

Modified restorative circles: a reintegration group planning process that promotes desistance

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This article describes the Modified Circle process and its potential for increasing criminal desistance with the aim of influencing corrections programs to use the process. A *Modified Restorative Circle* is a group process for an incarcerated individual to plan for meeting his or her needs for a successful reintegration back into the community. The process is similar to the Restorative Circle process except no loved ones participate during the Modified Circle, which other incarcerated people attend instead. The process is solution-focused and promotes desistance from crime for both the individual having the Modified Circle and the participating incarcerated people. Qualitative evidence shows the process successfully assists incarcerated people in rescripting their life stories; assists them in developing plans for reconciling with loved ones and the community; and helps them find ways to meet their other needs for a positive life and successful reintegration.

Keywords: incarceration; group process; restorative justice; desistance; solution-focused brief therapy; reintegration; enactive learning

'Hey, I just got word. I got listed for Laumaka.¹ I could be outta here in a week', says Eric to a group of 15 men and 2 women. The group sits facing each other in a circle of old beat-up chairs with plastic padding bursting at the seams. All the men wear red T-shirts with *Waiawa* printed in white old English font style, the name of the minimum security prison where they live. The two women, dressed in street clothes, are facilitators of a training program titled *Restorative Justice as a Solution-Focused Approach to Conflict and Wrongdoing* (see Walker & Sakai, 2006), which meets once a week for 12 weeks. The group is in the fifth week of training.

'So what's your plan?', one of the facilitators asks Eric.

'What'd ya mean? I'm going to Laumaka,' he replies.

'Right, but after Laumaka, what's your plan? Where will you live and stuff?'

'I don't,' says Eric, with a furrowed forehead, adding 'Don't know what I'm gonna do exactly. Yeah, man, wish I had a plan.'

'Well, let's do one tonight. We can have a *Restorative Circle*. Everyone here can help you think up ideas and hammer out a plan. We'll type it up and in a couple days you'll have a written plan,' the facilitator says.

One hour after Eric announced his impending move to Laumaka, he is sitting next to one of the facilitators, while the other one stands writing information on a white board with a blue felt pen, recording what the group says.

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Two days later Eric receives a printed four-page *Circle Summary and Transition Plan*, which documents what happened at the hour-long impromptu group process. The plan includes what Eric is most proud of having accomplished since being in prison; it lists all his strengths that the other men said he has; and it outlines ways that he can meet his needs for ensuring a successful transition back into the community. The written plan also includes what Eric will do and by what date he will accomplish these tasks in order to meet his needs.

Eric's experience marked the first trial of the *Modified Restorative Circle* process that was discovered serendipitously during the training program he participated in at Waiawa prison.

Hawai'i's Restorative Circle Prison Program

In 2005 Hawai'i began piloting a two-part reintegration program for incarcerated people (De Jong & Berg, 2008). One part of the program is the *Restorative Circle*, a facilitated group process for those incarcerated individuals to meet with their loved ones and prison representatives to make a detailed written reentry plan (Walker, Sakai, & Brady, 2006). The group process for formulating the plan addresses how the incarcerated person can live a healthy and happy life, which necessarily includes drug and crime-free living. The 2007 Special Session of the Hawai'i state legislature mandated and funded a statewide pilot study of the Restorative Circle Program (*Hawai'i Legislature, Senate Bill 932*, 2007).

The second part of the reintegration program is *Restorative Justice as a Solution-Focused Approach to Conflict and Wrongdoing*, a 12-week facilitator training program for incarcerated people to learn cognitive skills for living healthy, happy, and peaceful lives. Learning *emotional* and *social intelligence* (Goleman, 2006), along with specific cognitive and behavioral skills including *mindfulness* (Williams, Teasdale, Segal, & Kabat-Zinn, 2007) and listening, to help develop insight and self-awareness, are important features of the facilitator training (Walker & Sakai, 2006). The facilitator training for those incarcerated was developed at the suggestion of staff at Waiawa prison in 2005.

The Restorative Circle and facilitator training programs are separate and individuals may choose to participate in both or either programs. Eric was participating in the facilitator training program when he had his Modified Restorative Circle.

The incarcerated person drives the Restorative Circle process, beginning with the decision to have one and choosing who may attend. Loved ones and favored prison representatives are invited. A Restorative Circle is not possible without a loved one participating because his or her attendance is a critical component of the process.

