seek support and offer transparency within the training team or personal support circle** to find a way to care for everyone without getting further involved. Openness to feedback is essential to minimize blind spots.
4. If a participant speaks to a trainer or assessor about their feelings, we ask the trainer to **acknowledge the participant's vulnerability**, recognize that this is a common occurrence, and **refrain from discussing their own feelings**. If possible - propose a co-trainer to step in to offer deep empathy to the participant so as to shift the focus of attention.
5. In the event that a participant makes declarations of love or intimate invitations, or if a trainer has strong romantic feelings towards a participant (including CTs and candidates), we ask the trainer to **conduct a "reality check"**. It is common for self-deception or confusion to occur in these situations, so it can be helpful to explore these questions with the support of someone else on the team to clarify your thoughts, feelings, and needs:
 - Are you aware of unmet needs in your life that may affect your commitment to your role as trainer and that may increase your vulnerability?
 - Are you flattered and do not want to miss out on this opportunity, or do you feel like this is your only chance?
 - Are you only seeing the positive aspects of this person or the potential relationship? Do you find yourself enjoying everything the participant says, feeling drawn to them, and coming up with reasons to be near them or interact with them?
 - Do you think the participant would have approached you if you had met in a different context where you were not in a trainer or assessor role?
 - Is the participant showing up in many of your sessions, sitting closer to you, or finding reasons to talk with you? Do you have any indication that they may be placing you on a pedestal?
6. To address declarations of love or intimate invitations, or if you have strong romantic feelings towards a participant, we recommend the following steps:

- Communicate about it: Share and reflect on the situation **with colleagues or a mentor/co-trainer**. By discussing these topics, you can reduce their subtle power and influence.
- Be honest about your experience, but **DO NOT discuss your own feelings with the participant in question during the training**.

If you choose to pursue a romantic or sexual relationship with a participant during a training, it is strongly recommended that you step down from your role as a trainer, assessor, CT, or candidate.*

If you disagree with any of the statements in this document or if you encounter resistance, please discuss your concerns with your assessor, mentor, or supervisor and engage with your community to explore the topic in more depth.

**We propose an agreement that includes a high threshold for maintaining the integrity of CNVC: If a trainer, assessor, CT or a candidate chooses to pursue a romantic/sexual relationship during a training, they will no longer be considered a trainer or assessor and become a participant in the training. However, it is noted that we request this proposal be addressed more fully with the Assessor Community Circle, CNVC board, and other relevant parties before it is implemented. It is currently only being proposed.*

FRAMEWORK AND RESOURCES

The quality of the relationship between trainers and participants, or between assessors and candidates, is essential for the learning process in NVC because we prioritize connection.

Additionally, the trainer - participant relationship can become blurred, depending on how we live the “power-with” principle (i.e. the trainer may believe they connect as fellow human beings and thus are equal and overlook where roles/power differentials call for different responsibility within the relationship).

This applies also to a relationship between a participant and an organizer or other individuals with more access to resources i.e. power within the training context (including between people with different degrees of structural power and rank - like a trainer and an assistant). It may be helpful to view such relationships as *asymmetric*.

It is important for trainers and organizers to consider how they approach and interact with participants in such relationships, both during and after a training, in order to acknowledge and address any power differences.

The relationship is not equal* because:

Trainer/Assessor/Organizer/Host	Participant
guides (creates structure, framework and context for the training; invites cocreation)	participates, co-creates within the frames invited by the trainer, commits themselves
is paid for the training	pays for the training
shares knowledge and experience, invites dialogue	learns, receives, shares own insights
questions routine patterns	self-reflects
secures the space (takes responsibility for the emotional and physical well-being of all attending)	opens up to the process
takes care of own vulnerability and invites others to explore their vulnerability	explores own vulnerability
offers feedback and coaching	receives feedback and coaching
asks for feedback about the needs of participants around the workshop	offers feedback about their needs around the workshop
intends to serve personal development / healing	receives assistance in development
in the "spotlight" to be idealized/devalued	possibly idealizes/devalues

**This dynamics also applies to relationships between people with different degrees of structural power and rank within the training team, where the power/rank difference is even more subtle than between a trainer and a participant*

During training (and for a period of time afterwards), it is important for trainers to own their role, take responsibility for power imbalances and create a learning environment that promotes trust. Our recommendation is to maintain this responsibility for 6 months to 2 years after the training. If feelings of attraction arise for a trainer, it is important to address them with the support of a mentor or colleague (e.g. if the lead trainer is struggling with sexual feelings) and with high priority.

