

What is Restorative Justice?



From our friends and partners at [Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth](#) (RJOY), comes this clear explanation of Restorative Justice:

Restorative justice invites a fundamental shift in the way we think about and do justice. In the last few decades, many different programs have arisen out of a profound and virtually universal frustration with the dysfunction of our justice system. What distinguishes restorative justice from all these programs is that it is not a program. It is a theory of justice which challenges the fundamental assumptions in the dominant discourse about justice.

What are the dominant assumptions?

If you commit a crime, you incur a debt to society, you create an imbalance in the scales of justice. The only way to pay back the debt and re-balance the scales is to be given your just deserts. This is based upon the Roman, Justinian notion of “to each his due”. If you caused someone to suffer, you will be caused to suffer. If you have inflicted pain upon someone, pain will be inflicted upon you. Pain, suffering, isolation, deprivation, even death are often viewed as the only way to make right the wrong, the only way to pay back the debt and the only way to re-balance the scales.

In this sense, dominant justice may be viewed as officially-sanctioned vengeance. Instead of the person harmed who retaliates, it is our justice system that strikes back on the victim’s behalf. Our criminal justice system tends to focus on determining blame and administering pain – judging and sentencing. The retributive essence of our current system has spawned the highest absolute and per capita incarceration rates in the history of the world. Scholars speak of how it has “prisonized” the entire North American landscape. We see this phenomenon very clearly in our urban schools which are beginning to look and function more like jailhouses than schoolhouses.

However, in the last three decades, humanity has been making a historic shift from a justice as harming to a justice as healing. From a retributive justice to a restorative justice.

Our criminal justice system asks these three questions:

1. What law was broken?
2. Who broke it?
3. What punishment is warranted?

Restorative justice asks an entirely different set of questions:

1. Who was harmed?
2. What are the needs and responsibilities of all affected?
3. How do all affected parties together address needs and repair harm?

An emerging approach to justice rooted in indigenous cultures, restorative justice is reparative, inclusive, and balanced. It emphasizes:

1. Repairing harm
2. Inviting all affected to dialogue together to figure out how to do so
3. Giving equal attention to community safety, victim's needs, and offender accountability and growth

Restorative Justice has diverse applications. It may be applied to address conflict in families, schools, communities, workplace, the justice system, and to even to address mass social conflict (such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa).

Coming to the Table and Restorative Justice

Along with an understanding of [Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience](#), Restorative Justice principles and practices rest at the foundation of the Coming to the Table [Vision, Mission, Approach, and Values](#).

When conflicts arise within a Local Affiliate Group or between a Local Group and the national CTTT organization, CTTT encourages individuals and groups to engage in restorative processes that support reconciliation. [Pikes Peak Restorative Justice Council](#) outlines a good set of principles for such efforts that CTTT embraces and supports:

1. VOLUNTARY: All participants voluntarily agree to participate in a meeting in a safe setting with a trained facilitator.
2. RESPONSIBILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY: Offenders acknowledge their responsibility for the offense and are willing to repair its harm.
3. VICTIMS: Restorative Justice is a victim-centered process. Victims or victim surrogates are encouraged to attend.
4. COMMUNITY: Affected members of the community are encouraged to attend and assist in determining how the harm will be repaired.
5. RESPECT: All participants agree to treat one another with respect.
6. AGREEMENT: All participants are willing to strive to agree on how the harm is to be repaired.

Coming to the Table co-sponsored a series of webinars with the Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice focused on RJ in Education. Click on the links below to watch:

- [Learning from Students](#)
- [Student-led Restorative Justice in Fairfax County](#)
- [But That Teacher Doesn't Like Me -The Importance of a Relational Pedagogy](#)
- [Possibilities for Interrupting the School-to-Prison-Pipeline](#)
- [Restorative Justice in Everyday School Practices: A Panel Discussion](#)

For additional information and resources, please visit

- [The Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice](#)
- [Restorative Justice.org](#)
- Read [The Little Book of Restorative Justice](#)