Let's Talk Dialogue

Community Conversations about Drugs

Yasmin tells us about her two best friends. "We all come from different religions and different parts of the world. I am Muslim, one is Christian and the other Bahai. We all have different ideas of how someone should raise their families. We have opposite political views. We completely disagree on a number of fundamental aspects of life. But I have never met such kind and wonderful people. I genuinely enjoy their company and have never laughed so much in my life. We are actually planning a trip to Europe this summer, just the three of us."

Communities often find it difficult to address issues around which there is divergent opinion and contested evidence. Addressing such complex issues as drug use, overdose prevention or drug policy requires that we come together as a community and build understanding between ourselves. But how?

We live in an age of hyper-individualism. An era where the phrase "what's in it for me?" replaces "what's in it for us?" The influence of this individualistic culture has encouraged people to live and act in silos. A free market system has encouraged people to believe that the only way to find happiness is to pursue their own narrow self-interests. As a result, many people today feel disconnected from their community, from their government, and ultimately from each other. Problems on a social level – such as poverty, inequality, homelessness, problematic drug use, discrimination, and crime and violence – stem from our inability to define values that matter as a community and from a decline in social and civic participation.

> "We need to instigate a cultural shift from 'buying' to 'belonging'—from extrinsic to intrinsic values—where our personal identity and wellbeing is based much more on the quality of our relationships and sense of community engagement than on the size of our bank balance or the heady offerings of a luxury consumer lifestyle, and where more of us are willing to put common interests before self-interest."
>
> – Roman Krznaric

In this time of growing deficit in human relationships, public health problems emerge as pathologies of dislocation. Overdose death rates spiral out of control. And community attitudes bounce between compassion, fear and rejection. But the problem continues to be seen as a problem of individuals – they are sick, they are bad, they are dangerous. Yet, part of the healing involves nourishing the bonds of community. Attitudes and actions that stigmatize people or exclude them from full participation in the community make the situation worse. The people who are currently disconnected in our communities have valuable experiential knowledge that can help us craft safer, healthier communities.

Dialogue is a manner of communication that involves two-way conversations where people not only speak to each other but also really *listen* with the goal to leave the conversation with a better understanding of the topic and the different perspectives that make up a community. This kind of listening involves empathy. Each partner in a

dialogue is curious about the experiences of the other partners – about their assumptions, beliefs and values.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the leading thinkers on dialogue, suggested that true dialogue is distinguished from other forms of conversation by how we view "the other." Sometimes "the other" is viewed as an object or representative of a role (e.g., treating someone as a number, a case, something to be processed). Martin Buber describes this as the "I-It" relationship where the other is a means to an end rather than a genuine human being. Other times, we may view "the other" as a competitor or opponent – someone we listen to only in order to construct a better argument for our own position. But in true dialogue, neither participant presupposes to know the whole truth, rather each is open to the possibilities inherent in the other's views.

Human life is fundamentally dialogical – we are introduced to the elements of our self-understanding through interaction with significant others. Our very thoughts, words and actions are shaped by the words and practices of others. We do not discover ourselves, our identity; we work it out through our interactions with others.

In dialogue, the goal is to leave the conversation with a new understanding. Unlike many other forms of public communication (e.g., debates or negotiations), dialogue is not meant to lead immediately to agreement or action. Instead, the hope is that participants will come away from the conversation with a better understanding of the subject, of each other and of themselves. This new understanding means community members will be able to work together more effectively. Communities will be more flexible. Individuals and communities will have a greater sense of control over their own lives and well-being.

Community dialogue can exist in many shapes and sizes. It can start on a small scale when two people are intently hearing one another about matters of community concern. It may be achieved in a large open forum when audience members indeed "give ear" to each other. It is not limited to a public meeting or sitting around a table. It could involve walking tours facilitated by different members of the community. It could be an art show, a series of "ask me anything" sessions or participatory theatre. The sky's the limit. The only critical requirement is that it helps us listen to, and understand, each other.

