

# The Forgiveness Project's RESTORE approach, to achieve desistance from crime

## Introducing RESTORE

TFP's RESTORE programme is an intensive group based intervention that encourages offenders to explore concepts of forgiveness and reparation in a framework that fosters greater accountability and responsibility. Coming under the victim empathy and restorative justice umbrella, every course is co-facilitated by an ex-offender and survivor of serious crime. The intervention uses narrative learning approaches as a humanising pathway. This summary seeks to show how the RESTORE approach fits within current theoretical frameworks analysing and explaining how transformative change can be catalysed amongst repeat offenders, leading to increased potential for desistance. The RESTORE programme therefore fits well within 'assisted desistance' policy thinking [1]

## An evidence-based rationale for RESTORE

Research into patterns of offending amongst individuals engaging with criminal justice services has shown that offenders are often trapped in cycles of reoffending [2], and that the process of desisting from these cycles is difficult and complicated, reminiscent of the challenges faced by those recovering from addictive behaviours [1]. Studying life narratives amongst offending populations has also revealed that violent offenders often have violent personal histories [3], making their early socialisation processes fraught with negative and destructive influences. Thus anger and lust for retaliation or revenge are common amongst prison populations, further compounded by a fear of loss of face, encouraged by the machismo pressures of prison environments [4]. Researchers agree that these conditions combine to present clear obstacles to profound personal change amongst prisoner populations [2, 5-8].

Relationships within prisons (either between inmates or between inmates and staff) rarely offer a 'safe space' for vulnerable disclosure – for example in which to explore feelings, uncertainty, share fears or doubts – or for calm reflection [4]: all of which are processes considered by psychologists as necessary for behaviour and attitude change [6, 7]. TFP's RESTORE approach is independently evidenced as offering particular strengths in these areas [4, 6-8], and is described by prison staff as unique, invaluable and powerful [5]. Its premise is closely related to a Restorative Justice approach [9], a framework increasingly academically debated, and appraised by

some as particularly effective in reducing violent reoffending [10] and offender recidivism [11]. RESTORE engages neither a 'risk-based' nor a 'needs-based', but a 'strengths-based' approach [1] to addressing reoffending, sometimes called 'the third way' by commentators [12]. Its philosophy confronts standard, judgement-led approaches, which have had such poor success rates in achieving persistent offender desistance [13]. The following summary highlights the key elements of the RESTORE way.

## TFP as specialist deliverers

The TFP team offers specialist expertise in this Restorative Justice-related approach, using an exploration of 'forgiveness' and reparation as a basis for transformative learning, and a non-judgemental appraisal of victim and perpetrator narratives (sharing life-stories) as a unique feature of RESTORE [4-8]. The process is led by expert group facilitation teams, who also run training for prison staff. The model includes mentoring for offenders by ex-offenders, and enables apprenticeship opportunities for emerging facilitators, as well as some continuing follow-up support for RESTORE participants, if required. The RESTORE programme has been the subject of academic study, including providing a case study chapter for Scherto Gill and Ivan Goodson's new book: *The Healing Power of Narrative – Learning from listening and telling our stories* [6].

## Example RESTORE activity pattern

A typical RESTORE programme involves a 3-5 day intensive, facilitated group workshop process.

- Groups are introduced to victims of serious violent crime, and ex-offenders, who share their stories openly.
- Offenders' own life-narratives are explored in a supported, compassionate space, encouraging peer reflection.
- Groups explore their existing and habitual behaviour patterns and attitudes, and encouraged in self-appraisal, in a directed, non-judgemental environment.
- Participants complete guided individual cell-work in workbooks, focussing on personal reflection.
- Each subsequent workshop day begins with group reflection, to encourage peer support and trust.

- Follow-up 1-day consolidation and support workshops take place at 1 and 3 months.

### Deeper processes: 'change mechanisms' in RESTORE

The RESTORE programme seeks to facilitate the conditions for transformative learning to take place. Its processes are underpinned by research-based 'change mechanisms', or drivers for catalysing personal change at a deep level. Five of these drivers, identified and researched by a range of leading academics, are outlined below.