Restorative Circles are based on restorative justice (Walker, Sakai, & Brady, 2006) and there are ranges of restorative practices (McCold & Wachtel, 2002). Restorative Circles are a 'fully restorative' process because the three 'primary stakeholders', that is, the person who caused harm (the incarcerated person – the offender²); a person who was harmed (the loved one – the victim); and the 'community of care' (the prison representative) participates in the process (McCold & Wachtel, 2002). Modified Circles on the other hand are 'mostly restorative' because at the most, two direct stakeholders are involved, the incarcerated person and the community of care (namely, her incarcerated friends, possible prison representatives, and other community resource people) (McCold & Wachtel, 2002).

Inviting loved ones and arranging a Restorative Circle can be challenging and is part of the reason the process is time-consuming and can be difficult or impossible in many cases. In addition to people like Eric, who do not have the time necessary for a full Circle, many incarcerated people have no loved ones able and/or willing to attend. Some have no family or friends living in Hawai'i or on the island that the Circle is held where they are incarcerated. Besides a lack of transportation, many loved ones cannot come for other reasons including the inability to take time off work; no child-care; they are minors who cannot obtain legal consent to visit the prison; or they are too ill to attend. Finally, some loved ones are unwilling to participate in Circles due to poor relationships and estrangement from the incarcerated person.

The Modified Restorative Circle, therefore, is a viable alternative for people who cannot have a full Circle. Instead of loved ones, other incarcerated friends and possibly prison staff, and community resource people can attend. It gives incarcerated people the chance to increase their self-efficacy by taking responsibility for their lives; it is an opportunity for them to learn how to create a positive life including building a support system; it generates positive emotions needed for change; and it is a means of reconstructing life stories into ones that are more likely to lead to their desisting from crime. An incarcerated person hearing what a group of incarcerated peers say his or her strengths are can be the beginning of a newly reconstructed life story.

Offering an incarcerated person a Modified Circle is a positive alternative that provides someone wanting to improve his or her life with the hope that he or she can achieve this, even though loved ones do not participate.

Description and rationale for Restorative Circles

Restorative Circles and Modified Circles seek the same desired outcomes. Both models focus on what an incarcerated person needs for a healthy, happy and peaceful life, and both models are opportunities for them to learn how they might meet their needs.

Both Circle models assume that most of those incarcerated have the capacity, especially with a group of caring others, to make decisions and plans for a positive life. Restorative Circles provide the opportunity to learn how to create positive futures by giving those incarcerated the chance to figure out how to do just that. Allowing an imprisoned person the opportunity to take the lead in planning for his or her reintegration, compared to being the subject of a *case plan* prepared by professionals, is also more likely to result in increased self-efficacy and learning (Bandura, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993).

Albert Bandura whose work in self-efficacy concerning our beliefs about our capabilities,³ has extensively studied how people learn. Bandura's work shows that people learn best through experience, or *enactive learning*. The second best way for people to learn is by modeling and observing others. Telling people what they should do is the least effective way of learning (Bandura, 1997), yet lectures and presentations continue to be the most widely used method of education today (Jarvis, 2001).

Circles provide enactive and modeled learning opportunities. For enactive learning, incarcerated persons are engaged in planning for their lives by participating in a Circle. They are envisioning what kind of life is preferred and generating possibilities and alternatives to create that desired future. This type of planning involves

motivation that is positive and ‘approach-oriented’ (seeking a positive desired outcome: *promotion*) versus ‘avoidance-oriented’ (avoiding a harmful result: *prevention*) (Friedman & Forster, 2008). Approach-oriented endeavors significantly result in increased positive cognition including increased creative abilities (Friedman & Forster, 2001). For modeled learning, the person having the Circle observes and learns from the participants who share their ideas and knowledge about how the preferred future might be obtained.

In the Modified Circles, supporters also have the opportunity to learn how they can create more positive lives by listening to and observing each other. For example, during Eric’s Circle, another incarcerated man recognized and said that he too believed he had wrongly used women in the past after Eric had discussed wanting to reconcile this. The man’s acknowledgment demonstrates how group members imitate the actions of the motivated members and learn from each other. In this case the other man modeled Eric, as demonstrated in Bandura’s 1965 study on vicarious processes (cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

After Eric’s Circle, several other participants in the facilitator training wanted one, and as more of the men had Circles, more asked to have them. After a few weeks, two Circles provided a training day to accommodate everyone who wanted one. Unfortunately, not all those who wanted a Modified Circle were able to have one because time ran out, the training program ended, and the prison administration objected to allowing them outside of the training program.