Yet a word of caution is in order. Not everything called "dialogue" is dialogue. The word is commonly used interchangeably with debate, discussion, or deliberation. To begin to understand dialogue is also to begin to understand what it is not.

Debate versus Dialogue

Assumes there is one right answer – and I have it	Assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can craft a solution
Is combative – participants attempt to prove the other side wrong	Is collaborative – participants work together toward common understanding
Is about winning	Is about exploring common good
Entails listening to find flaws and make counter arguments	Entails listening to understand and find meaning and agreement
I defend my assumptions as truth	I reveal my assumptions for reevaluation
I critique the other side's position	I examine all positions
I defend my own views against those of others	I admit that others' thinking can improve my own
I seek a conclusion or vote that ratifies my position	I discover new options and do not seek closure

(From *The Magic of Dialogue* by Daniel Yankelovich, 1999)

More dialogue – less debate

We have become accustomed to debates that pit one against another: idea against idea; issue against issue, person against person. But this doesn't work. Those who lose do not go away, they simply disengage. This disengagement actually contributes to the situation we face today with rising overdose rates, various drug cultures and other problems related to drug use.

Debate is the opposite of dialogue. The goal in a debate is to win an argument. In dialogue, we are passionately committed to understanding the other person. We have no instinct to prove anyone wrong. We understand that no one has "the right answer," because no one can see the problem from all sides.

Dialogue is more than discussion

"Discussion" is often used interchangeably with "dialogue." But make no mistake – they are not the same. Discussion is a rough and tumble activity. After all, it shares its root with "percussion" and "concussion." In discussion everyone is presenting a different point of view, but it doesn't take us very far. David Bohm likens it to a game of ping-pong in which people are batting ideas back and forth with the goal of scoring points and ultimately winning. This type of conversation is very popular in our society but it tends to be superficial. During a discussion, we are more occupied with formulating answers than we are about trying to really *listen* to what the other person is saying.

In dialogue there is a different spirit. Nobody is trying to win. The goal is not to score points or prevail. We know discussion has moved to dialogue when a deeper understanding has occurred and trust is being established. In dialogue, everybody wins.

Dialogue first, deliberation after

Communities commonly come together to solve problems, to seek consensus or make a decision. This usually involves some sort of agenda, which tends to encourage an environment for power politics and special interest advocacy. When we are encouraged to make decisions without really understanding each other, we often don't make the right ones and end up back where we started.

Dialogue offers another way. In dialogue, we propose, there is no agenda. Or at least, the agenda must be put aside long enough to build a foundation of real understanding. Dialogue offers the potential for deliberation in which individuals no longer seek to promote their own interest but the community seeks ways to support the interests of all citizens.

Dialogue nurtures an optimal environment for good decision-making, but dialogue cannot be made into the first step in the deliberation process. One might say, dialogue precedes, underpins and permeates deliberation. Dialogue is a way of being with one another, not just an activity we engage in. People need a variety of opportunities, apart from the pressure of decision-making, to talk with each other in safe environments that build understanding and connection. When this community foundation is strong, deliberation is likely to lead to more successful decisions.

> "Real dialogue depends on us being passionately committed to our own world, and simultaneously, passionately interested in other worlds. It is possible to work for the realization of our values and interests, but to do so in a way that remains continuously open to inquiry and dialogue."
>
> – Margaret McKee

Three fundamental elements of dialogue

Openness to the other

In order to be open to someone else's position, we must be aware of our own preconceptions and prejudices that grow out of our past history, culture, and personal experiences. This awareness allows us to consider the potential differences and similarities between ourselves and the other person.

Being open to consider our own position as being shaped by our past, we can then be open to the other's position and allow the other, with a different set of experiences, to say something to us. Openness provides us accessibility to points of view that our experiences, thus far, have not made available to us.

