

# Sample Dialogue: Under NonViolent Communication Principles

## **Participants:**

Michelle, a 26 year old black woman, graduate student in economics

Kathy, a 33 year old white woman who works in a flower shop in downtown Minneapolis

Mediator : A 46 year old white woman who has been involved in Anti-Racism workshops for 10 years

Each is asked to talk about how they feel about the events of the last week.

Michelle: I've been very upset. I have not slept well. I keep seeing that video of George Floyd's death over and over in my mind, and I'm outraged. It's traumatizing because I personally know a family who lost a family member in a police killing. My brothers have been harassed by the police and I have been stalked by police in a few instances. So many of my relatives and friends are behind bars. I see the whole police system as at war on the black community, and that this continues in spite of all the work we've done, just exhausts me. I am literally afraid when I go out the house that some police officer is going to take it in their mind that they don't like how I'm looking at them, and start harassing me, and next thing you know it's gonna be me on the evening news, dead on the ground under somebody's knee or foot. I am sorry I can't... (cries).

Mediator: Michelle, can you try to identify what some of your feelings are now?

Michelle: Well as I said I been upset. I'm angry. I feel traumatized...

Mediator: Michelle I want to pause you a moment now, traumatized is not a feeling, it's an evaluation. Take a look at the feelings list and see if you can identify more feelings from there.

Michelle: Okay well I'm not just angry I'm furious. I'm outraged. I'm horrified, repulsed, stressed out, I'm heavy-hearted, I feel hopeless, distraught, disturbed. Also terrified afraid.

Mediator: Thank you Michelle. Kathy, can you begin by reflecting back what you heard Michelle say? How she's feeling?

Kathy: I heard that Michelle is really angry, and actually I am too!.

Mediator: Kathy, let's first focus on reflecting what you heard Michelle say before you start talking about your own feelings. You'll get a chance to do that pretty soon.

Kathy: Okay well I heard Michelle say she's not just angry she is furious and outraged. Also sad and heavy-hearted, depressed, distraught and fearful.

Mediator: Michelle, did Kathy hear you correctly? Is there anything she missed?

Michelle: I'm horrified and disturbed. And not just fearful, but terrified.

Kathy: You feel horrified and disturbed too. And your fear is more than fear it's terror, you are suggesting.

Michelle: Not suggesting, *saying*!!

Kathy: Okay, saying!

Mediator: Kathy, can you now guess what some of Michelle's needs might be based on how she said she feels?

Kathy: Well she said she feels terror, so I would guess she needs safety and security. She says she feels distraught, so I would think she has a need for comfort. I also get the sense she has a need to be heard and to experience justice.

Mediator: Thank you Kathy. Michelle, do those sound like needs you have now?

Michelle: Yes. But the justice and safety is not for me only, it's for George Floyd and all black people.

Mediator: So Michelle are you saying you want justice and safety for your whole community?

Michelle: Yes, for all black people in America and in the world.

Mediator: Michelle, would you be willing to make a request or requests of Kathy, what would you like to ask her for?

Michelle: I want to ask you all to stop being racist, and to help bring down this racist system that's killing black men.

Mediator: Michelle, try to make a request asking for what you'd like Kathy to do rather than what you'd like her not to do. That will help be more clear. Also please address just what you want from Kathy, since you're only speaking to a group but just one person.

Michelle: I want to ask you to be an ally, an ally to the black community. I would ask you to help us with our cause, and to protest with us, and speak for us, and ask for the police to be dismantled. Talk to the mayor and ask him to abolish the police and hire more black people in government. Sign our petition and I'd like to ask you to get educated about anti racism work so that we can bring down this whole racist system. I have some books I would like you to read on antiracism, I would request you read those.

Mediator: Kathy, do you have a response to Michelle's requests?

Kathy: I....I....can't really... Michelle I have to be honest with you. This is hard to say, I know you feel distraught and angry, scared and ....

Michelle: ...Terrorized! ...

Kathy: Yes, terrorized....but I have to say....I do not honestly think George Floyd's death had anything to do with me, or with white people, or with a system of racism.