Circles are also likely to be more effective at generating alternatives and problem solving than a group of corrections professionals who alone are less cognitively diverse than those incarcerated. Incarcerated people have different cognitive perspectives based on their diverse education, ethnic identities, ages, and life experiences (*U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Criminal Offender Statistics*, n.d.). The more cognitively diverse the group, the more creative and effective it is at problem solving.

Restorative Circles promote taking active responsibility

Addressing what one needs, whether incarcerated or not, and how to attain those needs, is a responsible approach to life and an important underlying principle of the Circle process. The idea that *taking responsibility* is a necessary part of life was described well by concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl who believed: ‘Life ultimately means taking responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks, which it constantly sets for each individual’ (1984, p. 85).

Frankl’s idea of taking responsibility is future oriented and suggests that individuals should face whatever is happening to them and address their problems. This interpretation of what taking responsibility means is consistent with the approach Maruna and Mann advocate is necessary for people who have offended to reform and rehabilitate:

Rather than insist that offenders take ‘responsibility’ for the past, we suggest efforts should focus on helping them take responsibility for the future, shifting the therapeutic focus from *post hoc* excuses to offense-supportive attitudes and underlying cognitive schemas that are empirically linked to re-offending. (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 155)

Consistent with Maruna and Mann’s point are Braithwaite and Braithwaite, who distinguish,

... between the backward-looking passive responsibility of being held responsible for a past wrong and the forward-looking active responsibility to right wrongs in which one may or may not have been personally implicated. Active responsibility is a virtue, a virtue which modern justice institutions punish: active responsibility to right wrongs today is taken as evidence of sanctionable backward-looking responsibility. (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001, p. 20)

This future focused concept of taking responsibility is that ‘individuals do not blame themselves for their problems, but hold themselves responsible for the solution to the problems’ (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 167). The importance of ‘[d]ividing the concept of responsibility into “blame for the past” and “control over the future”’ is for challenging a pessimistic explanatory style of past events (ibid.). People who take the blame for all the negative things that happen in their lives are more likely to continue criminal behavior (Maruna & Mann, 2006, p. 165). Not only is a pessimistic explanatory style linked to criminal recidivism, but it is also a predictor of poor mental health and poor physical health (Brantley, 2007; Seligman, 1998).

The Circle process is optimistic. It focuses on the future and what an incarcerated person needs to do to live a positive life. During both types of Circle, the incarcerated person explores ways to repair the harm caused to others for past behavior. Addressing the effects of one’s behavior and how others have suffered is important for rehabilitation. ‘It is easier to harm others when their suffering is not visible and when destructive actions are physically and temporally remote from their injurious effects’ (Bandura, 2004, p. 44).

The Restorative Circle with loved ones takes three hours, two hours longer than the Modified Circle. The extra time is needed for emotional processing between the incarcerated person and his or her loved ones. Addressing reconciliation during a Modified Circle is not nearly as emotional. Yet even without any loved ones present, the incarcerated person develops a plan for how she or he will try and repair harm caused by his or her past behavior. Most incarcerated people include staying clean and sober as one way to reconcile.

Restorative Circles for reconciliation and healing

Restorative justice addresses the needs of people harmed by wrongdoing, those who caused the harm, and others in the community who were affected by the harm, including the loved ones of those directly affected (Zehr, 1990). Restorative justice focuses on both the physical and emotional needs of people, including the need to repair relationships and build positive social connections. Three basic questions are addressed by restorative practices: (1) Who has been affected by the wrongdoing?; (2) How have they been affected?; and (3) What can be done to repair the harm? (Zehr, 2002a). Answering these questions can increase coping skills and healing (Walker, 2000). People harmed by crime as well as those who have committed crimes can suffer trauma and benefit from processes that support healing (Meili, 2004; Zehr, 2002b).

For successful reintegration, incarcerated people need a functional role in the community. The needs addressed at the Circles are basic for anyone functioning in a community. The first need someone in prison has is for reconciliation. Incarcerated people need to find ways to reconcile and restore relationships, including the relationship they have with themselves. *Restoration* and *reconciliation* for the purposes of a Circle, does not require a repaired and continued relationship with another person.

