

Nonviolent communication for conflict management in interpersonal relationships in the healthcare workplace

Comunicação não violenta para gerenciamento de conflitos nas relações de trabalho na saúde

Comunicación no violenta para la gestión de conflictos en las relaciones laborales del sector sanitario.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To reflect on Nonviolent Communication for the prevention and resolution of conflicts in healthcare workplace relations.

Development: The discussion is grounded in references to conflict management and communication practices in the professional healthcare context, with an emphasis on the Nonviolent Communication method. In environments marked by urgent demands, human suffering, and long hours, Nonviolent Communication emerges as a promising strategy for transforming the relational culture, fostering cooperation, mutual respect, and the development of healthier and more sustainable professional relations.

Concluding Remarks: In the face of emotional strain and recurring conflicts in healthcare workplace relations, Nonviolent Communication presents itself as a viable, human-centered, and strategic alternative capable of strengthening interpersonal relations, promoting the well-being of healthcare professionals, and contributing to the creation of more collaborative, respectful, and resilient work environments. Its application can positively impact the quality of care provided, encouraging communication practices that value empathy, mutual understanding, and the peaceful and constructive resolution of conflicts.

Descriptors: Communications; Conflict Management; Interpersonal Relations; Health Personnel; Empathy.

RESUMO

Objetivo: Refletir sobre a Comunicação Não Violenta para a prevenção e a resolução de conflitos nas relações de trabalho em saúde. **Desenvolvimento:** A discussão apoia-se em referenciais sobre gestão de conflitos e práticas comunicacionais no contexto profissional da saúde, com ênfase no método da Comunicação Não Violenta. Em ambientes marcados por demandas urgentes, sofrimento humano e longas jornadas, a Comunicação Não Violenta revela-se como estratégia promissora para transformar a cultura relacional, favorecendo a cooperação, o respeito mútuo e a construção de vínculos profissionais mais saudáveis e sustentáveis.

Considerações Finais: Frente ao desgaste emocional e aos conflitos recorrentes nas relações de trabalho em saúde, a Comunicação Não Violenta apresenta-se como alternativa viável, humanizada e estratégica, capaz de fortalecer os vínculos interpessoais, promover o bem-estar dos profissionais e contribuir para a criação de ambientes laborais mais colaborativos, respeitosos e resilientes. Sua aplicação pode impactar positivamente a qualidade do cuidado prestado, incentivando práticas comunicacionais que valorizem a empatia, a compreensão mútua e a resolução de conflitos de forma pacífica e construtiva.

Descritores: Comunicação; Gestão de Conflitos; Relações Interpessoais; Profissionais de Saúde; Empatia

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RESUMEN

Objetivo: Reflexionar sobre la Comunicación No Violenta para la prevención y resolución de conflictos en las relaciones laborales del sector salud. **Desarrollo:** El análisis se basa en referencias sobre gestión de conflictos y prácticas de comunicación en el contexto profesional de la salud, con énfasis en el método de Comunicación No Violenta. En entornos marcados por exigencias urgentes, sufrimiento humano y largas jornadas laborales, la Comunicación No Violenta se revela como una estrategia prometedora para transformar la cultura relacional, favoreciendo la cooperación, el respeto mutuo y la construcción de vínculos profesionales más saludables y sostenibles. **Observaciones Finales:** Ante la tensión emocional y los conflictos recurrentes en las relaciones laborales del sector salud, la Comunicación No Violenta se presenta como una alternativa viable, humanizada y estratégica, capaz de fortalecer los vínculos interpersonales, promover el bienestar de los profesionales y contribuir a la creación de entornos laborales más colaborativos, respetuosos y resilientes. Su aplicación puede impactar positivamente en la calidad de la atención brindada, fomentando prácticas de comunicación que valoran la empatía, la comprensión mutua y la resolución pacífica y constructiva de conflictos.

Descriptores: Comunicación; Gestión de Conflictos; Relaciones Interpersonales; Profesionales de Salud; Empatía.

