

# **Working on Nonviolence with People who killed**

by Pat Patfoort

Since 6 years we have been working on a regular basis in 7 different prisons in Belgium with groups of about 10 prisoners. We met with the groups one or two times a week, over 8-10 sessions of 1h1/2 (with 1/2h more of private conversations afterwards). Altogether we did 20 such series of sessions, so we worked with about 200 detainees, mostly men, but also a few women. Most of them were imprisoned for a long term, because of terrible facts like having killed.

## **1) Content of the seminars**

After the facilitator of the session had presented herself, her organisation and the seminar, the first session was one in which the detainees were asked, through a symbolic exercise, to **think about themselves and** were invited to **tell the group** afterwards some concrete facts in which **skills and feelings about themselves** showed up (like love, happiness, excitement, hope, irritation, anger, regret, hate). Most of the time they participated very actively in thinking about themselves and usually they all told something afterwards to the group. As we did at the end of every session, we evaluated this first session, and usually people said they liked learning to know one another, they liked the atmosphere of listening and respect for one another, and they wanted to continue to thinking about discovering themselves.

From the second session we started, using the MmE-model<sup>1</sup>, to give **theoretical lessons about violence** : how it starts, how people deal with differences in a way which leads to violence, what is a conflict, what are the mechanisms of violence, how people get involved in them and how difficult it is to get out of them, what are the different means of violence, how violence can be provoked, what is aggression, how people usually deal with it (see fig. 1). The theoretical lessons were **supported by giving lots of concrete illustrations and** were regularly **supplemented with exercises** to bring the theory closer to the prisoners and their own experiences. Through these exercises they learned to situate themselves inside of violence and conflicts, to understand how they came to behave in violent ways, to see what were the mechanisms and means of violence each of them was using, and to recognise the consequences of their acts. These sessions were sometimes very emotional.

Very important items during these lessons were '**expressing anger**' and '**defending oneself**', not being passive and weak. We discussed that it was very important to be able to express one's anger, and to defend oneself; otherwise violence is done to us, we are hurt and will internalise our anger and will feel bad. But we also considered that it has to happen in a different way than the usual aggressive and destructive one. It's O.K. to be strong, but it shouldn't be at the expense of someone else. So it was very important to distinguish the fact of defending oneself (which is healthy and positive) from the way it happens (which often is negative).

The **second part of the theoretical lessons** was **about** the alternative for violence, **nonviolence** (see fig. 2)<sup>2</sup> : how does the alternative model contrast with the basic model of

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see : [www.patpatfoort.be](http://www.patpatfoort.be)

<sup>2</sup> At this point, we work with fig.2 without mentioning the two kinds of justice.

violence, what are the instruments of this model, and what skills do we need to put it in practice?

We did **exercises** to learn to use those skills and instruments:

- creating stories about violent and about nonviolent facts
- small role plays about communication
  - o asking something of someone in an aggressive and in a nonviolent way
  - o giving criticism in an aggressive and in a constructive way
  - o refusing to do something in both ways
  - o expressing anger in both ways
- listening exercises, complemented with sheets with tips
- filling in questionnaires about their own attitudes in situations of conflict, about their own ways of expressing anger, and discussing them
- offering a ‘trick-box’ to be able to master oneself in situations of high tension, and trying some of those ‘tricks’ out, like for instance deep breathing and relaxation
- discovering positive qualities in oneself and in others, giving and receiving positive affirmation

Only during follow-up seminars we did ‘real’ role-plays, in which they could try out different behaviours towards someone, to develop an equivalent nonviolent one. For instance one was playing a guard and another one himself feeling insulted by the guard (this was a situation that was really regularly happening to this prisoner). And the prisoner tried out several behaviours not reacting in an aggressive way towards the guard (which could have been physically very aggressive). After every play the group discussed what elements they thought had been aggressive and what had been nonviolent.

On top of these formal exercises, there were **two more ways to practice** nonviolence and the skills for it:

- First, when there were difficult times inside the group (between two prisoners, or between one prisoner and the rest of the group, or even between the facilitator and one prisoner, or between the facilitator and the whole group) we used these situations to put as well as possible the learned theory into practice and to discuss and evaluate it afterwards. This greatly strengthened the lessons. It made people more easily believe it could work.
- Secondly, in between the different sessions, the detainees always got some kind of task to do ('cellwork', cf. homework), so as to try out what had been learned during the session with the cell-contemporary, or a visiting family-member, or a guard. Or the detainees brought up during the session a difficult situation they had in coping with one of those people, and during the session we analysed and worked on it. This kind of additional work made them think more and more deeply about the content of the course.

