

What Is Restorative Justice?

By Ted Lewis

Restorative Justice is an alternative, community-based framework for addressing crimes, harms and conflicts.

Restorative justice aims to bring something good out of something bad. Instead of isolating harming and harmed parties, and leaving all decisions up to justice professionals, restorative justice dignifies and empowers people to identify their needs and to have a major role in resolution processes that integrate healing and accountability. This can include individuals involved in specific incidents, but it can also include entire communities of people impacted by system or historic harms.

Rather than pain-for-pain, real justice delivers a transforming good. It restores people to their true selves, to trusting relationships, and to normal life. The biblical tradition speaks of 'shalom' or peace as a fruit of justice which is designed to set things right between people.

Many indigenous societies worldwide have relied on relational, non-punitive practices that are grounded in storytelling, elder wisdom, reparative actions, and circle processes. These teachings informed the development of what is now called restorative justice. Restorative justice emerged out of pilot projects in the mid-1970s that pioneered new models for victim-offender dialogue and reparations. The term 'restorative justice' emerged in the late 1980s.

Since the 1990s, restorative justice has grown rapidly as an international movement; its applications have widened far beyond the criminal realm to include schools, workplaces, faith communities, and urban neighborhoods. Restorative justice is no longer an alternative intervention. It also involves prevention work by strengthening communities wherever hard-but-healing conversations can take place. Some would consider restorative justice to be an entire 'way of life' as it embodies the deepest values for human beings to live together in right relationship with each other.

Honest and heart-felt dialogue is very much a centerpiece for restorative processes. But the most important thing is *not* bringing together harming and harmed parties face-to-face in the same room. The most important goal of restorative work is to help harming and harmed parties *move forward in life*, whether or not they come together. This reframing helps to broaden the menu of opportunities for people in light of other conversation partners that can be invited into facilitated dialogue processes (such as surrogate victims and offenders).

Two dialogue models have stood the test of time over the past few decades:

1. **Restorative Conferencing**, based originally on a mediation model that prepares parties prior to joint dialogue. Support people are invited to join. Typically, these meetings end with a consensual written agreement for reparations.
2. **Restorative Circles**, based originally on indigenous practices that bring together family and community members. Circles are very flexible to be either responsive to incidents or proactive for community building.

Restorative facilitators and circle keepers receive adequate training to gain knowledge of skills, structures and standards for 'holding space' in which constructive conversations can take place. Experienced facilitators, however, do not primarily rely on techniques or scripts for guiding conversations. They rely mostly on intuitive wisdom for inviting the best scenarios for others to share deeply, listen deeply, and to be heard deeply. When people with oppositional histories enter deeply into this heart-zone of conversation, they generally humanize the other party and find a sense of connection and relief. This allows people to shift forward with greater trust and thereby discuss future matters of reparation or resolution.

Separate preparation meetings for victimized and responsible parties is standard for harm-based restorative cases. These preparatory meetings are always voluntary and confidential, and there is no presumption for people to commit to anything further. Every person and every situation is unique, and therefore facilitators take a slow, non-directive approach, tuning into the needs and preferences of the parties. Joint dialogue or

shuttled communication is only done when it appears that constructive, win-win outcomes can be predicted. Parallel processes of support, with other conversation partners, is also a viable pathway.

Most restorative conversations are structured according to a simple outline:

1. What Happened? Storytelling Discussion
2. Who Was Affected? Impact Discussion
3. What Are The Repairs? Resolution Discussion

This progression is designed to help people move from the PAST to the PRESENT to the FUTURE in order to help them move forward. Aligned with this outline are three key components of restorative dialogue, namely Ownership, Empathy, and Reparation. Empathy, of course, provides the essential pivot. It is what truly helps people connect with the experience of the other party. Two clashing narratives now become a single shared narrative. Empathy is the key to the restorative adage: “Shift Happens.”

If you are in a situation of dealing with past harm, either as someone affected by ongoing trauma or someone seeking a dignified way to make amends, you are welcome to contact our center and someone will talk or meet with you. Our center primarily is a resource center to help with trainings and RJ program development, but we can assist you to find the best possible resources to support your own journey of healing, so you can move forward in life.

This introduction is just that: an introduction. Here are a few suggestions for further learning:

[Conference/Circle example](#)

[A Victim's Guide to Restorative Justice](#)

[Healing Justice film trailer](#)

[Core Processes of Restorative Justice Circles](#)

[School Dialogue Circle example](#)

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