

TOOL n°7 – The Restorative Questions

1. What happened?

This question aims to clarify the facts. What is this about? By asking questions such as what, where, when, who, and how, we get a clear picture of the situation and the damage. Asking "why" on the other hand, doesn't help us move forward. Consider what answer you would get to that question. Often, people either shrug and say "I don't know" or provide an explanation that shifts the blame elsewhere. This is logical, as the "why" question implies blame or accusation, which is exactly what we want to avoid. A facilitator adopts an involved, but non-judgmental attitude, which makes it possible to listen to the other person openly and without bias. Still, the facilitator keeps the focus on the core of the issue, not getting distracted by side anecdotes, one-sided interpretations, or outdated experiences. This requires a significant level of discipline.

2. How did it affect you? Who else was affected?

Here we explore both personal experience and empathy for others. How did you experience the incident? What was the most difficult part? What effect did it have on others? Who else was affected? How were they affected? How did it feel at the time? How does it feel now? When working restoratively, it's crucial to inquire about feelings. Emotions as the engine of the restorative process. When people can communicate their feelings authentically, it's a significant step in the healing process. Being able to hear and recognize the other person's hurt will bring us to action.

3. What was your part in it?

How do you think about it now? What was your part in the situation and the fact that it got to this point? What could you have done differently? The question whether one is prepared to take responsibility is a crucial step in the restorative process. If someone cannot or doesn't want to acknowledge their role, it's better not to involve them yet. The risk of further escalation is too high. The other party may feel unjustly treated. They might feel that they are left alone to bear the consequences or that their experience is being minimized or even denied. In this context, we speak of secondary victimization. Giving people time to reflect, discussing what they could have done differently, involving support people, a second assessment, etc., are possible strategies to help mobilize someone to take responsibility.

4. What is needed to repair the harm?

This is an open question that steers the conversation towards the future. And now what? What do you need in order to feel free again? What are the possibilities? One can express expectations towards the other person, but we need to act here with caution. Placing too many expectations on others can prevent people from looking for commitment within themselves.

5. What will you do about it?

This final question focuses on action. What can we expect from you? How can you contribute? For an offender this means: what will you do to (try to) repair the harm? But we ask a similar question to the one being hurt by an incident. We don't want to treat them as a victim. We want to empower them instead of purely keeping them dependent on the efforts of the wrongdoer. If you want change, you need to be willing to put something of your own into the process.

Restorative Questions in Practice

The restorative questions are (merely) guiding questions. They do not need to be used with exactly the same words as we described above. For a smooth application, both the phrasing and the order can vary depending on the conversation partner. For example, asking an 8-year-old what "their role in the events was" may not be appropriate. The question "what could you have done differently?" is more suitable given their comprehension and reflective ability.

Naturally, there are nuances in how we apply the restorative questions for both 'offenders' and 'victims'. However, we make no explicit distinction in how we define the questions depending on the party involved. In reality, it's rarely clear-cut who is the offender and who is the victim. Both parties are typically both offenders and victims. Still, we often hear that it's not obvious or even inappropriate to ask a 'victim' about their responsibility. We still ask this question because it empowers people. It forces them to reflect on what they can do, to take their lives into their own hands rather than remain passive. And that's our goal. Below, we offer variations on how we might phrase these questions.

Variations of Restorative Questions

What happened?

Tell me...

What makes you come to me?

What is this about exactly?

If I had video footage, what would we see?

What's the core of the matter?

What is the hardest part for you?

What were you thinking at the time?

How has this affected you?

How does this make you feel?

How was this for you?

What impact has this had on you?

Who else was affected?

How do you think it impacted your teacher, parents, classmates, etc.?

What was your part/responsibility?

What have you done (or not done) to let this happen?

What is your part in the story?

What could you have done differently?

How do you view it now?

How do you think the other person views it?

What is needed to move forward?

What do you need to move forward, and what can you do about it?

How can this be repaired? What is needed for that?

Can someone help you with this?

What will you do?

What are you going to do to make things right?

What are you willing to do to move forward?

What do you think should happen to move forward?

The restorative questions have numerous applications. They provide structure to restorative circles. The choice of method (restorative dialogue, small restorative circle or restorative conference) depends on the severity of the conflict and the number of parties involved. How we apply these restorative questions will vary based on the situation. When applied

authentically the questions will serve as a simple and effective tool for reflection – also for our own actions!