For the Circle processes, reconciliation can simply be: ‘the process of making consistent or compatible’ (*Dictionary.com*, n.d., para. 2) and does not require contact between people directly hurt by crime and the people who committed the crime. The Circle processes can be used effectively for so-called *victimless crimes*, like substance abuse and prostitution. Addressing how incarceration has affected a person, and what they can do to repair the harm, including imprisonment, can be part of the Circle.

While most people in American prisons plead guilty to an offense (Hall, 2003), there are many cases of innocent people being imprisoned (Patterson, 2007). The Circle process could be used for incarcerated people who did not harm anyone and who are wrongly imprisoned. Frankl was wrongly imprisoned, yet he took responsibility to face and cope with his horrible situation. Besides exhausting legal remedies, a wrongly imprisoned person could address the injustice through the Circle process by working to find solutions to the situation, even if the solutions are simply ways in which to cope. Additionally, a wrongly imprisoned person could possibly reconcile with anyone who might have falsely accused him or her of the crime.

The Circle process, whether or not it includes those directly affected by their participation, addresses how others were harmed by past behavior, including oneself, and what might be done to repair that harm. In some cases, repair of the harm may be that the incarcerated person plans to stay clean and sober and to never contact the person she or he hurt.

In Eric’s case, when he was asked who was affected by his behavior, he said his family and some women:

You younger guys are gonna think this is nuts, but I took advantage of a lot a women. And I think it was wrong. I’ve used lotta women for cookin, rides and sex. I have ta quit doing it. It’s part of my recovery to stop. To be a new man, I gotta stop using women.

To reconcile, Eric decided and included in his reintegration plan that, ‘in the future he will have *healthy relationships* where there is *sex only when there is love*. No more using women for sex, food, etc.’ (emphases in the original).

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy Application

The Circle processes use the *solution-focused brief therapy* (SFBT) approach. SFBT began in the 1970s through the work of family therapists Steve deShazer, Insoo Kim Berg, and their colleagues in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Berg, 1994). SFBT offered a radical approach to helping troubled people. Instead of focusing on motivation and understanding why problems exist and trying to fix them, the solution-focused approach asks people to consider *what they want in life* rather than *what they do not want*, and to think of strategies for attaining their desires (Trepper, Dolan, McColum, & Nelson, 2006).

A guiding principle of SFBT is that people have the ability ‘to know what is best for them and to effectively plan how to get there’ (Trepper, Dolan, McColum, & Nelson, 2006, p. 134).

The basic premise of the model is that exceptions to problems offer keys and clues to solving problems and that it is more profitable to pay attention to the activities that center around a successful solution than to the problems. These exceptions

become the pathway to future solutions. When and if there are no past successes to build on, the client can be helped to forge a different future by imagining ‘a miracle’ and identifying small but realistically achievable steps toward that event (Berg, 1994, p. x).

Research shows that the solution-focused approach is successful with both volunteer and mandated clients, and for problems including drug abuse, child neglect and abuse, and family violence (De Jong & Berg, 2008).

In a solution-focused program for men convicted of domestic violence mandated to participate, it was stressed that: ‘Participants take ownership of their problem not by talking about or reaffirming the problem but by defining goals of therapy and constructing solutions’ (Lee, Sebold, & Uken, 2003, p. 9). This is consistent with Frankl’s idea of taking responsibility ‘to find the right answer’ (Frankl, 1984, p. 85) and Maruna and Mann’s (2006, p. 167) notion that it means: ‘focusing on what needs to be done’, rather than dwelling on problems.

SFBT is similar to *motivational interviewing*, but is less expert intensive. Motivational interviewing relies on counselors to determine the *stage of change* that individuals are in for applying that approach, while SFBT finds individuals capable of change at any time (Lewis & Osborn, 2004).

SFBT co-founder Insoo Kim Berg assisted in the development of the original Restorative Circle process (Walker, Sakai, & Brady, 2006). In both type of Circle processes, facilitators and recorders are trained in SFBT and use the approach in providing them.

Modified Restorative Circle Process description

Eric’s Modified Circle begins with the facilitator saying, ‘The purpose of this Circle is to assist Eric in making a plan for reconciling for his past behavior and to find ways to live a successful life’. Eric, sitting next to the facilitator, is asked, ‘What are you most proud of having accomplished since being in prison?’ He replies:

That I focus on myself now and what I need to improve on. I learned a lot about taking responsibility for myself being here. My biggest lesson has been learning that ‘Pain is the touchstone for all spiritual growth.’