Michelle: I **can't believe** I'm hearing this! Did you **NOT** just hear me saying everything I just **said** here! ?? Did you **not** see that man his life squashed out of him on the video?

Mediator: Michelle, can I pause you a moment while we let Kathy respond to your requests? You'll have a chance to speak after she finishes.

Kathy; I'm sorry Michelle, but I think this was the result not of racism but of a bad police officer or officers. Actually I don't know fully what to think about the police officer's motivations because I can't make assumptions about those. I can't assume there was racism involved....

Michelle: (rolls eyes) OMG!

Kathy: ...I also don't believe there is a whole huge system of racism throughout the city and the nation and world. Sorry, Michelle, I see you are upset, but I just don't believe that. So, because I don't believe that, I really can't help you with any of your requests. No, I am not going to read your anti-racism books, and I'm not going to speak to the mayor and ask for the police to be dismantled. I think that's actually a really stupid idea. And as far as being an ally to your community....I am open to the idea, but I'd like to know more of what that means and what you want. I mean if you're going to roll your eyes at me when I have a different opinion or disagree with what you say....that doesn't really make me feel safe.

Mediator: Michelle, do you want to respond?

Michelle: I really don't know why I'm doin' this, listening to this crap. These white people never understand what's really goin' on. They have the privilege to ignore racism even when they are seeing it right on the TV screen!. They are so ignorant, ...really Kathy you are being so hurtful!

Mediator: Michelle, instead of judging Kathy would you be willing to say how you feel about what Kathy said in reply to your requests? Look at the feelings list, tell us how you feel.

Michelle: Well I feel FURIOUS! As in F-U-R-I-O-U-S! Outraged. I feel hurt. Disappointed, distressed, enraged.

Mediator: Thank you Michelle. Now before we get back to exploring more about your request that Kathy consider being an ally to your community, let's take some time now for Kathy to tell her story and say how she feels and have you listen.

Mediator: Kathy, do you want to say what happened for you this week and how you feel?

Kathy: Well...I felt horrified when I saw the video of George Floyd's death. Over the last week....it's been hard. The riots were bad in our area, and so my employer shut down the business and boarded up the store. I had to stay home. In spite of the store being boarded up, rioters broke the plywood down and went in and destroyed the place. It was looted and then set on fire. I was feeling really scared. The police were completely unable to protect the area... I am upset too because now that the business is gone I'm out of a job and...

Michelle: You're upset about a **job** when someone was **murdered**?!!!

Kathy: I didn't say that...

Michelle: White people get upset when their **property** is threatened, meanwhile, black people are being **killed, murdered!!!** (shaking)

Mediator: Michelle, it may be hard for you to hear Kathy, and you'll get a chance to say why that is. But before asking you to explain how you were impacted by what Kathy said, can you reflect what you heard her say, as she did for you earlier?

Michelle: Well I heard Kathy say she upset about some plywood and flowers. (rolls eyes).

Mediator: Kathy, did Michelle hear you?

Kathy: No. I felt Michelle was mocking me, not hearing me.

Mediator: Would you like to repeat what you said so Michelle could hear better?

Kathy: I don't feel like repeating myself...I'm wondering if Michelle is interested in hearing me at all.

Mediator: Kathy, do you want to ask Michelle if she is willing to hear you?

Kathy: Okay...Michelle, I listened to you earlier...are you willing to listen to me now?

Michelle: Okay!

Kathy: (repeats story)

Mediator: Michelle?

Michelle: Kathy is upset because her store was looted and she lost a job. She feels scared.

Mediator: Kathy is that right? Did Michelle hear you?

Kathy: Yes.

Mediator: Now Michelle would you like to talk about how you were impacted by what Kathy said?

Michelle: **Yes.** You know Kathy, what I feel, when I walk by that **police station**, the one you say they didn't do enough **to protect** you and your employer???? I am **traumatized**. Thoughts come to me of **genocide**. I'm seeing my ancestors when their **bodies hung on trees**. That's what I'm goin' to bed with these last few days. So that is what I think when white people they are talking about a **flower** business honey, the plywood that come down! You see? You get it? It's hard to care about that!! You know????!! That is what is different, between me and you, and it gets **tiring**, to not have that difference known. I am **exhausted**.