Highlights

1. Nonviolent Communication can contribute to the prevention and resolution of conflicts in workplace relationships within the healthcare sector.
2. Empathy, active listening, and non-judgmental communication foster more collaborative and respectful professional relationships.
3. Nonviolent Communication is based on four elements: observation, feeling, need, and request.
4. Training in Nonviolent Communication can enhance professional well-being and contribute to healthier work environments.
5. The practice of Nonviolent Communication fosters more conscious responses to conflict, reducing automatic reactions and strengthening cooperation in workplace relationships.

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Introduction

Human relations are becoming increasingly complex and conflictual. In the healthcare workplace, these tensions are exacerbated by the unique challenges inherent in the nature of the work; consequently, professionals in this field are constantly exposed to the fine line between life and death, health and illness, and are required to provide important and urgent care and guidance. In addition to external demands from patients, institutions, and society, these workers must manage their own expectations and frustrations, which often disrupts their work environment. In other words, they are exposed to various stressors that can affect their well-being, potentially leading them to exhibit behaviors such as isolation or a desire to quit their jobs².

For this reason, the routine in this field requires emotional intelligence and self-control, both when providing patient care and when interacting with the team.³ The approach is multidisciplinary, and various fields of knowledge can provide specific solutions that, when combined, contribute significantly to improving the whole, that is, to bringing it ever closer to an ideal set of working conditions and relations. Certain characteristics of contemporary society make harmonious interaction more difficult in all settings, and this is most evident in areas related to human health. Individualism, impatience, and the polarization of positions – whether political, religious, moral, or ethical – further hinder mutual understanding among people. All of this is reflected in daily actions. Therefore, being attentive and open to diversity facilitates connections between individuals, and effective communication can build the necessary bridge for fostering relationships.

In the book *Nonviolent Communication (NVC)*, the technique was developed as a means of resolving conflicts amicably, based on the therapeutic methods of psychologist Carl Rogers. The aim was to facilitate mutual understanding and rapid, nonviolent communication among individuals in hostile environments⁴. In light of the above, the objective of this study was to examine Nonviolent Communication as a means of preventing and resolving conflicts in healthcare workplace relations.

Development

This is a theoretical study based on a literature review of Nonviolent Communication as an effective tool for the prevention and consensual resolution of conflicts in healthcare workplace relations, considering the emotional and organizational impacts stemming from complex, high-pressure work environments. The discussion is grounded in references regarding conflict management and communication practices within the professional healthcare context, with an emphasis on the Nonviolent Communication method, and is also anchored in the authors' experience with the theme. The main elements discussed were therefore: – workplace relations in the healthcare field and their complexities: how to achieve well-being in interpersonal relations; and – the nature of nonviolent communication: difficulties in interpersonal relations and their causes.

Workplace relations in the healthcare field and their complexities: how to achieve well-being in interpersonal relations

Workplace relations in the healthcare field are shaped by the unique challenges inherent in dealing daily with human frailty and the sensitive nature of the work. In the relationship between healthcare professionals and patients who are frail and vulnerable due to illness, teams find themselves in tension-filled situations. The causes are wide-ranging and involve challenging emotional issues; high demands imposed by the nature of the situation itself, by institutions, and by the professionals themselves; long work hours; lack of resources and personnel; exposure to biological, physical, and psychological risks; and, with the growing judicialization of healthcare, professional ethical and legal risks, among others⁵.

Concurrently with these particularities, the mental health crisis is a global phenomenon that affects a wide range of fields. However, even greater consideration should be directed toward healthcare professionals. There is a direct link between the workplace environment and the emotional well-being of workers; since while the workplace affects them, it is also adversely affected when its professionals experience significant emotional distress that goes beyond daily hassles.

Promoting a harmonious work environment means fostering healthy interpersonal relations, which have an impact on a range of contexts: from a decline in the quality of patient care and increased exposure to the risks of errors and harm, to the personal and emotional well-being of healthcare workers. Among the essential approaches to improving the living and working conditions of healthcare professionals is the implementation of resources, conditions, and interpersonal skills as a means of overcoming tensions in the face of the field's adversities. Empathy, active listening, and connection are some of the approaches that can be cultivated through Nonviolent Communication⁴.

