

# Tension Transformation Guide

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# Introduction

## **About this guide**

This guide was put together by Annabelle Macfadyen, Clare Hein and Cordelia Rowlatt, all of whom are based in Frome, Somerset. The original work was written for a small co-operative of conscientious workers who were nevertheless experiencing some conflict. They asked for help to find ways of addressing the conflict within their group and this guide was written in response to their request.

Every group is unique and solutions that are intended for one group may not suit another. We invite you to use this as a working document that can be altered and added to as your group discovers what works for them in practice.

## **The purpose and scope of this guide**

The purpose of this guide is to introduce some simple and effective tools and processes which can be used to shift tensions from a negative, divisive force into positive and constructive interactions. We think this may allow useful learning to take place and enable deeper connections between people.

The guide starts with a consideration of what kinds of practices and agreements might help establish and maintain good connections with the people around you, then it examines the real experience of feeling a tension. How might you recognise and respond to the feeling? We suggest processes and techniques, first to help notice and become conscious of tensions when they arise and then to explore how they might be addressed positively. A key skill throughout is listening to other people openly and without judgement. The guide offers a range of options for how to address tensions constructively but we are aware that there is a lot more that could be included. We encourage you to add to it.

## **About our sources**

In creating this guide, we have drawn on many sources for information and inspiration. Where we have taken directly from a source, we have referenced it with a link to a website.

## Tension Transformation – an introduction

### **Conflict or tension?**

This guide is about communication, so to start with, a word about language. We decided to focus on tensions rather than conflict for two reasons: first, tensions are often the precursors to conflicts. If we can address tensions at an early stage then maybe there will be less conflict! Second, it's easier to talk openly about feeling a tension than it is to talk about having a conflict with someone, so issues are easier to rise when they are defined as tensions rather than as conflicts.

## More about tension

We're starting from a premise that tensions and discords with other people are inevitable and common and that we all experience them in our everyday lives. Although they are common it can be easy to get caught up in feelings such as frustration, irritation, stress or confusion without stepping back to think about what's going on and working to address the feelings positively. However, if we don't address them, they can develop into painful and destructive conflict.

Tensions often arise that have their roots in structural shortfalls within the organisation. Tensions can therefore be useful as they help us explore what's working and what's not working, from our perspective. Appropriate changes can then be made within the systems of the organisation.

We believe that with some skills and understanding, tensions can be addressed in a way that develops personal empowerment, greater individual confidence, more open communication, better mutual understanding and empathy and a more cohesive group.

## Building the foundations of a Restorative Culture

To create a *Restorative Culture* means to intentionally develop ways of working together based on common agreements and values that support healthy relationships.

The intention here is to build on existing goodwill and skills to develop a culture where everyone has a voice and there is commitment to a caring, no blame/no shame ethos. In this way we will be more able to address tensions as they arise.

What can you do in your group or organisation to foster and sustain healthy relationships and working practices?

Here are some questions for you or your organisation to think about:

- **Connection & community:** What practices might be helpful in sustaining good relationships and a sense of community within your group or organisation?
- **Care and support:** What kinds of support do we need when things are challenging, and how do we access it? How do we take care of our own and others well-being?
- **Shared purpose:** How do we maintain a sense of shared purpose and shared values?
- **Power:** From your perspective, who holds the power within your organisation? How aware are other members of possible power dynamics? How can power dynamics be identified and named to ensure that everyone's voice is heard and their needs are taken care of?
- **Communication:** How do we communicate in positive/empathic ways? (See NVC and Active listening below.)
- **Feedback:** Feedback is important in ensuring systems are working well and helping us to be more in alignment with the purpose and values of the organisation and maintain positive relationships. How do people give feedback within the organisation? How do

you offer feedback to others? What might be stopping you feeling able to give feedback?

- **Agreements:** Are there clear agreements on things like decision making, giving feedback, addressing tensions or sharing information?

Here are some examples of things that you might consider doing:

- A regular check-in at meetings
- A neutral and skilled facilitator to hold meetings
- Regular debriefs based in reflective practice
- Acknowledging and sharing challenges
- Celebrating achievements

## Addressing tensions in yourself

Before considering how to address a tension the first thing we need to do is acknowledge how we are feeling. Perhaps we feel irritated, frustrated, triggered by something that happened or that someone said. If we can pause and take the time to reflect on our feelings this will allow us to respond rather than react to the situation.

Can we remain curious and willing to understand what our underlying needs are in the situation? If we can take personal responsibility here then we will be in a better position for addressing the tension through dialogue.

Here are a couple of simple processes that can be helpful when you are feeling a tension:

### **STOP**

This is a way of cultivating a practice of self-care and self-awareness. It can serve us when facing tense situations. Find opportunities in the day to just STOP and notice how you are feeling – especially when you are feeling anxious or stressed.

**S**     **Stop** what you're doing; put things down for a minute.

**T**     **Take** a few deep breaths.

**O**     **Observe** your experience just as it is.

**P**     **Proceed** with something that will support you in the moment: talk to a friend, rub your shoulders, have a cup of tea. Or simply move to your next activity in a relaxed way.

