

Where Do I Put My Attention: Life or Pain

NVC Chapter 13: Liberating Ourselves and Counseling Others

Session objectives: By the time you exit the room after 90 minutes, you will have...

1. Identified the feelings and needs connected to a sticky situation from your own life.
2. Described the beauty of one of your needs to a partner in your breakout room.

Lofty goals: A year from now, what audacious and inspiring thing will you be able to do?

1. Notice your jackal thoughts a little sooner and meet them with more curiosity.
2. Remember, in at least some hard moments, that there's beauty in what you're longing for – not just lack.
3. Pause more often before reacting, and ask yourself: Where is my attention right now?

Breakout Room Activity #1: Stimulus

In NVC, a “stimulus” is the specific event or situation that triggers a reaction in you. Think of a recurring situation — one you have worked on before but that keeps coming back. The stickier, the better. Write it down as concretely as possible.

Breakout Room Activity #2:

Today, one person will have time to process their situation as the Player. The others will support.

Breakout Room Roles:

1. **Player:** Explores and processes their own situation.
2. **Facilitator:** Walks the Player through steps 1–11 of the worksheet.
3. **Empathy supporters:**
 - Silent witnessing: Listen with a quiet mind and an open heart, listening deeply with your whole being. When your own thoughts come up, gently let them go, returning to presence.
 - Offering support: When invited, name feelings and needs you imagine the Player might have, using the provided sheet as a guide.

Welcoming the Jackal Show

“Jackal” is NVC shorthand for inner thoughts, judgments, blame, or criticism — the inner voice.

Listen to your thinking:

1. **Embrace the “jackal show.”** Let any reactions — thoughts, judgments, anger, blame — come into awareness. Say them aloud, then write them down.

Differentiate the thoughts (jackal thinking) from the observation:

2. Say the thoughts again, this time with full energy. Let yourself really feel them in your body (e.g., “I’m not good enough”).
3. Repeat them again, prefacing each thought with the phrase: **“I’m telling myself that...”** or **“There is a thought that...”** (e.g., “I’m telling myself that I’m not good enough.” Or “There is a thought that, I’m not good enough.”)
4. Notice your body now. Is there any distance between you and the thought? Does the thought feel separate from you?
5. Now return to the original situation. How does it feel in your body now compared to before?



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This isn't a step-by-step checklist — it's an organic process. The Player can move between steps, following whatever feels alive in the moment.

6. Vulnerability

As you move from your thoughts to your feelings and needs, notice what comes up. What are you feeling? What need is alive for you? Do you notice any softness or vulnerability? What are you yearning for?

7. Yearning

Notice the sensations in your body. Do they feel familiar? Have you felt this way before — perhaps a long time ago? Does the feeling have a young quality to it, like a part of you from childhood? If so, imagine a young child coming to you carrying this feeling. Can you picture them? How would you welcome this little one? What would you do?

8. Mourning

Stay with the grief or sadness until you feel something shift or soften in your body. If another jackal thought shows up, gently return to the process. Hear it, give it empathy, and sit with the feelings and needs underneath. These are sometimes called “orphans,” feelings and needs that haven't yet been welcomed.

9. Beauty of the Need

Now focus on the **fullness** or **beauty of the need**.

- Imagine what it would feel like to have this need met or recall a time when it was met.
- Sense why this need matters so much to you. What makes it precious?
- Describe the beauty of this need to your partner in your own words.
- Let yourself soak in this awareness of the beauty.
- Notice the energy in your body. What feelings or needs come alive?

10. Test

Holding the beauty of the need, bring the original situation back to mind. Check in: Do you feel triggered again? If so, return to the earlier steps and welcome whatever thoughts or feelings haven't yet been heard. Do you feel some relaxation or openness? If so, move on to step 11 and consider a request.

11. Is there a request you'd like to make of yourself? This could be an inner shift (like offering yourself more compassion) or an outer action (like a conversation you want to have). What would help you meet your beautiful need?



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Stepping Stones Exercise

This one-pager shows the same exercise in visual form. You can trace it with your finger to mark where you are in the process, or place mats on the floor and physically step through it. Moving through it this way shows how the process isn't linear; we move back and forth between welcoming the pain and exploring the beauty.



Based on the “Transforming the Pain of Unmet Needs into the Beauty of Needs” process developed by Robert Gonzales. Adapted with permission by Mary Kay Reinemann.



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Example: Imagine you wanted connection with a friend, and they canceled plans. The “lack” state focuses on what’s missing: “They don’t care about me.” The “fullness” state still honors how much connection matters to you — its beauty — even though it wasn’t met in this moment. Both are real. The practice is to be aware of where you are resting your attention.

From Robert Gonzales, we learned: The beauty and wholeness of our needs is present even when the need is not met. It’s the beauty of the unmet need.

Notice what it’s like to turn your attention to the **beauty of the unmet need** even when that need is not being met in your life or relationships. When you don’t connect with the beauty, you stay connected to “the lack.”

My mind says, "Something is wrong here. I have to fix it. This isn't right."

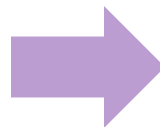
My mind judges myself or the other person.

Any time I'm caught in judgment or telling myself the story that something isn't right or isn't enough, I'm in the “lack” or “deficiency” state of consciousness.

“Something is wrong here. I have to fix it. This isn’t right.”



**Lack of...
Deficiency**
Pain-centered consciousness



**Fullness
Wholeness**
Life-centered consciousness

CHOICE

① Is my attention on life-alienating consciousness?
(Pain-centered)

② Is my attention on life-enriching consciousness?
(Life-centered)

This process brings three qualities — **clarity**, **compassion**, and the **empowerment** to move forward — grounded in deep self-connection and care for everyone's needs. So, when a stimulus arises, where do you find your attention?