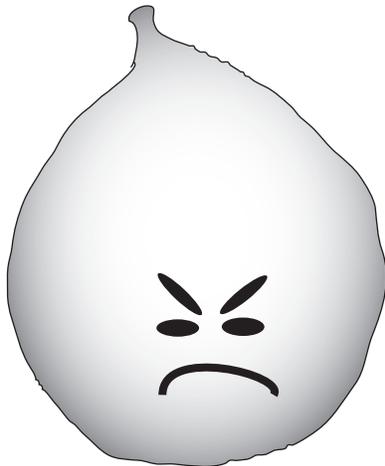


How Nonviolent Communication Solves Arguments

By Rick Longinotti

When he teaches conflict resolution in elementary schools, Jeff Caplan brings a number of props. One of them is a balloon with an angry face painted on it. Jeff holds the balloon over a child's head, demonstrating the anger inside when I child feels slighted. When the child feels understood---or comes to understand the other child's point of view, the balloon deflates.



It's the same with adults. When we're angry, it's either in frustration at not getting our needs met (like the need for understanding), or resentment because we're telling ourselves a negative story about our partner. That story can go something like:

- "He/she doesn't care enough to ..."
- "He/she never listens to me."
- "He/she's never satisfied."
- "He/she's too sensitive."

And so on.

One of the biggest mistakes we make in couples relationships is giving up our power to deflate our anger. We give up our power when we place the responsibility on the other party. "He needs to learn how to be more sensitive to my needs". Or, "She needs to go to a therapist to work on her stuff". Our power lies in transforming ourselves, not our partner.

We transform our anger by noticing the blaming thoughts. One of my favorite blaming

thoughts about my partner has been, "She's too controlling." When I'm conscious that the thought is a blaming thought, I know I need to look deeper. When I feel defensive, what am I defending? I'm defending my autonomy. Because I am telling myself that when she reacts strongly to a situation, I'm going to lose. I have forgotten that I have power in the situation. No one can make me do anything I don't want to do. I have forgotten that for major decisions, my partner and I are committed to being in consensus.

With restored calm now that I know that she's not going to "get her way", I can transform my judgment that "she's so controlling" to "she really feels strongly about this". I can turn my attention to why---what need of hers is motivating her effort?

At the core of every couple relationship is the desire of each person for the well being of the other. This desire gets pretty well obscured in the midst of an argument. Each party has a grievance and really wants the other party to see their point of view. But each is too distressed to empathize with the other. "Listen to me!" "No, you listen to me!"

The Nonviolent Communication method unblocks this logjam when one of the partners is able to empathize with him/herself. Subsequently that partner is able to empathize with the other person. When the other person gets the understanding he/she wanted, he/she predictably feels relief from the distress.

The self-empathy process consists of two parts. The first is what Marshall Rosenberg calls, watching *The Jackal Show*, naming the flood of blaming thoughts after a carnivorous animal. The *Jackal Show* is Rosenberg's version of the Buddhist idea of observing the

feelings and thoughts that take over our brain. With practice, we can recognize the kind of blaming thoughts that we get over and over again. (This may be self-blame, e.g., “I really *am* insensitive”, as well as blame directed at the partner, “You are so stubborn”.)

The recognition of familiar blaming thinking can be helpful in the next step of self-empathy, which is finding the unmet need at the root of our uncomfortable emotional state. Our needs, as understood in the NVC model, are the most basic elements that all human beings require--things like understanding, self-respect, autonomy, etc. When we become conscious of what we need, we are less distressed. There is a calmness in just getting clear about what's behind our desperate efforts, and in remembering that we have better ways to get the need met. We are more likely to get our needs met when we cease trying to motivate the other person with our angry responses, or comments intended to produce guilt. For there are many strategies to get what we need.

When we have discovered what our needs are, we have a choice as to the next step to take with our partner. We could decide to express ourselves, using the NVC model, making our need known and making a request of the other person. But most likely if the other person is feeling distressed, we are better off putting our need on the shelf for awhile and listening to our partner with empathy. We know there is time to come back to expressing our need. Empathizing with our partner serves our own needs as well as our partner's. It helps us overcome our blaming thinking that causes us so much grief. For much of our thinking that produces hurt and shame has to do with beliefs such as “My partner disrespects me,” or “He/She doesn't care enough about my needs”. When we listen with empathy, we find the

deeper motivation of the other person behind their hard-to-hear language. Rosenberg says that with “giraffe ears on” (his metaphor for conscious awareness) we never hear criticism, ridicule, etc. Rather, we hear the pain of the other person's desperate attempt to get a need met.

The Empathetic Response

An empathetic response can be expressed in the form of an acknowledgment of our partner's feelings along with a guess at what he or she might be needing. For example, “Are you feeling angry because you're wanting to be understood?” Guessing at our partner's needs works better than asking, “What do you need?” The guess is an expression of care---of our extending ourselves to understand the other person. “What do you need?” doesn't reveal our own receptive attitude toward our partner, and he or she may mistrust our motivations in asking.

When we are able to understand our partner's basic needs, (along with honoring our own needs), the argument is on the road to resolution. The NVC process is elegantly simple, yet so hard to do. We have habits of defensiveness to overcome--- years of responding to blame and anger with our own. A helpful practice is to keep a journal or talk regularly with a friend about the kinds of things that push our button, and ways of responding that better meet our needs. . The other articles on this site attempt to illuminate some of the common areas of conflict and the needs that might be at the root of those conflicts, and use of self-empathy to arrive at an ability to empathize with our partner.