It is important to consider the potential consequences of sexual or romantic relationships between trainers, assistants, and participants in NVC trainings, which may include:

- Difficulty thinking clearly and staying focused, potentially leading to confusion of roles and aims
- Tendency to hide or obscure one's own limitations, vulnerabilities, etc.
- Attempting to please or posture, which may have unintended effects
- Focusing on gaining attention at the expense of other participants
- Not seeing the other person as a whole individual with both strengths and edges.

There are several potential effects of sexual or romantic relationships between trainers, assistants, and participants in NVC trainings, including:

- Difficulty for the trainer to take responsibility for the processes of the participants, particularly when distress arises
- Other participants in the group or as individuals may receive less attention, care, or other resources
- The trainer may want to offer excessive attention and believe they can make a unique difference in the participant's life, leading to an unhealthy and unbalanced power dynamic
- The trust of the participants in the trainer may be compromised
- Imbalance in the group due to "preference" may trigger self-protection responses or trauma reactions among other participants, such as anger, jealousy, or envy
- Undisclosed relationships may be sensed subconsciously within the group and compromise the needs for clarity, transparency, and trust, even if all ethical and responsible considerations within the intimate circle are clear.

Trauma

One of the primary reasons why this document calls for such relationships to not occur for 6 months to two years after a training is that we want to hold responsibility towards people who are in an active process of personal growth and healing, when it is not clear what has been experienced before. We prioritize needs for trust, contribution, integrity... and give both parties time to reorient before forming a new relationship. The person attracted to the trainer might have an unresolved trauma (without even knowing), but also if the new relationship is seen, it might trigger retraumatization in some group members. Any group of people will have people in it who have experienced trauma to a lesser or greater degree. It is important to know that this can lead to fight, flight or freeze responses. Healing from trauma is a process and will take time. It's also important to work with a mental health professional who is trained in treating trauma.

To learn more about trauma, you can refer to the following resources.

If you have resources that you sense would be helpful please give us your feedback.

Resources on power and inclusion:

- https://docs.google.com/document/d/15yoAlLnQfejEsyHApmiCsU3VxYHrmctp3u3r0n_7BDU/edit

NVC-based perspectives on trauma:

- Sarah Peyton, <https://sarahpeyton.com/>
- Susan Skye, <https://susanskye.com/sarahpeyton.com/event/how-nonviolent-communication-discovered-trauma-healing-an-interview-with-susan-skye/>
- Tracy Seed <http://tracyseed.com/>
- Simone Aniker <http://simoneanliker.com/>

If you know other certified trainers with expertise in trauma, please offer us feedback so we can add their names to our resource list.

Other resources on trauma:

- <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1J1QJmfnESGimgGCC0Wal8O9JkixeIV2rn6FL-74mHY/edit?usp=sharing>
- thewisdomoftrauma.com/resources/

FEEDBACK

The **feedback we received so far** can be accessed [here](#) and within the original document [here](#)

Please consider **offering further feedback** [here](#)

We updated the guideline with the feedback received one year after the document was available. Now, we would like **the updated guideline to stay as is for another 3 years (until Jan 2026)** before incorporating another round of feedback.

AUTHORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

This document was initiated by the ethics group of NVC network in Austria (Nicola Tobias, Paula Rossi, Mira Kernjak, Andrea Scheuringer), and Lydia Hammerschmied and developed into CNVC

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