NVC is more than just a way of interacting; it is a skill to be learned, refined, and applied. Most training and professional development programs in the healthcare field focus primarily on technical skills, while communication and interpersonal skills, whose importance is growing steadily, are often overlooked.

For this purpose, an internal shift is needed in the pursuit of quality, whether in communication, behavior, emotional control, or interpersonal relations. Above all, differences must be overcome. It would be ideal if all people were equally capable, with identical discursive backgrounds and the same emotional disposition to engage in this communication naturally. However, what is known is that human relationships have never been simple — and never will be. Where there are people, there are conflicts.

An individual is always shaped by a variety of factors. In other words, no one is ever simple: their history, memories, values, religion, ideology, and everything that connects them to others comprise their essence and influence their outlook on life. And, of course, the way people communicate is affected by these influences⁶.

Broadening perspectives on others can be a way to improve human relations. In the healthcare field, given its complexity, this approach fosters more humane, friendly, harmonious, cooperative, and collaborative relations. People's vulnerability can lead them into situations bordering on violence; therefore, it is essential to address the theme of Nonviolent Communication. Training sessions, lectures, study groups, and other similar tools are effective ways for healthcare workers to be heard, supported, and empowered to develop greater empathy toward their patients and colleagues.

The nature of nonviolent communication: difficulties in interpersonal relations and their causes

Nonviolent Communication is more than just a way of communicating; it is a way of relating to others developed by Marshall Rosenberg, who, having grown up in a hostile environment, set out to develop the method with the aim of improving interpersonal relations, so that responses to situations experienced in life would not be automatic reactions, but rather conscious ones, based on perception, feeling, and need. As the author himself suggests: “NVC helps us connect with others and with ourselves, allowing natural compassion to flourish.”⁴. It guides us in reshaping the way we express ourselves and listen to others by focusing on four key areas: **what we observe, what we feel, what we need, and what we ask for** to enrich our lives. [...]”⁴ (highlighted by the authors)

Nonviolent Communication advocates that in order to communicate compassionately, a person must place themselves in a state of presence at both instances: when expressing themselves and when listening with empathy, which is understood as a respectful understanding of what others are undergoing¹. At each of these moments, it is important to focus on four elements: a) observation: first **observe the situation** as a whole, without judgment or value statements, focusing on the facts, on factual description; next b) **identify the feeling**: that is, what this situation evokes, such as sadness, anxiety, joy, or concern; then, c) identify the **need** given the context: for example, further explanations, understanding, acceptance, and d) **make a request** to the other: expressing yourself and addressing each of the previous points, describing the situation itself, communicating your feelings and needs, and finally expressing your request: for example, scheduling a new meeting, taking a specific action, or implementing a plan — all permeated with a prospective vision and attitude of cooperation and collaboration for the benefit of the whole and of everyone.

Therefore, empathy and active listening are essential parts of Nonviolent Communication. It is necessary to be free of judgment, with a clear mind, and listening wholeheartedly. This is only possible with two key elements: willingness and training⁴.

The desire to change and improve cannot be achieved effortlessly; it stems from daily choices and attitudes, even in the midst of the chaos of daily activities, concerns, and demands in the healthcare setting. Training is an essential tool for achieving the desired empathy and assertive communication. Some people find it easier, but most struggle to maintain a calm demeanor under pressure. That is why it is essential to be open to learning new techniques. We live in a learning society; the courage to fight and face challenges makes people stronger and more resilient.

Social changes, especially the fast-paced and demanding nature of daily life, require a focus on human relations and the development of new communication skills.