Next, one by one, each of the other incarcerated men sitting in the Circle, from the closest one to the facilitator’s right side, are asked: ‘What are some of Eric’s strengths?’

For most people in prison, this is the first time they have ever heard a group of people say positive things about them, and many tough-looking men have gotten teary-eyed hearing the compliments. One by one each of the 15 men offers different descriptions of Eric’s strengths, which adds up to 38 positive characteristics including: ‘confident, determined, intelligent, polite, humble, kind heart, compassionate, flexible, positive thinking, good leadership skills, has insight’. Finally, after the last of the 15 men have spoken, Eric is asked, ‘What other strengths do you have not mentioned yet?’

‘Without seeming conceited, I do enjoy helping others,’ he says smiling.

The facilitator says, ‘And another strength you have is that you take responsibility for yourself and you want to make amends and a plan for a successful return to the community.’ The facilitator looks at the rest of the men in the Circle and says: ‘You

can all help Eric find ways to meet his needs for a good life and one of his first needs is for reconciliation and to make amends.’

The facilitator next asks Eric: ‘Who was harmed by your past behavior?’
 ‘My brother and daughter. I haven’t communicated with them in too long.’
 ‘How has that affected them?’, asks the facilitator.
 ‘They counted on me and I wasn’t there. I would tell them I’d be there and never showed up. So many times I let them down.’
 ‘How did that affect them Eric, you’re not showing up?’
 ‘Well, I worry my daughter is not going to trust anyone. And my brother was left hanging so many times it’s a joke.’
 ‘What do you think you could do to repair the harm?’
 ‘I will call them.’
 ‘When?’
 ‘As soon as I get to Laumaka.’
 ‘When do you think that will be?’
 ‘Within the next four months.’

Later when Eric’s Modified Restorative Circle Summary and Transition Plan are prepared, it will include Eric’s intention to contact his brother and his daughter. Under the heading: ‘Things to Do’ it states that Eric will call his brother and his daughter ‘within in the next four months’. Each of the needs that he and the group address will provide a specific time for taking specific actions.

After the reconciliation segment of the Circle is completed, the process addresses the incarcerated person’s other needs including housing, financial and employment, transportation, lifelong learning, documents, emotional, and physical health. Each need is addressed separately by the group, which generates suggestions for how the needs might be met. For example, housing might include options like ‘clean and sober house’, ‘studio rental’, ‘room at Mom’s’. Housing needs always include at least three alternatives.

Then, after the incarcerated person selects which ways he or she wants to meet his or her needs, it is decided what is needed to make an option happen. For example, for the person who chooses a ‘clean and sober house’ for a housing alternative, they would be asked:

‘What do you need to do to get a place in a clean and sober house?’
 ‘Write a letter to them.’
 ‘How will you know what address to send the letter?’
 ‘The list on the board in the dorm has all the addresses.’
 ‘By what date will you write the letter?’, the facilitator probes further.

This specific information stating to whom the letter will be written and by what date, will be included in the plan, which is usually about four pages long, and is mailed to the incarcerated person several days after the Circle.

After all the needs are discussed and the plan is finalized, the group members each compliment the person having the Circle on something. Often these compliments are added to the list of their strengths also included in the plan. Finally, the person having the Circle is the last to speak describing what it was like to have the Circle and anything else he or she wants to say. So far, every person having a Modified Circle has thanked the group for its help. Most of the other participants stand up, hug each other, and shake hands.

Restorative Circles generate positive emotions

Circles are highly positive and enjoyable emotional experiences that generate optimism. They assume incarcerated people can address what they need for healthy and happy lives. Circles are in stark contrast to ‘treatment programmes that appeal to a cognitive deficit model of offenders’ competence in reasoning’ (Rumgay, 2004, p. 405). Instead of assigning professionals to prepare case plans for incarcerated people, the Modified Circle invites them to take responsibility for determining their futures, including how to reconcile.

