

# Partner Jackals

by Rick Longinotti



## Introduction: The Defensive Jackal

I'm irritated. Aviva took offense at something I said. My thought is, "She's always ready to think that I'm criticizing her."

I react defensively. "Calm down! I wasn't criticizing you."

We're playing one of our customary jackal games, called, "*You're Too Critical/You're Too Sensitive*". In the second round of the game, each of us tries to assign responsibility to the other for making our conversation turn sour. It's not so much that we want the other person to feel bad. (Unless the game goes on for long enough and we move into a second game, called *If I Retaliate, You'll Know How Bad It Feels*.) It's more about wanting to avoid feeling guilty for "ruining the conversation".

There's a way out of any jackal game. It starts with one person *remembering*. Remembering some truths that are hidden to our habitual way of thinking. One of those truths is, "I have power to not shame myself". Suppose my intention wasn't to criticize Aviva. But she thinks she heard a criticism, on account of our history, and is upset with me. I have the power to stay in a peaceful state of mind. I could empathize with how she is feeling and calmly let her know about my intentions. "Are you feeling irritated because you're thinking I'm criticizing you?" "Would you like to hear what my thinking was when I said that?"

What blocks me from staying serene is my old guilt/shame. I tell myself, "You've made her sensitive

to criticism. It's all the criticizing you've done to her over the years." I need to remember another forgotten truth, "Whatever I've said or done that I now regret was an attempt to meet a need". I now see that there are better ways to meet needs. At the time, the old ways seemed like the only ways. The emotion I feel when looking at my old mistakes is a sadness for the loss of opportunity to contribute to her happiness and to be happy myself. The sadness is mixed with a sweet self-forgiveness, a kind of "I once was lost, but now I'm found" gratitude and hopefulness. I now am more aware and can choose happiness. This is a far cry from guilt/shame---and makes me much more available to my partner.

Suppose my intentions weren't free of criticism. Suppose Aviva correctly sensed my disapproving attitude. This situation is more of a challenge for me. Still, I have the power to choose self-acceptance over guilt/shame. Reminded of my disapproving attitude, I can accept that my habit of Jackal thinking is still alive and well---and nothing to scold myself about. If I'm able to be kind to myself, I can actually look at what information the Jackal is telling me. It might be something about a need of mine that seems unfulfilled. For example, if I'm critical of Aviva for a purchase she just made, I might be needing some assurance about our financial situation---that my security is not threatened. Just becoming aware of my need it is often enough to feel better. When I am aware, for example, that Aviva's purchase triggers a fear about my financial security, I can honor myself for having a real need for security. I can remind myself that my security is not really at stake. That takes the anxiety out of any discussion we might then have about our budget.

Conscious familiarity with my habitual jackal thinking gives me more of a chance to resolve conflict with my partner. Jackal thinking often goes on below our level of conscious awareness. Becoming more aware of our thoughts is the goal of these articles. With conscious awareness of our habits of thought, we are far more powerful---we have the power to choose self-acceptance over shame, empathy over condemnation.

## How to Transform the Defensive Jackal

When we are feeling defensive, what are we defending? We're trying to fight against an image

of ourselves as *in the wrong, selfish, bad, defective in intelligence, etc.* The feeling that comes with the thought that *there is something wrong with us* is shame. We'll do most anything to avoid feeling shame. Our favorite tactic is to blame the other person.

We need to look with compassion on this tactic. It's goal is beautiful: to protect us from the idea that there is something wrong with us. Imagine if from the moment of early childhood, we were to submit without a fight to the idea that we are defective. How depressed we would be! But we did, and still do fight this very mistaken idea.

The fact that most of us have internalized jackal messages that there is something wrong with us means the tactic of blaming has not sufficiently protected us. Blaming accepts the jackal paradigm: that there *is* such a thing as a defective person. If that is so, the nagging insecurity remains, that "The fault lies in me".

Nonviolent Communication takes the view that we are not defective. We have a generous nature. The way Rosenberg puts it is, "Our favorite game is giving to others." What are known in the jackal paradigm as "character defects" are simply habits of thinking and acting that we have learned from our jackal culture. The habits are meant to fulfill some real needs, like getting ourselves companionship or self-acceptance.

So it makes no sense to accept as valid the judgments, criticism and blame that we receive. Nor do we accept the verdict of the jackals in our head that echo the negative message we just received. With a moment of *remembering*---of our true inner beauty-- - we can respond non-defensively, listening past the other person's words to hear their needs.

When we think of "communication skills" we think of how to express ourselves. But it starts with how to listen. How to never hear blame or criticism. How to hear instead the universal needs that motivate others.

This gives couples far more power than the when they are stuck in thinking that the other person has to change for them to be happy. "I can't take her criticism any more" is an expression signifying that the person has yet to discover his/her own power to

not hear criticism. My experience in discovering my own power has made my relationship more of an adventure. With an ability to avoid taking on blame, I can even find enjoyment in hearing complaints. Aviva and I have an agreement we call "Every little thing". That means we want to share the irritations we feel with each other, no matter how small. We wait until we're assured that the other person has their "giraffe ears" on, meaning that they are *remembering* their self-acceptance and will not take personally the jackal thoughts that we are about to say out loud. We are saying to our partner in effect, "I know this is jackal judgment, and I need help to get it out of my system." In the ensuing conversation we can hear more about our partner's intentions and that understanding helps us relinquish our defensiveness. The enjoyment is in untying knots that have been around for years.