**Reference** - <https://www.mindful.org/stressing-out-stop/>

## **RAIN**

This is a tool for bringing mindfulness and compassion to challenging and difficult emotions that may have been triggered by an interaction or situation.

**R - Recognise** what is happening – bring awareness to whatever thoughts, feelings, emotions or sensations in our body that are arising here and now.

**A - Allow** the experience to be there, just as it is without trying to fix or avoid anything.

**I - Investigate** with interest and care. Call on your natural curiosity to bring more focused attention to your needs in this present situation.

**N- Nurture** with self-compassion. Try to sense what the hurt/irritated part of you needs and offer yourself the care and kindness you would to a friend or a child who felt this way.

You can find a fuller version here: <https://www.tarabrach.com/rain-practice-radical-compassion/>

After this process you may find it easier to think clearly about what needs to happen next.

## **Addressing tensions with another person**

If you are feeling a tension with someone or notice a difficult situation or conversation in the group, here are some things you can do:

### **Have a restorative/clearing conversation**

If you decide to have a conversation with the person with whom you are feeling a tension it is very helpful to have an agreed approach within the organisation.

Our experience is that people have appreciated being able to ask for a ‘clearing conversation’ with a co-worker, knowing that they will understand this as an opportunity for learning and a chance to listen and understand the other person (rather than fearing judgement and blame).

When this practice is embedded in the organisation and is working well, everyday small tensions can be addressed as they arise. While some clearing conversations can happen briefly and simply, others will need a little more preparation, which is explored below.

### **Preparation**

#### **Find a supportive listener**

You could try to find someone not directly involved in the situation to talk to. It’s important that this person is a good listener plus someone who can be totally neutral and non-judgmental; someone who will not offer any opinions about the situation but who will ask you searching questions, whilst not trying to influence you in any way.

It is helpful if the supportive listener explores with you the purpose of the conversation, what you want from it and checks your willingness to hear the other person’s side of things.

## **The conversation**

The conversation has more chance of being restorative if you use Active Listening and Non-Violent Communication (NVC - see below).

Here are some tips for when you meet that might help the conversation go well.

- Before you start, it is helpful to voice your intentions e.g., to understand each other and to be able to work well together. For example, “I will try to understand how this situation is for you as I would like us to feel comfortable working together”.
- Agree how you want to conduct yourselves during the time together e.g.: listen with respect; speak without judging the other person. It’s really useful to say these things out loud and not to assume them.
- It works well if one person at a time has space to speak while the other focuses simply on listening without interruption. The listener then reflects back what they heard and what they think was important to the speaker. The listener then asks the speaker if that feels ok. You could consider using open questions like ‘Have I captured everything that’s important to you? ‘Is there anything you want to add?’
- Take it in turns to swap roles until each person has a chance to speak and be heard. Sometimes, this will all be a short and quick conversation and at other times the swapping may take multiple times until both sides are heard about what is important to them in this particular situation.
- The swapping over process may shift into something more conversational after a while. This is fine as long as active listening continues. It may be possible to explore more deeply what led to the triggering of feelings.

## **Moving forward**

When you have both been able to speak and been heard, think together about what you need to do to keep your interactions positive going forward. Perhaps you could create some agreements to improve how you interact together and prevent the tensions from recurring in the future.

If the tension relates to a structural issue within the organisation then take time to feed back to the wider organisation in a constructive manner.

## **Self-care after the meeting**

The conversation may bring strong feelings to the surface so you might want to plan how to take care of yourself afterwards. What kind of support do you think you might need and how can you arrange it so it’s available to you after the meeting?

## Have a conversation with support

### **A conversation with a silent witness**

Another alternative is to have a clearing conversation with a silent supportive witness. This can be helpful when you don't feel confident about talking to the other person by yourself for whatever reason.

This would be someone who is trusted by both people in the conversation and is able to maintain a neutral position. Their role is to provide a kind, non-judgemental presence within which you can both feel supported during the conversation.

At the end of the conversation it is important for everyone to thank each other, try not to analyse what's just happened and agree that what has been said remains confidential going forward.

### **A facilitated meeting**

Sometimes, despite trying everything suggested above, you may still need to have a more 'formal' facilitated meeting. If this is the case, it is important to ask an external experienced facilitator to help to prepare for and run the meeting as they are able to hold a neutral and encouraging space for both people. The facilitator will help you both talk through your differences and help you come to some shared agreements.

It can be helpful if you agree to check in with one another about two weeks later see how the shared agreements are being worked on.

*Based on work from The Restorative Justice Council and Restorative Together, Wiltshire*

## **Important skills:**

### **Active Listening**

Active Listening refers to a pattern of listening that helps to keep you engaged with your conversation partner in a positive way. It is the process of listening attentively while someone else speaks, then paraphrasing, reflecting back what is said, while withholding any judgment and advice.

When you practice active listening, you allow the other person to feel heard and valued. In this way, active listening is the foundation for any 'successful' conversation.

