

# The Restorative Continuum: Building and Repairing Community through Tiered Practice

## I. Introduction

In any community—whether spiritual, civic, or organizational—conflict is not a sign of failure, but a natural expression of human relationship. What matters most is how we respond. The Restorative Continuum provides a flexible framework for cultivating connection, repairing harm, and transforming disruption into opportunities for growth and healing.

Restorative practices, as we know them today, have been shaped by a wide range of cultural, spiritual, and social traditions. Modern restorative justice models trace significant influence from the justice practices of the Māori people of Aotearoa (New Zealand), especially through the development of Family Group Conferencing. Practices such as community circles have also been informed by Indigenous traditions across Turtle Island (North America), where many Native communities have long emphasized collective healing, dialogue, and relational accountability. While these roots are acknowledged, it is essential to recognize that restorative practices as they are currently taught and used—particularly in white-dominant institutions—are often far removed from their cultural origins. Naming this respectfully, without appropriating, requires ongoing reflection, humility, and, where possible, relationship and accountability to the communities from which these practices emerged.

This guide explores the five core tiers of the restorative continuum—ranging from everyday expressions of care to highly structured processes for repairing serious harm. Through both conceptual explanation and community-based examples, we'll examine how restorative practices can support well-being, accountability, and resilience in fellowships such as Humboldt Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, spiritual congregations, and civic organizations like Toastmasters or the Lions Club.

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## II. Overview of the Restorative Continuum

The Restorative Continuum describes a spectrum of practices that increase in structure and formality as the intensity of the issue escalates. Each practice on the continuum builds on the skills of the previous one, creating a tiered approach that can adapt to a wide range of situations.

### 1. Affective Statements

- Brief, heartfelt expressions of emotion and care.
- Used daily to foster connection and share impact.

### 2. Affective Questions

- Gentle prompts that invite reflection and understanding of impact.

- Encourages empathy, accountability, and insight.

### 3. **Small Impromptu Conferences**

- Quick, responsive conversations that gather those involved in a moment of disconnection to reflect and resolve.
- Often used to de-escalate small conflicts or misunderstandings.

### 4. **Circles**

- Structured group processes that provide a shared space for connection, community building, healing, or problem-solving.
- Includes variations such as listening circles and fishbowl formats.

### 5. **Formal Conferences**

- Carefully prepared meetings that bring together all affected parties to process serious incidents, take responsibility, and co-create a plan for repair and reintegration.
- Requires trained facilitation and emotional readiness.

In the following section, we'll explore each tier of the continuum in depth, providing clear descriptions and examples from community life that show how these practices can be integrated meaningfully.

## **Deep Dive into Each Level of the Continuum (with Affirming and Restorative Examples)**

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### **1. Affective Statements**

#### **Definition:**

Affective statements are concise expressions of genuine emotion grounded in a personal experience of behavior and the underlying need or value. They build trust and reinforce emotional literacy by naming impact clearly and respectfully.

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#### **Affirming Example (community setting):**

After a gathering, someone says to another member,

“When I saw you stay late to help clean up, I felt grateful. I really value shared responsibility and the care you bring to this space.”

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**Restorative Example (meeting setting):**

After being interrupted during a discussion, one participant says,

“When you spoke while I was still sharing, I felt frustrated. I really want to know that there’s space for each of us to speak fully before moving on.”

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**2. Affective Questions****Definition:**

Affective questions are gentle prompts that encourage individuals to reflect on their actions, the impacts those actions may have had, and what might support repair or reconnection. They foster empathy and responsibility without blame.

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**Affirming Example (community group):**

At the end of a successful volunteer project, the facilitator asks a group member,

“What was most meaningful for you in being part of this today? How did you feel seeing the results of everyone’s effort?”

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**Restorative Example (board meeting):**

Following a tense exchange, the chair asks a member privately,

“What was going on for you in that moment? How do you imagine others may have felt? What do you think would help us move forward with care?”

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**3. Small Impromptu Conferences****Definition:**

These are brief, intentional conversations used to address emerging tensions or small breaches in connection. Guided by restorative questions, they aim to prevent escalation and restore understanding quickly and compassionately.

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**Affirming Example (youth program):**

After a collaborative activity, a group leader says,

“Let’s each take a moment to say what we appreciated about someone else’s contribution and how it made a difference to the group today.”

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### **Restorative Example (community event):**

Two participants have a disagreement about event logistics. A third person invites them into a short conversation:

“Can each of you share what happened for you? What were you hoping for, and what do you need now so you can move forward together?”

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## **4. Circles**

### **Definition:**

Circles create space for shared dialogue, reflection, and connection. Participants speak in turn, often with a talking piece, guided by prompts that build community or support healing.

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### **Affirming Example (community group):**

At the beginning of a new season, a group holds a welcome circle with the prompt:

“What is one hope you carry for our time together in the months ahead?”

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### **Restorative Example (after organizational conflict):**

Following a breakdown in communication about a group decision, a circle is held with the question:

“What has this situation brought up for you, and what would help you feel grounded and reconnected as we move forward together?”

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## **5. Formal Conferences**

### **Definition:**

Formal restorative conferences are structured, multi-phase processes designed to address significant harm or serious breaches of trust. They are not casual or ad hoc conversations but facilitated dialogues grounded in a clearly defined protocol, originally developed and taught by organizations like the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) and outlined in handbooks such as the *Restorative Conference Facilitator's Handbook*.