According to psychologist Paul Ekman, an expert in the physiology of emotion, ‘enjoyable emotions motivate our lives; they cause us to do things by and large that are good for us’ (Ekman, 2003, p. 199). Emotions are contagious. ‘Emotions, like moods, are infections. The “circle of emotion” is the best way I have found to describe what happens in emotional infection’ (Kast, 1994, p. 33). Verena Kast is a Swiss psychologist who believes that our moments of greatest joy ‘are also moments when real changes can take place’ (Kast, 1994, p. 20). Kast encourages us all to work on ‘reconstructing a biography of joy’ (p. 54). ‘Reconstructing a biography of joy removes us from our usual biographical treadmills and habitual conceptualizations. Once again we discover a new story about ourselves; perhaps even creatively construct one’ (p. 55).

The Circle process and positive display of emotions and connectedness between participants are important for cultivating change. Hearing what others say are your strengths helps reconstruct a new positive story. As Kast states:

Symbiotic connectedness conveys a genuine feeling of *Geborgenheit* (that is, safe, secure, protected). Elated feelings give us the experience of feeling sustained and carried in life, an experience we call hope—hope in the unforeseen, hope for the better, for newness and change. This hope carries us with it. Allowing us to bear much of what we often think is unbearable. (Kast, 1994, p. 158)

Circles provide hope for what is possible and a concrete plan for creating a desired future.

Restorative Circles promote desistance

‘The phenomenon of natural desistance’ (Rumgay, 2004), concerns how people who engaged in criminal behavior, are able to stay crime free after deciding to reform (Maruna, 2001).

Shadd Maruna, who has spent a career studying desistance, advises that it is more important to focus on *how* people manage to stay crime free, rather than focus on *why* they decide to stop committing crimes. He points to overwhelming evidence and agreement in the ‘research community’ that eventually ‘the vast majority of delinquents and adult offenders reliably desist from offending behavior in later life (Rutherford, 1992)’ (Maruna, 2001, p. 20).

Desistance is an ongoing process and ‘sustained desistance most likely requires a fundamental and intentional shift in a person’s sense of self’ (Maruna, 2001, p. 17). According to Cy Kalama a longtime Waiawa prison drug treatment counselor who has participated in numerous Circles: ‘The Circles are a place to say who the *new man* is, who the *new warrior* is, compared to the *old man* and the *old slave* they used to be’ (emphasis added).

He also says: 'The Circles are a place to express hopes and dreams and find what's needed specifically for a good life. They help create a support network'. Maruna states that 'The best-developed theoretical argument in this tradition can be found in the work of Neal Shover (1983, 1985, 1996), who attributed desistance from crime, in part, to changes in 'identity, self-concept and the framework employed to judge oneself and others' (Shover 1983, p. 208)' (Maruna, 2001, p. 34). Shover found:

Successful creation of bonds with conventional others and lines of legitimate activity indisputably is the most important contingency that causes men to alter or terminate their criminal careers. At all ages and potential turning points, those who fail to secure satisfying employment or to create bonds with conventional others often return to their former lifestyles and the risk of criminal involvement this brings. (Shover, 1996, p. 129)

Modified Circles provide incarcerated people with the means to create 'bonds with conventional others.' During the reconciliation state of his Modified Circle, Karl explains who he believes was harmed by his past behavior: 'It was my girlfriend's grandma. She did a lot for us. She'd bail us out when no one else would. She just wanted to help us. I really hurt her. I wanna to tell her I'm sorry'.

As a result of the Modified Circle, Karl decided to write the grandmother a letter thanking her for her kindness, apologizing for his behavior, and asking how he could work to repair the harm he caused. He wrote and mailed her the letter as he had decided to do in his Circle, and it was included in his plan. The following week during the facilitator training, Karl beamed as he excitedly told the group: 'I gotta letter from my mom! First time I hear from her in years! She said she might come and visit me too!'

Karl's mother wrote to him saying that the grandmother whom he had written to the week before, had called and read her his letter. The two women were moved by what Karl had written and how much he had appeared to have changed and grown since going into prison. Not only did Karl experience joy in hearing from his mother, but others in the facilitator training shared in this positive emotion as well. 'I just was so happy for him! I seen him get the letta and that smile on his face. It made me so happy too!', said Kimo, one of the other men in the group.

Eight months after Karl's Modified Circle and writing to his girlfriend's grandmother, he has rekindled a relationship with his mother and father who are sponsoring his release from the Laumaka work furlough program, which is required for his parole. 'Writing that letter made all the difference', says Karl.