Active Listening comprises both a desire to comprehend as well as to offer support and empathy to the speaker.

It's much harder to do when you're feeling angry so it's a good idea to go through the RAIN process (above) before you begin.

## **The Purpose**

The purpose of Active Listening is to earn the trust of the speaker and helps you to understand their situation.

It differs from critical listening; in that you are not evaluating the message of the other person with the goal of offering your own opinion. Rather, the goal is simply for the other person to be heard, and perhaps enables them to solve their own problems.

## **Features of Active Listening**

Active Listening involves more than just hearing someone speak. When you practice active listening, you are fully concentrating on what is being said. You listen with all of your senses and give your full attention to the person speaking. Active listening is about getting curious about what's going on for someone.

You are there to act as a sounding board rather than ready to jump in with your own ideas and opinions about what is being said.

Some key features of active listening include:

- being neutral and non-judgmental;
- being patient (periods of silence are not "filled");
- offering verbal and nonverbal feedback to show signs of listening (e.g., smiling, eye contact, leaning in, mirroring);
- asking questions;
- reflecting back what is said;
- asking for clarification;
- summarising (using their words).

Listening can be challenging. You may be distracted by your own thoughts and feelings and you may experience strong emotions. If so, notice your feelings, acknowledge what is happening for you and then bring your attention back to listening. Remember, you will soon have a chance to express yourself.

*From: Very Well Mind <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-active-listening-3024343>*

## **Non-Violent Communication (NVC)**

NVC offers us ways of entering dialogue or giving feedback in a way that helps us to maintain an empathic connection with the other through challenging interactions.

Throughout the dialogue we speak from our own experience – expressing how 'I' am without criticism or judgement of the other. We receive feedback empathetically without jumping to the defence.



Here are some basic guidelines:

1. Express **observations** of the situation without introducing any judgement or evaluation.
2. Say clearly how we **feel** in relation to our observations – are we hurt, irritated, disappointed?
3. Stating our own **needs/values** clearly and honestly e.g.: a need for respect, co-operation, and understanding.
4. Clearly **requesting** specific, concrete actions that would enrich your life.

Addressing someone in this way might look like this:

‘When I heard/saw..... I felt.....because I need/value.....would you be willing to.....?’

For more information see the NVC website: [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)

## Over to you!

We hope you have found this guide easy to understand and will be able to make use of it in your everyday life and in the organisations and groups you work with.

To end where we started: tensions are an important natural part of everyday life, by taking care of ourselves and others through addressing these tensions we can move towards the foundations of creating a Restorative Culture, where everyone is valued equally and a more caring considerate world is created. All new skills take practice – none of us ‘get it right’, especially at the beginning, but it can really help to be part of a group that is learning together.

We, Annabelle, Cordelia and Clare wish you well in your endeavours – this practice has made a difference to each one of us and we believe it can make a difference to you too ... go well!

## Further reading

### Books

- Brown, B. (2018) 'Dare to Lead'. London: Penguin Random House
- Costello, B., Wachtel, J. and Wachtel, T. (2009) 'The Restorative Practices Handbook'. Etobicoke: International Institute for Restorative Practices.
- Cottam, H. (2018) 'Radical Help'. London: Virago.
- Davis, F. (2019) 'The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing and US Social Transformation'. Vermont: Good Books.
- Evans, K. and Vaandering, D. (2016) 'The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education: Fostering Responsibility, Healing and Hope in Schools'. Vermont: Good Books.
- Kaufman, S. B. (2020) 'Transcend: The New Science of Self-Actualisation'. Los Angeles: Tarcher Perigree
- Kline, N. (2008) 'Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind'. London: Cassell
- Linnea, A. and Baldwin, C. (2010) 'The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair'. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler.
- Parker, P. (2018) 'The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters'. New York: Riverhead Books.
- Rosenberg, M. B. (1999) 'Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life'. Encinitas: Puddledancer Press.
- Syed, M. (2019) 'Rebel Ideas'. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
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- Thorsborne, M. and Vinegrad, D. (2017) 'Restorative Practices in Schools'. London: Routledge.
- Whyte, D. (2014) 'Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words'. USA: Many Rivers Press

### Websites

- Centre for Non Violent Communication <https://www.cnvc.org>
- Extinction Rebellion Conflict Transformation: <https://sites.google.com/view/xruk-transformativeconflict/what-is-transformative-conflict>
- Navigate: <https://www.navigate.uk.com>
- Restorative Justice Council: [www.restorativejustice.org.uk](http://www.restorativejustice.org.uk)
- Restorative Circles: <https://www.restorativecircles.org/>
- Restorative Engagement Forum: [www.restorativeengagementforum.com](http://www.restorativeengagementforum.com)

### Videos

- An Introduction to Restorative Circles with Dominic Barter <https://vimeo.com/10778141>
- Resolving Conflict Through Restorative Justice with Dominic Barter  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bazgiTyieKo&ab\\_channel=UniversityofRochester](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bazgiTyieKo&ab_channel=UniversityofRochester)