Also very important to give the work depth, was to give at the beginning of the seminar a folder to all participants, in which for every session they could add written material about that session: either printed material (for instance with the models and diagrams), or filled-in printed material (like the questionnaires), or comments or conclusions about the exercises (sometimes dictated). At the end of the seminars, prisoners often expressed how important it was for them to keep this material and to be able to look at it regularly.

## **2) What people learned**

They learned about speaking with I-messages, how to deal with their own emotions (like frustrations, bottled-up anger, powerlessness, jealousy, being confronted with a lack of understanding or injustice, sorrow), accepting their own emotions, looking for their own motivations, empathy, giving people choices instead of putting them under pressure, being aware of different forms of communication (our intonation, our non-verbal communication). They became aware of how other people can see the reality in a different way from themselves, without being wrong. Other people can have other values.

They particularly liked to discuss with the group, especially in the way we did, which they were not used to at all: everyone could have his/her say, everyone was listened to and respected, people didn't try to convince the other ones. So they did appreciate very much that the facilitator from the beginning made them talk one by one and listen to one another, that they didn't talk at the same time or interrupted one another. This was new for most of them.

With the presented models, the exercises and the discussions, the **two most important points** they discovered were:

- 1) There are not just two positions, the Major- and the minor-position (the winner and the loser), but there is also a third one: the Equivalent position. There is not just one strong position, the Major-position, the hard one, but there is also the Equivalent position, the really strong one. There are 2 kinds of heroes: violent ones, but also nonviolent ones. And one needs more strength and courage to develop the Equivalent position than the Major-position.  
**When one doesn't act in an aggressive way**, in a Major way, **it doesn't automatically mean** he is in a minor-position, that **he is weak**. He also can be building up the Equivalent position. He can be very strong.
- 2) **There is a way to express anger and to defend oneself which is not aggressive and destructive, but** which is **constructive**. There is a way to deal with one's energy in a constructive way. And they started practicing to make this concrete.

Here below we find some comments of the prisoners at the end of the seminars about what they learned:

1. When we make time for one another, we see that there are many more good people than we sometimes think there are.
2. My conviction that people have good will has been confirmed again.
3. It is possible to have a group in which everyone is Equivalent, in which nobody is excluded or ignored, in which everyone can talk freely without feeling put in a minor-position.
4. Most important for me was the atmosphere in the group, open and pleasant.
5. I made new contacts; this is something that happens here in prison too seldom.
6. The most important thing for me was that I heard many problems of other people.
7. There is a nonviolent way to get out of conflicts.
8. I learned things I never heard about before.
9. This seminar will be very useful for my life later.
10. The schematic design gave me more insight.
11. I got new insights about how aggression and conflicts arise, and how to deal with them.
12. I got more insights concerning conflicts and aggression. Now let's see if I can deal better with all that.

13. How it is possible, already long beforehand, to recognize and eventually change a conflict. This can be very useful for me in my life.
14. I learned to look at problems in a different way.
15. We have to go about conflicts more consciously.
16. The most important for me is that we can work on problems of aggression.
17. One can change when one really wants to and is open to it.
18. Sometimes we don't know enough about ourselves or how we behave.
19. I got a better insight about how other people think about me. This is valuable to avoid or resolve conflicts.
20. We don't have some skills, and by practising them we can improve the situation.
21. I don't have enough skills yet to deal in a different way with aggressive people.
22. I better understood when we put someone in a minor-position, how this person can react.
23. We should not put other people in a minor-position.
24. When we use aggression, we are always the stupid one. Aggression doesn't produce anything.
25. This seminar made me think a lot and showed me some points I recognize in myself or others. On the other hand I hesitate about some points of theory and practice. I think every human being has his limits of tolerance and is steered by his emotions. When these emotions dominate the mind, then a person will do stupid things.
26. The most important point for me is that I have to think first instead of acting because I am fiery.
27. It's necessary to learn to master ourselves.
28. People who have patience will be rewarded; people who don't have patience will be punished.
29. I know better how to deal with the opinions of others.
30. We have to listen better to others because their reasoning and foundations are also important and worth considering.
31. I always knew aggression and violence were senseless.
32. I learned how I can resolve a problem with words, and not at once physically.
33. The most important is : talk, talk and talk.
34. I learned it's important to speak with I-messages.
35. We should not be afraid to open ourselves towards other people.
36. The prison obviously is not the most ideal place to learn about all this, but nevertheless we also got positive tips for prison life.
37. I learned a lot about tolerance, respect for every human being, understanding one another, and self-control.
38. We have to understand and respect one another, learn to know more about one another, and in this way avoid situations of misery.
39. All people should be considered as Equivalent people; this is often not the case in reality.
40. I learned about how it should not happen, about myself, my fellow man, looking at other people, about patience, respect, self-control, resolving conflicts with words, being positive in negative situations, positive thinking, my behaviour towards other people, how to build a better world.

