

## **Trauma-Informed Restorative Practice in Social Work: A Personal Journey**

When I first stepped into the world of social work, I carried with me a deep conviction: that relationships are at the heart of change. Over the years, I've seen how trauma shapes lives, families and communities and how restorative practices, when informed by trauma awareness, can create spaces of healing, accountability, and hope. This is both a reflection on my journey and a call to reimagine how we support people through the lens of trauma-informed restorative practice.

### **The Starting Point: Recognising Trauma Everywhere**

Early in my career, I often encountered families whose stories were marked by layers of trauma poverty, systemic injustice, intergenerational harm, and personal loss. At first, I thought of trauma as something extraordinary, a singular event. But the more I listened, the more I realized trauma is woven into the everyday fabric of many lives. It shows up in silence, in anger, in mistrust, in the way people brace themselves for disappointment.

This recognition shifted my practice. Trauma wasn't just a backdrop; it was central. And if trauma was central, then our interventions had to be trauma-informed, sensitive to triggers, attuned to resilience and grounded in safety.

### **Restorative Practice: More Than a Tool, a Philosophy**

Restorative practice entered my work as a framework for dialogue and accountability. At first, I used it in structured settings Family Group Conferences, Restorative Circles, facilitated conversations. I quickly realised it was more than a method; it was a philosophy. It asked me to see people not as problems to be solved but as partners in their own healing.

The restorative lens emphasises:

- Relationships over transactions
- Dialogue over directives
- Accountability over punishment

When combined with trauma-informed principles, restorative practice becomes a powerful way of working. It acknowledges harm without re-

traumatising. It invites voice and choice. It builds safety through empathy and curiosity.

### **Trauma-Informed Principles in Restorative Work**

In practice, trauma-informed restorative work means holding onto a few key principles:

- **Safety first:** Emotional and psychological safety is non-negotiable. Before any circle or dialogue, I ask myself: What will help this person feel safe enough to participate?
- **Empowerment through choice:** Trauma often robs people of agency. Restorative practice restores it by offering choices about who is present, how the conversation unfolds and what outcomes feel possible.
- **Collaboration, not coercion:** Healing happens in partnership. I've learned to slow down, to co-create processes rather than impose them.
- **Cultural humility:** Trauma is experienced differently across cultures. Restorative practice must honour those differences, resisting one-size-fits-all approaches.

### **A Story from Practice**

I remember working with a Matt a 15yr old young male who had been excluded from school after a series of violent outbursts. The narrative around him was bleak: “aggressive,” “unmanageable,” “a risk.” He was described by the teaching staff as the “Devil incarnate!” He used his six foot stature and angry expression to repel people. Keep them at a distance, but when I sat with him, listened to his story, I heard something different. His anger was a shield. Beneath it was grief, his violent, alcohol dependent father had left the home when he was 5yrs old, his mother had struggled all her life, beaten down by the life she had endured since birth and he felt invisible.

We convened a restorative circle, carefully prepared with trauma-informed principles. He chose who would be there: his mother, a trusted teacher and Education Welfare Social Worker. We set ground rules that emphasised respect and safety. When the circle began, he spoke haltingly at first, then with growing confidence. He described how he felt unseen, how exclusion only deepened his sense of abandonment.

The circle didn't magically solve everything. But it shifted the narrative. He was no longer "the problem." He was a young person carrying pain, seeking connection. The school agreed to reintegrate him with support. He suggested ways that would help, a teacher he could go to and sit in their class when he felt overwhelmed, space to himself during lunch breaks and when needed he agreed to stay back in class to have a restorative conversation with whoever he had caused harm to. His mother spoke openly about her current situation. She felt heard and welcomed the support offered. He left the circle with a sense of agency.

Before the review, four weeks later, I spoke with the same staff who now described him as, "an angel". Staff had been active in saying hello to him on the corridors, stopping to make conversations as they both moved from one class to another. One minute stops to recognise that he was not invisible.

That experience reinforced for me the power of trauma-informed restorative practice. It doesn't erase harm, but it reframes it. It creates space for healing where punishment would only deepen wounds.

### **Lessons Learned Along the Way**

Through many such encounters, I've learned a few lessons that continue to shape my practice:

- **Preparation matters:** Trauma-informed restorative work requires careful preparation. Rushing into dialogue without attending to safety can cause more harm.
- **Language heals or harms:** The words we use, "offender," "victim," "case" can retraumatise. I strive to use language that humanises and empowers.
- **Facilitators need support too:** Holding trauma stories is heavy. Restorative practitioners must also care for themselves, debrief and seek supervision.
- **Small shifts matter:** Sometimes the most restorative act is not a formal circle but a small moment of empathy a question asked with curiosity, a silence held with respect.

### **Wider Implications: Systems and Culture**

Trauma-informed restorative practice isn't just about individual cases. It has implications for systems and culture. In child protection, it challenges

punitive approaches and emphasises family-led decision-making. In schools, it shifts discipline from exclusion to inclusion. In workplaces, it fosters psychological safety and relational accountability.

But systems change is slow. It requires leaders willing to embrace discomfort, to prioritise relationships over metrics, to see culture as the soil in which practice grows. My long-term vision is to help workplaces and institutions become trauma-informed and restorative—not as a program, but as a way of being.

### **Personal Reflections**

This work has changed me. I've learned to listen more deeply, to hold space for stories that are painful, to resist the urge to "fix." I've seen how shame can be dissolved through empathy, how resilience can be nurtured through connection, how accountability can be embraced when people feel safe.

It's not easy. There are days when the weight of trauma feels overwhelming. But then I remember the young person in the circle, the mother who felt heard, the team that chose dialogue over punishment. Those moments remind me why I do this work.

### **Conclusion: A Call to Practice**

Trauma-informed restorative practice is not a quick fix. It's a commitment to seeing human side of the human being, to creating spaces where healing and accountability coexist. For social workers, it means moving beyond case management to relational engagement. For leaders, it means shaping cultures that honour voice, choice and safety. For communities, it means believing that harm can be addressed without perpetuating cycles of trauma.

My journey continues. Each conversation, each circle, each story teaches me something new. And I remain convinced: when we bring trauma-informed principles into restorative practice, we don't just change outcomes, we change lives.

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