

Considerations around consent around touch for the design and facilitation of NVC events

1. Principles and concepts:

- Self-connection nurtures freedom to take responsibility and be in choice
- Needs change from moment to moment and situation to situation.
- Everybody's needs matter. To do this, we aim to be fully inclusive and make the effort to consider the needs of the most vulnerable which might not be immediately obvious to some.
- Touch is a human need. When other needs aren't compromised, it can fully support the heart-opening practice of Nonviolent communication.
- From recent research, there is growing understanding that it is more difficult to say 'No' to touch when it is already moving towards us, hence the need for creating and supporting the space for a 'No', before a gesture of touch starts to move towards us.

2. For facilitators of workshops and gatherings.

Here are some practices which aim to validate and support participants' choices around touch as a beautiful expression of needs, and to build a culture of consent:

- Notice any touch you are suggesting in ice-breakers or transitioning activities (eg massaging people's shoulders). Make it touch-free or offer alternatives.
- Make as clear as possible in workshop promotion, the type and amount of touch that participants will be invited to engage with during the workshop, to enable participants to make a choice as to whether attending would meet their needs.
- Practice saying 'Yes' and 'No' in a variety of embodied ways in the session.
- Do some group 'Needs checking' with questions that people respond to with raising arms to different heights: (Participants are included and empowered in getting a sense of preferences in the room).
 - Do you prefer to rotate or stay with one or limited partners? (eg Raise high if a strong preference to rotate and keep low to express fewer partners)
 - Are you wanting to explore lots of touch, or the possibility of limited touch or not touching at all? (eg Raise high if wanting lots of touch and keep lower for less touch)

Stay sensitive to and appreciative of the vulnerability in expressing any aspect of these preferences.

- Acknowledge that in the session, participants may find themselves in situations they did not anticipate, eg:
 - being partnered with someone that they don't feel comfortable with.
 - discovering that the type or level of touch is different than expected.
 - an old trauma or memory is triggered.

Have strategies and support in place for when these things happen.

- Support participants to receive a 'No' with respect and to see the 'Yes' behind the 'No'; to support participants to not see it as a personal rejection or to pathologize the other person.

- Create a 'Solo Zone' (or 'Your needs matter Zone'); a place where participants can go when they want to sit out of an exercise. This supports the ability of participants to say no to what is being suggested by facilitator or another participant.
- Offer a choice of exercises where various levels of touch can be used, to support diversity of participation. Include a demonstration of each option.
- Suggest expressing 'Yes' and 'No' non-verbal signals e.g. 'Yes' can be shown by holding a palm out; 'No' can be shown by raising a hand or moving away.
- Allow a moment prior to each stage of an exercise for participants to check that they are happy to take part, for example by saying 'yes'.
- Keep reminding participants to take as much care as they can of their own needs, aiming to remain self-connected and to be in choice.
- Remind participants that if they do not want touch or are uncomfortable, they either step the Solo Zone, or say 'No', move away or find another way to express 'No'.
- Be willing to accept a participant's choice to say 'No' to touch for the entire duration of a session as a valid and dynamic participation. (For some, this could constitute a significant step in their journey towards healing around consent and touch. Please note: this is not the same as observing a session)
- Have an assistant to step in and out of partnerships as necessary.
- Step in to stop touch if you can see it happening without agreement and/or consent.

4. Additional reflections for Workshop Facilitators:

How do I find ways to invite enquiry around:

- what conditions in my sessions might make it more difficult for someone to identify and/or express their 'No' to touch, at any given moment?
- how I can stay humble and open to feedback?
- what I am not seeing?
- how I can welcome the stories and experiences of those whose social conditioning may be different from mine?
- how I can stay accountable and transparent in my role as a facilitator, with both the power and authority that I have, and the power and authority that is projected onto me as "experts".
- how I can I review the sessions I offer (am I in a peer circle? do I have supervision or mentoring?)
- my relevant training and insurance for the practice I am wanting to share. Am I connected to a professional body to support my ongoing development? eg. 5 rhythms, biodanza, movement medicine, partner yoga, contact improvisation, biodynamic breathwork and trauma release etc

5. Additional suggestions and reflections for Camp/Event facilitators (people responsible for holding the event)

- Recognise that on residential events such as summer camps, participants are stepping into an arena where interactions of a more complex and personal nature are likely to occur.
- Ask the questions at the beginning of planning, and building them into the design and risk assessment of the event
 - Who is the most vulnerable among us?
 - How do we gather so it is safe for the most vulnerable among us?
 - What information would it support event participants to share before the event, so we can consider this
- Clearly indicate in promotional materials that touch might be explored in some workshops
- Prepare and support participants by exploring at the beginning of the event, themes such as choice, connecting to needs on a moment to moment basis, saying 'No", and saying 'Yes"
- Encourage offerings that will support participants to connect to their needs eg 'living energy of needs' work.
- Encourage offerings that build greater awareness around consent eg Betty Martin's Wheel of Consent
- Facilitate and create group agreements about how you are going to respond to inevitable conflicts or when you are out of balance with each other. Seek support from the Conflict Transformation Weave for ways of doing this.
- Have awareness that it's impossible to make an event completely safe for everybody or meet everybody's needs all the time. It *is* possible to take time to think and plan in advance (like taking on board the suggestions in this document).
- Have the intention to pay attention to everybody's needs, seek connection, to listen to feedback, and be open to change.

Related research:

This research paper helps gain understanding around the frustration 'Why didn't you just say no?'

When Not Saying NO Does Not Mean Yes: Psychophysiological Factors Involved in Date Rape

Stephen W. Porges, PhD,¹ and Erik Peper, PhD²

¹University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC ²San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA

Keywords: verbal consent, evolutionary physiology, polyvagal theory