### **3) What changes did these seminars bring in the prisoners**

Following are some items which prisoners said the seminars had changed:

1. The problems I had in the past are still hurting me a lot, but I am learning to accept them better, and I now try to make the best of it.
2. This course gave me some golden tips for now and for the future.
3. I surely shall use the ‘trick-box’ in my life.
4. I am now more focused on the future.
5. I don’t want to come back to the prison, so I want to deal in a better way with conflicts and aggression.
6. I feel I deal in a different way with aggression and conflicts because I understand better what they are and how they happen. I want to learn everyday to handle them better.
7. I understood some errors I made when dealing with aggression.
8. I was doing wrong. Now I master myself better. I think more.
9. I didn’t know when and where to deal with my problems. I learned about that here.
10. As I got better insight about the underlying causes of aggression, I now think more and work on mastering myself and talking more.
11. I know better how to deal with my self-control.
12. I talk more at the moment itself.
13. I’m learning to express myself to others in the right way.
14. I became more patient: I know myself a bit better now.
15. I started to think more about myself and I often stand still thinking of daily situations.
16. I notice more how I react in a conflict.
17. I understand other people better now.
18. It was important to learn to look at a person in a positive way and to say something positive to one another, instead of always negative things.
19. To avoid physical but also verbal aggression, I try now to think about myself in a more positive way.
20. I became more quiet because I know better now what we can do. I work on talking in a more open way, learning to know people better, trying to talk to people in a more equivalent way.
21. This course made me think more, that we have to understand the reaction of the other person.
22. I give more attention to the problems of other people.
23. It did change the hate and the bad feelings I had towards people who were hurting me in my faith. I first saw things in black-and-white, for instance between Christians and Muslims, and now I became aware that it’s not like that. It comes from individuals and leaders who are doing propaganda.
24. I stay away from aggression now.
25. Now I clench my fists in my pockets when someone tries to provoke me.
26. Yesterday a man did insult me. Before I would have immediately beaten him. Now, for the first time in my life, I kept my fists in my pockets (the man says with a very proud look).
27. This seminar cheered me up and gave me courage.

I think this list gives a good idea of what these seminars can bring to people who committed terrible criminal deeds. We can summarize this list by saying that this kind of seminar makes people think more about how they behave and enables them to start changing their attitudes in the direction of nonviolence.

It's important to be aware that most of those people have had (and often still have) very difficult life situations, they have known little love and respect. It's a stereotype to say they had 'a difficult childhood', but nevertheless it's often a fact. For instance consider a young man whose parents didn't want him to be born, and who had to hear his whole life that he shouldn't have been there, that he was 'the' problem in the family, that it all was his fault, etc, and who couldn't remember ever have been appreciated or cuddled in any way. During those sessions, the prisoners feel handled like 'human beings', feel listened to, respected as they are, with the feelings they have, no matter what they did. This is often a very special experience for them. They learn to know a different world than the one they always knew. It's important for them to know there is another world, another kind of relationship between people, another way of behaving with one another, and on top of that they experience a little bit of it, as much as possible. At least they know this does exist, and they learn to know a bit about how it looks and feels and works.

This is significant for several reasons:

- First, we should not forget those people some day will come out of prison, and it is important that they come out of prison after having learned something so they can deal with their anger and aggression in a more constructive way than when they came in.
- Secondly, the prison should not be a 'punishment' by which we try to take revenge for what they did, because then we use the same Major-minor system, the system of violence, that they used with their crime. Instead, the time in prison should be used as a time of reflection, to have them become aware of the consequences of their acts, learn to situate their acts and behaviours, and see how things can happen differently. So we work on replacing retributive justice by restorative justice.
- Finally, many of those people have children themselves, so it's important that they know more about constructive human relationships for the education of their children

These three ways will help to diminish violence in our society and to build a safer and more peaceful world.

To close, I would like to express my deep gratitude for the directors of the prisons, the guards and social workers in the prisons who are inviting us to do this kind of work and who enable us to do it under the best possible conditions.

---

[Paper presented at the 21th General Conference of the International Peace Research Association (in the Nonviolence Commission), on the theme of "Patterns of Conflict, Paths to Peace" at the University of Calgary, Canada, June 29- July 3, 2006]

Acknowledgement : I like to thank Janet Powers for her precious comments on the language of this article.