Mediator: Michelle, can you summarize your feelings?

Michelle: I felt angry, distressed, hurt, distraught, outraged. And exhausted, totally exhausted.

Mediator: Kathy, did you want to talk about the impact upon you of what Michelle shared?

Kathy: I get the sense that it's hard for Michelle to take in my experience. To listen. There's a lot of judgment and comparison she's expressed in one way or another towards me. Michelle, I really feel like you are diminishing my experience and really my life in comparison to yours. No, I wasn't murdered, nor was my employer, but neither were you. White men have also been killed by police: this isn't about race, but you are insisting it is, and trying to use that against me. Honestly, I feel like you are exploiting George Floyd's death to drive a wedge between us, and to diminish my life in comparison to yours.

Mediator: Michelle, would you like to guess what Kathy is feeling and needing?

Michelle: (rolls eyes) I think Kathy is feeling fragile, must be white fragility and privilege...

Mediator: Michelle, those are judgments, please try to avoid using judgments, look at the list of feelings.

Michelle: Kathy feels detached, disengaged and distant. Vengeful. Also guilty.

Mediator: Kathy, is that correct?

Kathy: no, not at all! Michelle!! That's not nice. I don't feel detached, I feel upset. Not distant, I am right here. I feel hurt and disheartened, angry. Indignant. Actually Michelle I don't think you see: I want to feel more connected to you, but I feel like you aren't allowing that. You asked me if I want to be an ally to your community, but how can I do that when I feel like you don't really care about my life? Or if you put up walls between yourself and I? Or say contemptuous things?

Mediator: What most upset you about what Michelle said?

Kathy: She used the word "white fragility" and privilege. Where is the privilege? I'm a daughter of a janitor who never went to college, and Michelle is in graduate school.

Mediator: Michelle?

Michelle: Kathy, you don't see how your **privilege** protects you and allows you to focus on smaller issues like property, and not have to be **dragged** into one tragedy after another, one **death** after another, all because laws exist to protect **white people property**? ?? The problem is, the differences between us that I feel like you are not seeing at all. I'm living here continually traumatized in an atmosphere of **death and imprisonment**, and you're talking about protecting flowers! Listen to yourself, woman!! Do you know how many black men are in prison??? Those that don't get straight out killed by the cops!! They all in prison.

Mediator: Kathy, how are you impacted by what Michelle said? Do you have any feelings you want to name?

Kathy: I'm hurt by what Michelle said. Michelle I feel like you are making me into a doll figure in a story you're telling, not letting me be a real, live actual person. I feel like you only want me to exist to fit into your story, and all my feelings, my needs, my life needs to be subordinated to your story. IT seems narcissistic actually.

Mediator: Kathy, can you avoid using evaluative or judgmental words and try to talk about how you feel? Narcissistic is an accusation.

Kathy: I feel depressed and hurt.

Mediator: is there anything you'd like to ask Michelle?

Kathy: Michelle, how can you ask me to be an ally to you if you don't show that you care about my life and my feelings?

Michelle: It's not that I don't care about your feelings, it's just that I feel hurt and angry that you don't understand our differences.

Mediator: Michelle, maybe you can help Kathy by naming some of those differences that you would like her to understand.

Michelle: Well for one thing police see me differently. I cannot go anywhere without it being seen that I am black. Whereas you don't have to think about your race at all. When the police seein' you they don't know if your father was a professor or a janitor. They just know you **white**. And me, my father might be a congressman, they don't see that, all they know, all they see, I'm **black**!! And **that's** how they done George Floyd, and he now in a casket!!

Kathy: That's not true. That I don't have to think about my race.

Mediator: Can you elaborate Kathy? And tell us how you feel.

Kathy: I feel hurt. And angry. I feel like I can't tell my own story at all here. I've gotten messages from Michelle that what happened to me and my employer's shop in the riots, is less important than what she saw happen to someone else on TV, that my suffering is less than hers, and now she tells me that I don't have to think about my race. Michelle, how do you think I feel when I go home in my neighborhood and I'm one of the few white people living there? You think people don't stare at me? You think I'm not made aware that I'm a different color than most of my neighbors?

