Conversation Guide: Restorative Justice

Living Room Conversations offers a simple, sociable and structured way to practice communicating across differences while building understanding and relationships. Typically, 4–6 people meet in person or by video call for about 90 minutes to listen to and be heard by others on one of our nearly 100 topics. Rather than debating or convincing others, we take turns talking to share, learn, and be curious. No preparation is required, though background links with balanced views are available on some topic pages online. Anyone can host using these italicized instructions. Hosts also participate.

Introductions: Why We’re Here (~10 minutes)
Each participant has 1 minute to introduce themselves.
- Share your name, where you live, what drew you here, and if this is your first conversation.

Conversation Agreements: How We’ll Engage (~5 minutes)
These will set the tone of our conversation; participants may volunteer to take turns reading them aloud.

- **Be curious and listen to understand.** Conversation is as much about listening as it is about talking. You might enjoy exploring how others’ experiences have shaped their values and perspectives.

- **Show respect and suspend judgment.** People tend to judge one another. Setting judgement aside opens you up to learning from others and makes them feel respected and appreciated. Try to truly listen, without interruption or crosstalk.

- **Note any common ground as well as any differences.** Look for areas of agreement or shared values that may arise and take an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others.

- **Be authentic and welcome that from others.** Share what’s important to you. Speak from your experience. Be considerate of others who are doing the same.

- **Be purposeful and to the point.** Do your best to keep your comments concise and relevant to the question you are answering. Be conscious of sharing airtime with other participants.

- **Own and guide the conversation.** Take responsibility for the quality of your participation and the conversation as a whole. Be proactive in getting yourself and others back on track if needed. Use an agreed upon signal like the “time out” sign if you feel the agreements are not being honored.

Question Rounds: What We’ll Talk About
Optional: a participant can keep track of time and gently let people know when their time has elapsed.

**Round One: Getting to Know Each Other (~10 min)**
Each participant can take 1–2 minutes to answer one of these questions:
- What are your hopes and concerns for your family, community and/or the country?
- What would your best friend say about who you are?
- What sense of purpose / mission / duty guides you in your life?

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Round Two: Exploring the Topic -- Restorative Justice (~40 min)

One participant can volunteer to read this paragraph.

Many people are curious about the status and consequences of the current U.S. criminal justice system. Topics like mass incarceration, the School to Prison Pipeline, and Community-Police Relations are receiving attention at state and federal levels of government, adding to the growing sense we could be doing better. Throughout the country, schools and communities are working together with local courts and police departments to explore changing how crime is addressed with a method called Restorative Justice. Restorative Justice is based in ancient practices of indigenous peoples of the Americas. Prioritizing the experience and needs of the “victim”, those who have caused harm take ownership of their actions and meet with those who have been harmed. Some see this as the answer to our current justice system, which can be adversarial, overly punitive and encourage a denial of responsibility. Others would say punishment is a more effective deterrent to crime, and that incarceration keeps our communities safer. In this conversation, we will explore personal experiences around justice and restoration and what the principles of Restorative Justice really look like in our lives and communities.

Take ~2 minutes each to answer a question below without interruption or crosstalk. After everyone has answered, the group may take a few minutes for clarifying or follow up questions/responses. Continue exploring additional questions as time allows.

- When you think about the concept of “justice,” what words or values come to mind? What experiences or influences have shaped your ideas around justice?
- Where have you seen the concept of restoration in your personal life or your community? What was the impact?
- Think of a time you were harmed by another person or you have hurt someone else. What would it take for you to be willing to sit down and listen to the person who harmed you, or take responsibility for the hurt you caused? What would get in your way?
- What experiences have you or someone you know had with the criminal justice system? What was that like?
- How can you imagine applying the principles of respect, responsibility, and relationship in your own family or community?
- What are your hopes and concerns around the criminal justice system?

Round Three: Reflecting on the Conversation (~15 min)

Take 2 minutes to answer one of the following questions:

- What was most meaningful / valuable to you in this Living Room Conversation?
- What learning, new understanding or common ground was found on the topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?

Closing (~5 min)

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Thank you!

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