A formal restorative conference includes three distinct phases:

1. **Pre-Conference:** Careful preparation of each participant, assessing emotional readiness, clarifying the process, and supporting parties in developing their stories and identifying support people.

2. **Conference:** A facilitated circle using restorative questions to explore what happened, who was impacted, and how. Participants co-create a plan for repair based on mutual understanding and consensus.
3. **Post-Conference:** Implementation and monitoring of the agreements made, ensuring accountability and support through follow-up and documentation.

These conferences are typically used when less formal methods are not sufficient—such as in cases of repeated harm, deep rupture, or incidents involving multiple parties. They require skilled facilitation, significant time, and emotional care. While not part of the current workshop’s scope, it is important to know they exist as a valuable and often transformational restorative tool.

### **Restorative Example (community context):**

In one well-known case, six young men confessed to burning down a beloved covered bridge in their rural town. Rather than pursue only punitive measures, the community chose to engage in a formal restorative conference. Facilitated by trained practitioners, the process brought together the young men, those impacted by the fire, and supportive community members. Through extensive preparation and a structured dialogue, participants shared the emotional and practical impacts of the harm, and the young men took responsibility for their actions. Together, they created a plan for meaningful repair—including public acknowledgment, restitution, and community service—that contributed to healing and accountability for all involved.

This story is documented in the short film *Burning Bridges*, available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idjllu0NLb4>

## **Matching Practice to Need**

The power of the restorative continuum lies not just in the practices themselves, but in knowing when and how to use them. Each tier of the continuum is designed to meet a different level of need—from reinforcing connection to addressing harm—and the effectiveness of any intervention depends on thoughtful matching of the response to the situation.

### **Guiding Principles**

- **Start small when possible:**  
Begin with the least formal response that may be effective. A well-timed affective statement or question can often prevent a conflict from escalating.
- **Scale up as needed:**  
If the issue persists, grows in intensity, or involves multiple people, move toward more structured approaches—small impromptu conferences, then circles, and when appropriate, formal conferences.
- **Consider emotional readiness:**  
Effective restorative practice depends on participants’ willingness and capacity to engage. Especially in formal or emotionally charged processes, the time invested in preparation

(especially one-on-one listening) can make or break the experience.

- **Assess the impact, not just intent or severity:**

A seemingly small act can have profound impact, and a restorative response should take into account how people were affected—not simply whether policies were violated or rules broken.

### Practical Matching Examples

Situation	Suggested Practice	Why It Fits
A member expresses appreciation for another's support during a difficult time	Affective Statement	Reinforces community care and belonging
A speaker is interrupted during a meeting	Affective Question or Statement	Opens reflection and invites empathy
Two people have an escalating disagreement over shared responsibilities	Small Impromptu Conference	Creates space to name needs and rebuild understanding
A group feels a decision was made without adequate consultation	Circle	Allows diverse voices to be heard and collective meaning to emerge

Serious harm, such as harassment or repeated boundary violations

Formal Conference

Requires structured process, preparation, and accountability agreements

## Beyond Matching: Holding the Whole

Restorative practitioners also attend to the emotional and relational dynamics beyond the immediate issue. This includes:

- **Supporting facilitators** in deciding whether to respond directly or refer the matter to someone with more experience.
- **Offering care for those impacted**, even when a full process cannot unfold.
- **Being flexible**, recognizing that not all harm will be addressed through the ideal format—but still doing what we can to move toward repair and reconnection.

Restorative practices aren't a one-size-fits-all formula; they are a constellation of approaches guided by care, curiosity, and commitment to healing. With practice, communities build the collective discernment to know what response is most life-giving and just in any given moment.

## Application in Community Settings

The restorative continuum offers a framework that is especially relevant to community groups, spiritual fellowships, and civic organizations. These are spaces where people gather around shared values—but also bring diverse experiences, communication styles, and expectations. Conflict is inevitable. So is the opportunity for deepened connection when it's handled with care.

By weaving restorative practices into the daily culture of a community—not just as crisis response but as a way of being together—groups build trust before it's tested. They also create a container for addressing ruptures when they do arise.

### Sample Applications Across the Continuum:

- **Affective Statements** can be used by committee members to celebrate a contribution or gently name discomfort.
- **Affective Questions** might be posed during a check-in after an event that caused some tension or confusion.
- **Small Impromptu Conferences** could be used between two members with a recent misunderstanding, helping prevent deeper disconnection.

- **Circles** can be held to celebrate transitions (welcoming new members, honoring a retiring leader) or to process collective tension after a difficult decision.
- **Formal Conferences**, when needed, can address serious breaches of trust—though they require trained facilitators and may not always be feasible internally.

This range of practices allows communities to meet moments of both celebration and challenge with intention, care, and collective wisdom.

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## Conclusion

Restorative practices are not just tools to fix problems; they are pathways to living our values in community. The continuum—from brief affirmations to structured formal processes—offers a map for navigating both the ordinary and the extraordinary moments of communal life.

By matching our responses to the depth and context of each situation, we create opportunities for healing, belonging, and transformation. The power of the restorative continuum lies not only in what it helps us repair—but in the culture of care, responsibility, and connection it helps us co-create every day.



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## Documentary

Roca Inc. (2012). *Burning Bridges* [Short documentary film].  
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idjllu0NLb4>

This guide was developed with support from a variety of sources, including colleagues, existing literature, and digital tools that help synthesize and refine ideas.