1. *Creating a safe space* for reflection, and conducive conditions for questioning, enables participants to review and transform their attitudes [14]. For example in the RESTORE case questioning how criminality works, how society works, how humanity works, how forgiveness works, how revenge works, and how I as an individual work. [4-6]
2. *Story-telling*, a process at the heart of RESTORE, is considered a powerful tool (for which the human race is hard-wired [15]) in building intimacy between teller and listeners, creating community, constructing or reconstructing identity, and developing empathy [6, 16, 17]. These responses occur through a process known as 'narrative transport' [15], which we might recognise as becoming deeply immersed and *transported* by a story. All of these processes are pillars of the RESTORE experience [6], which revolves around the honest sharing of personal narratives as the stimulus for learning.
3. *Empathy building*, a key focus of all aspects of RESTORE, is developed through this shared dramatic experience of traumatic, authentic stories. The empathy-building process is further facilitated by an atmosphere of non-judgmental sharing and humanity, *positive psychology* [18], and values and principles modelled by facilitators. This Restorative Justice-based approach is seen as 'coaxing the offender's compassionate self to the fore' [2]. Generating true empathy of this kind is considered key to enabling real personal change [19].
4. *Perspective transformation* is a RESTORE building block: for example appreciating, seeking and attaining *forgiveness*, considered by learning theory specialists to be a 'humanising process' [6], which requires '*transgression*' [20]. This is the movement from detached, to mindful, to critically reflective, to self as victim, to actively reassessing self as offender and seeing the 'ripple-effect' of one's own behaviour. In RESTORE such a progression is supported through

what learning theorists call '*modelling*' [21], whereby behaviours, attitudes and identity-building factors are led by example, such patterns being laid and modelled by influential individuals. Here the influence is increased through '*social (or therapeutic) alliance*' [21], in this case the believability or authenticity of facilitators' experiences, and the pivotal role played in RESTORE by ex-offenders.

5. *Catalysing different choices and intentions*: RESTORE uses a '*strengths-based*' approach,[12] focussing on the positive potential of offenders' future life-paths. For example participants are encouraged in deciding – and in believing they are capable – to follow inspirational examples, to reconcile and restore damaged relationships, not to perpetuate cycles of violence and damage [1].

### RESTORE outputs and outcomes

According to rigorous research into the RESTORE approach to date, the quality of engagement and response amongst participating prison populations has proven to be extremely high – often soliciting commitment levels unprecedented in individual offenders' prison records. Thus attendance and repeat attendance levels have been evidenced as particularly strong in comparison to other prison-based learning opportunities, and offender evaluations of the programme have been extremely positive. The response of participating or observing prison staff members' has also been widely enthusiastic and positive [4, 5, 8].

#### Intermediate outcomes

Researchers have observed intermediate outcomes for offenders resulting from participation in RESTORE, findings falling into three categories:

- knowledge and skills gained
- attitudes and values developed
- behaviours altered.

#### *Knowledge & skills*

**Participants demonstrated that they feel differently**, for example more focussed and emotionally open, shocked, moved, vulnerable, empathetic, supportive, supported, heard and understood by others. This has resulted in participants feeling and communicating differently about themselves, their own stories, their victims and what is possible for the future.

**Participants demonstrated that they can think differently**, for example being less judgemental, more

able to take a broader perspective, challenging their negative thoughts and seeing new possibilities opening up. They were witnessed adopting new perspectives on other people, seeing new reasons for their life events, appreciating their own contribution to their life narrative, realising the effects of their own actions on their victims, and accommodating different choices or options within their view of their own future life path. [4-8]

### *Attitudes & values*

**Participants often began to engage in and express attitude change**, for example new attitudes towards how criminality works, how society works, how humanity works, how forgiveness works. These changes were apparent in offenders' revised views on the inevitability of their reoffending, and on any usefulness of anger or benefits from revenge. Attitudes were seen to change regarding the beneficial value of forgiveness, on the nature of justice, and on the possibilities afforded by motivational and positive thinking.

**Participants expressed new motivation to change their life paths**, for example manifesting increased self-esteem and motivation to make new effort, determination to believe in themselves. Many expressed the wish to give back and restore, and a new desire to contribute to a wider community, to participate in further training and even to mentor others.

**The RESTORE process catalysed different choices and intentions**, voiced by participants on completion. For example some participants expressed intentions to follow inspirational examples, to reconcile and restore damaged relationships, and importantly the intention not to perpetuate cycles of violence and damage. [4-8]

### *Altered Behaviours*

**Offenders have been reported engaging in different behaviours following participation in RESTORE**, for example employing new levels of empathy, trying to foster forgiveness of others and to forgive themselves, challenging their own anger, not succumbing to revenge desires, resisting or refusing to resort to violence. Some offenders have begun finding and building positive relationships, and avoiding negative or regressive peer relationships, and have demonstrated and claimed a new 'positive self-identity' through these actions.

**Participants began acting with a greater awareness of the negativity of victimhood** – for example no longer seeking revenge, or regarding other people as holding the answer to the obstacles they face. Apparently now able to recognise the 'ripple effect' of their (and others') criminal behaviour, some offenders seemed ready to take new control of their own story. [4, 6-8]

### **RESTORE Beyond the prison gates**

No longitudinal research has yet been conducted to test the longer-term impacts for offenders resulting from their participation in RESTORE programmes. Follow-up studies will be instigated to explore specifically indicated impacts, including:

- Reduced offending behaviour, both in prison and beyond release: ex-offenders' success in choosing different solutions that no longer involve criminality
- A secondary impact of fewer victims and fewer offenders, including amongst participants, their families, their communities, and more widely.

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