Mediator: Michelle?

Michelle: I didn't realize you live in a black neighborhood. I'm surprised. Did **not** expect that, girl.

Kathy: Well, there are other things about me that might surprise you. (Smiles)

Mediator: I think I just noticed one of the first moments of warmth in this dialogue between you two. How did that make you feel to hear that Michelle?

Michelle: I felt kind of happy. Amazed, surprised. I say even maybe somewhat renewed.

*(dialogue continues for a while longer)*

Later in the dialogue, the mediator worked with both Michelle and Kathy on the requests they could make of each other, attempting to help them make some kind of request that the other could agree to. Kathy was unable to agree to any of Michelle's original requests.

When her turn came to make requests of Michelle, Kathy asked for Michelle to avoid using the term "white privilege" in regard to all white people. The mediator reminded Kathy that this was a negative request and asked her if she could frame it in the positive. Kathy asked if Michelle would be willing to use terms relating to comparative advantage in some situations rather than use the term "white privilege". Michelle could not agree with Kathy's request.

From there, the mediator helped them refine their requests and try making different requests.

Eventually, Kathy was able to agree to Michelle's request that she sign a petition to ask for civilian reviews of police use of force in Minneapolis and beyond. She was also able to agree to Michelle's request that she be an ally to the black community, in terms of willingness to read certain books and information Michelle suggested. But she would not agree to participate in protests, put up a Black Lives Matter sign, or support BLM. Michelle agreed to Kathy's counter-request that she be given freedom to be an ally in ways that felt right for her, and that she would not be criticized for having her own boundaries.

Michelle for her part was able to agree to try to be more empathic to Kathy's experience and listen to Kathy explaining how she felt hurt by Michelle's dismissiveness of her experience. Michelle also agreed to Kathy's request to allow people to not support BLM without needing to condemn them as racist. Michelle also agreed to hear Kathy's concerns about her use of phrases like "white privilege", "white

fear”, and “white women’s tears”, without promising she wouldn’t use these phrases, but just being open to hear Kathy’s feedback about terms like those being used.

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UNPACKING afterwards:

In the beginning, both Michelle and Kathy were unsure if they wanted to participate in the NVC dialogue.

As the dialogue proceeded there were also points where each of them felt like leaving. But they stuck it out.

Kathy was quite amazed and grateful that the NVC process gave her support to talk about her own feelings and needs, as she’d been used to those being overlooked every time a conversation about these issues arose. As a result of the support she received from the mediator, she was much more assertive in expressing her own views than she normally would be. In most situations with black activists she’d learned to say nothing about what she really felt or thought as she was used to being immediately labelled a racist or silenced.

She was also amazed that in the end Michelle actually began listening to her, because her experience up until now in talking about this issue with black activists had been that they were not tolerant of her views and tended to end up angry with her.

As a result of feeling that Michelle finally did listen to her, Kathy found herself more open to hear more from Michelle, even though she could not agree with Michelle that Floyd’s death was a result of “systemic racism” as Michelle believed.

Nor did Kathy ever show any interest in working on anti-racism causes. But she also felt heartened now, that when she saw black activists and protesters, she didn’t have to worry that they all would hate her and not listen to her, as she’d now had a positive experience of connection with one.

Michelle began quite angry with Kathy, but found that when asked to talk about her own feelings, this helped her get focused. She left the dialogue feeling a combination of things. On the one hand she was disappointed that Kathy never did acknowledge the issue of systemic racism and even denied racism was involved in Floyd’s death. But on the other hand she found that by continually being focused to talk about their feelings and how they were impacted by what each other said, she did get to voice her disappointment and hurt, and so felt heard even if she did not get the outcome she’d have desired. After having an experience of warmth arise in the dialogue, Michelle hoped that Kathy would actually become an ally to the black community, so she was disappointed that this didn’t happen, but she realized she didn’t feel a lingering resentment. Michelle felt that some good had happened in that she’d learned that someone could disagree with her over major issues, and she didn’t have to be angry at them.