In addition to the objective variables such as the connection with conventional others, Shover identifies 'subjective contingencies' that influence desistance. These cognitive variables relate mainly to an individual's 'Resolve and Determination' to 'go straight' (Shover, 1996, p. 130). The most optimistic people desist and it is the individuals themselves who are best at predicting their ability to do so (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). Modified Circles generate optimism and the resulting plan given to the person having one is a reminder of their strengths and possibilities for a positive life.

Modified Restorative Circles are an opportunity to reconstruct positive biographies

People who successfully desist from committing crimes have developed positive narratives about their lives (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 2001; McNeill, 2004; Maruna, 2001). The importance in telling positive stories about our lives for healing is shared by Howard Zehr (2002b, p. 28):

Whether we have victimized or have been victimized, the journey from brokenness and isolation to transcendence and belonging requires us to renarrate our stories so that they are no longer just about shame and humiliation but ultimately about dignity and triumph. Questions of meaning, honour and responsibility are all part of this journey.

Maruna believes that ‘three key themes’ characterize ‘desisting narratives’. These are ‘generative motivations, the core self, and a sense of agency’ (Maruna, 2001, p. 115). Generative motivations are concerned with doing something for others, the idea that we leave the world a better place for the next generation. The core self-aspect of the narrative concerns the image of one being basically a good person who has behaved badly. Finally, the third aspect of the desister’s narrative – a sense of agency – concerns a ‘narrator’s strong sense that he or she is in control of his or her destiny’ (Maruna, 2001, p. 147)

Throughout the Modified Circle process, incarcerated people are given opportunities to describe and explain their self-narratives. Eric said, ‘I will be the Eric who my brother and sister can count on’. This indicates a generative motivation and his intention to help others. Many of the incarcerated people who have had Circles also make plans to help others, including working with drug treatment and helping young people avoid drugs and crime by being mentors and coaches. Despite their prior criminal behavior, people who have Circles exercise self-control by articulating their intentions. The Circles give them a chance to begin fashioning a new biography and a positive self-narrative.

Conclusion

Six months after his Modified Circle, Eric was working full-time, released from the Laumaka work furlough program, and off parole. In addition to Eric, 28 men and 10 women have had Modified Restorative Circles. More facilitator trainings are planned for Waiawa and the women’s prison in 2009 and 2010 when additional Circles can be provided.

While there is no experimental evidence that the Modified Restorative Circle process has indeed increased desistance, McNeill states that: ‘In terms of working to support the reconstruction of identity involved in desistance, this seems to underline the relevance of the “redemptive” opportunities that both community service and restorative justice might offer’ (2004).

We do know that the Modified Circle process has left the participants, including prison staff, other incarcerated people and the facilitators, feeling optimistic. Surveys collected from participants all indicate positive responses to the process. One incarcerated person commented on her survey that she especially liked the process because it shows ‘there are more positives than negatives’.

Generating positive emotions is not only important for criminal and drug rehabilitation, but it is vital for all our lives. As Kast says,

We must become conscious of how important the elated emotions really are for our lives and for the life of the communities and of society. Bound together in their deepest cores, joy, inspiration and hope strengthen each other. Joy is the most common, everyday emotion of the three, and is thus the most readily accessible it comes when we allow it into our lives directly, or indirectly—through memory or in the company of children or other persons. Joy is an emotion that wants to be shared. A joy multiplies. It opens doors to inspiration and hope puts us on the far side of divisiveness by focusing our attention on what we share, and delivers us the energy we need to realize our common ground. (Kast, 1994, p. 160)

Our prisons have focused far too long on the negative aspects of people without success. It is time to try something different and focus on people's strengths and positive emotions.

Modified Circles should be offered regularly to anyone in prison. They could be offered in conjunction with a case plan if necessary. The recidivism rates of the participants should be collected and analyzed. In the meantime if the Circles increase positive emotions for incarcerated people, prison staff, and other participants, there exists sufficient justification for their support.

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Notes

1. Laumaka is a Hawai'i State Department of Public Safety residential work furlough program located in Honolulu.
2. Every effort is made in this article to not label people as offenders and victims, which terms are used here only for purposes of clarity. Negative labels reinforce negative thoughts and emotions. While we should disapprove of bad behavior, we should look for the strengths, possibilities, and hope in people who are more than what happens to them and what they have done.
3. Self-efficacy is not self-esteem. 'Perceived self-efficacy is concerned with judgments of personal capabilities, whereas self-esteem is concerned with judgments of self-worth' (Bandura, 1997, p. 11).

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