The five axioms of pragmatic communication, which are essential for understanding human relations and predicting the effects of interactions, are: “1. It is impossible not to communicate — everything communicates, including silence; 2. All communication has a content aspect and a relational aspect — beyond what is said, there is an impact on the way the interlocutors relate to one another; 3. The nature of a relation depends on the punctuation of communicational sequences — the way one communicates tends to define the other’s response, and awareness of the tone of the conversation can shift it from hostility to collaboration; 4. Human beings communicate both digitally and analogically — what is said and, above all, how it is said; nonverbal language is more significant than verbal language; 5. Interactions are symmetrical or complementary — based on equality (horizontality) or difference (verticality), requiring a communicational approach suitable to each context”⁷.

Therefore, in communication, individuals cannot focus solely on the topic at hand, whether it be a request, a need, or a disagreement. Communicators must be attentive to everything that lies between the lines. Individuals enter relations bringing with them everything they are, but not everything is revealed. One can think of it metaphorically as an iceberg: what is seen is only a fraction of the whole; the largest and deepest part is hidden, concealed, imperceptible to the eye.

An individual carries scars, memories, and feelings that they do not wish to reveal, but which may surface at the most sensitive moments – especially in confrontational or conflictual situations⁸.

In this sense, workplace relations – where disagreements are common – require a closer look at the bonds and the ruptures between individuals. Nothing is so obvious; each person has multiple layers, some more hidden than others, and when these are exposed, they can hurt and violate feelings, leading to aggression.

It is necessary to have the internal disposition to adopt certain new attitudes in communication, such as, for example, careful use of language, compassion for others, non-judgment, and the practice of empathy. In contrast, alienating communication – the type that distances us from others – makes moral judgments, draws comparisons, and attempts to impose desires through demands and authoritarianism. As can be seen: “[...] One form of communication that alienates us from life is the use of moral judgments that imply that anyone who does not act in line with our values is wrong or evil. Another form of this type of communication is making comparisons, which can obstruct compassion both for others and for ourselves. Life-alienating communication also hinders the understanding that each of us is responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Communicating desires in the form of demands is yet another characteristic of language that impedes compassion.”⁴

Therefore, several attitudes that hinder mutual understanding in workplace relations can be listed: I- moral judgments that imply that those who do not act in line with one's own values are wrong or bad; II- making comparisons, which can hinder compassion; III- blaming others for one's own thoughts, feelings, and actions; IV- communicating desires in the form of demands is yet another characteristic of language that hinders compassion.

The understanding of communication dynamics and techniques, initially practiced intentionally, tends to become second nature over time and contributes to the improvement of human relations, whether in the workplace or in professionals' personal lives; the effects become systemic, such that a change in behavior by one team member, for example, impacts and alters the others. The difference lies in the nature of the communication itself, whether positive or negative. In this sense, the implementation of the Nonviolent Communication method aims precisely to adjust and improve human relationships through the way individuals communicate.

Concluding Remarks

Interpersonal relations and the challenges they present become even more pronounced in the healthcare workplace. This field highlights patients' vulnerability and the heightened responsibility of healthcare professionals.

Nonviolent (or assertive) communication is an effective way to bring harmony to this environment. For this purpose, it is necessary to view human beings as a whole – their history, their current circumstances, and their choices. In other words, the baggage they carry will be reflected in their attitudes and the way they communicate.

Finally, how can one improve communicability? By following the four steps of Nonviolent Communication (NVC): i – observe the situation, ii – express your feelings, iii – state your need, and iv – make your request.

However, keeping this in mind in the midst of daily demands is no easy task. It requires conscious effort and practice until it becomes second nature in professional relations. For this reason, courses, lectures, or training programs for healthcare professionals are essential for fostering more harmonious relationships in the workplace.

Authors' Contribution

Tacla, RT: Conception and design of the study; Data acquisition; Data analysis and interpretation; Drafting the manuscript; Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content. Bermejo AMB: Conception and design of the study; Data acquisition; Data analysis and interpretation; Drafting the manuscript; Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content. Buzalaf MN: Conception and design of the study; Data acquisition; Data analysis and interpretation; Drafting the manuscript; Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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