

Restorative Responses to COVID-19: A Call for Dialogue and Action for Restorative Practitioners

By Ames Stenson March 16, 2020

Dealing with a crisis is not a new challenge to those of us inhabiting this planet. Unfortunately, there are endless examples of historic and on-going crises happening throughout our world. Trying to define a crisis can also be challenging as it raises questions about power, privilege, and oppression. Throughout history and even today, people with power are the ones who generally define large-scale crises. They also prioritize resources accordingly to their own benefit. Their responses, thus, shape the narrative of the event(s) which inevitably re-enforce the privileges they hold within fundamentally unjust systems.

As a Restorative Practitioner Community, we are increasingly aware of how our work addresses not only services and programs for specific situations, but also the need for social transformation within larger systems. We now have a new opportunity and responsibility to help shape the narrative of how neighborhoods, communities, businesses, social systems, and governments respond to COVID-19.

It is often the case that large-scale crises reveal the best of humanity as people show up to provide comfort and support to one another. Hot meals, a listening ear, a tender touch, a smile, laughter and 'being with' one another; all of these and more convey messages of comfort, belonging, and social connection. Yet, the current COVID-19 crisis is requiring a different kind of response, stretching our comfort zones of what it means to be of support, in community, and in 'right relationship' with one another. Our safeguarding commitments to 'flatten the curve' require that we separate ourselves from each other, and yet, how ironic it is that a virus which is forcing social distance and separation is also highlighting our interconnectedness.

If, as John W. Bailie, President of International Institute of Restorative Practices, argues, "Restorative Practices is the social science of relationships and community," then Restorative Practitioners have an

essential role and responsibility in helping to shape the responses to this pandemic. As COVID-19 spreads throughout our families, communities, countries and the world, those of us who are familiar with restorative practices are facing a familiar set of questions: Who has been harmed and how might they experience further harm? What do they need? Who is responsible for mitigating and repairing these harms?

Part of what makes a restorative practice *restorative* is that it prioritizes an inclusive process which encourages engagement from all people. As restorative practitioners, we know that this can be extremely empowering for all involved. Furthermore, opportunities to share one's experience and feel heard is a fundamental starting point in response to this crisis due to the heightened level of stress that is taxing our nervous systems and feeding communal anxieties. Feeling heard, feeling a sense of belonging, feeling connected – these are powerful antidotes to stress and illness! As restorative practitioners, we have seen that creating this kind of connection helps us move out of survival mode and into a rest-and-digest mode which gives us fuller access to creative thinking. It also gives us greater capacity for building trust and working in collaboration in order to mitigate further negative impacts and prevent/repair harms to the furthest extent possible.

How might restorative practitioners encourage activities within families and communities? How do we invite people into spaces of connection and belonging? What kind of restorative practices could be utilized to invite neighborhoods to create safe and responsible ways to check in with one another? How could the use of restorative practices help prevent further stigma and isolation for those who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and/or for those who are at higher risk for contracting the virus? How can they and their families be supported by their community? And finally, what do these people need to tell us so we can serve them better?

Beyond the potential impacts of contracting the virus itself, we are seeing that millions of people are now impacted by extensive closures or sharply reduced engagement at schools, businesses, organizations, social services, etc. Restorative responses **must** recognize and acknowledge that while all people are being impacted at some level, people of color, people who have another minority identity or status (i.e. low socioeconomic status, women, LGBTIQ folx, people living with disabilities, physical or mental illness, immigrants, people who are undocumented, elders, children, etc.), and people who experience the intersectionality between these identities

and circumstances (i.e. a woman of color living in poverty), will be disproportionality impacted by the COVID-19 virus itself as well as by the economic and social fallouts from business, school and community closures. As restorative practitioners, we have an obligation to create opportunities where **all** voices are included in neighborhood, community and government dialogue regarding short-term supports and solutions in addition to long-term planning and responses.

The social distancing and closures we are currently facing in light of COVID-19 are creating new social and environmental contexts from which we now must engage. However, as with any crisis, *access to* and *quality of* care, services, goods and food are highlighting the daily adverse disparities that exist for many people and communities in our neighborhoods and around the world, particularly those with a minority identity or status.

By utilizing restorative practices within our own families and communities, an entry point into these larger systemic conversations becomes possible. Using restorative practices allows us to acknowledge the realities of the current crisis as well as the discriminatory systems from which we are operating. It also invites us to turn towards one another, create opportunities for authentic human connection, and begin to create processes for inclusion and transformation.

A Call for Dialogue and Action:

Restorative responses are already happening organically throughout the world! As a community of restorative practitioners, we are called to use this crisis as an opportunity to help craft responses and narratives that are rooted in justice, inclusivity and compassion. As a first step, it would be helpful for restorative stakeholders to have further dialogue at a virtual round table to consider such issues as:

- Cross-systems collaboration;
- Creative responses and solutions;
- Inclusion of all voices (particularly those disproportionality impacted);
- What *restorative responses* might look like;
- Availability of communication technologies;
- Ways to support one another as restorative practitioners to shape the narratives of response; and,
- Ways to pass on successful models to others.

Let us engage in dialogue and consider what local actions we might take within our communities to work toward *restorative responses* to the COVID-19 Crisis!

If you are interested in participating in a Community Sharing Circle to discuss these and related issues, please email exec.director@nacri.org to learn about future details.

References:

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*Ames Stenson is a social worker, teacher, restorative practitioner, and foster parent from Englewood, Colorado. Ames acknowledges their white, middle class, well-educated, able-bodied, and U.S. citizen privilege as the lens from which this piece was written. They look forward to listening and learning with others in the Restorative Practices Community as we seek restorative responses to this pandemic.