This openness requires us to suspend the familiar ways of looking that orient us to our own world. This readiness to receive new information, regardless of the consequences to one's own position, does not require or prevent the acceptance of either view. As Margaret McKee says, "Real dialogue depends on us being passionately committed to our own world, and simultaneously, passionately interested in other worlds. It is possible to work for the realization of our values and interests, but to do so in a way that remains continuously open to inquiry and dialogue." Such a position is a position of truly listening to what the other has to say to us.

Questions, not answers

In a genuine dialogue, according to Gadamer, our stance must be one in which we recognize that we are in the position of not knowing. This opens us up to be ready to ask a question. This is not as simple as it sounds. For Gadamer, a genuine question creates a state of indeterminacy such that the response of the other is not forced or predetermined by the questioner in any way. To use Bohm's metaphor, the question is not a "play in a game" but rather opens a space for honest seeking. This situation opens up a different stance for each of the participants, a stance of being open to receiving and giving in such a way as to accept new possibilities.

The concept of possibilities

Genuine questions open up possibilities, possibilities that were not there before the question was asked. Gadamer says that to the degree to which we are able to accept an answer as a possibility (rather than as a given), we are able to continue a genuine conversation. This dialogue of questions and possibilities leads to new possibilities and new levels of understanding that were not present before the conversation began. That is, the understanding generated by the dialogue is not limited to what either of the respondents previously understood. This is the generative nature of dialogue. Gadamer calls this a "fusion of horizons" which occurs when we are open to possibilities rather than focused on predetermined positions.

> "We cannot understand without wanting to understand, that is, without wanting to let something be said."
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> "To be able to question means to want to know, and to want to know means to know that one doesn't know."
>
> — Hans-Georg Gadamer

Nurturing dialogue

Although there are no "rules" for dialogue (since it is not a game), there are certain orientations we may learn as we go along. These principles help us learn different ways to give space to each other – something most of us are not very good at.

Practicing empathy

Without empathy, we remain within ourselves, imprisoned in our individuality. Without empathy, we are at an experiential disadvantage, limited by our own horizon. Empathy provides the way out. Empathy is one way by which we attempt to understand the inner life of another, to achieve an "authentic encounter" in order to experience a "deep presence."

> "All interactions are dynamic and more complex than might appear at first glance, and that it is the pursuit of understanding, rather than a pre-conceived function of its end, that allows one to recognize another in their full complexity, acknowledging nuances of similarity and alterity both."
>
> – Polina Kukar, on a take away from Edith Stein

The connection between empathy and dialogue seems obvious. But the relationship is far from simple. A degree of empathy would seem to be essential to any genuine dialogue. Yet, engaging in dialogue is a way to increase empathy. Empathy is an exercise in imagination. It is only when we try to imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes that we can start to acknowledge the complexity of another perspective and worldview. The attempt to understand another's experience or the world beyond our immediate experiences, while acknowledging the limitations of our capacity for understanding, is empathy. And it is this tension between what can and cannot be directly experienced that makes empathy unique.

No valid formula for nurturing empathy exists, but several strategies deserve consideration. For example, indirect experiences such as films, art, theatre, blogs (or other media) can provide us with opportunities to "step into the shoes" of other people and understand their views and ways of being. But, by themselves, such strategies are not very effective. Creating contexts in which we have opportunities to sense some of the experiences of others' lives (e.g., walking tours through certain neighbourhoods), even if only temporarily, can nonetheless help erode the "us" and "them" mentality that underpins social injustice. Teaching ourselves to be reflective can build empathy. For example, when we experience feelings of guilt, we might pause to reflect on what human aspirations lie behind that feeling rather than either beating ourselves up or dismissing the feeling as unwarranted.

Consciously creating dialogue across social divides encourages empathy. These do not always need to be face to face. For example, the *Hello Peace Telephone Line* allows any Israeli or Palestinian to call a toll-free number and speak to a random stranger from the other group. In its first five years of operation, over one million calls were made. Modern technology opens up many other possibilities for conversations in which people who are otherwise remote from each other can hear one another's story and begin to identify.

Ultimately, empathy is at the core of human relationships. Both empathy and dialogue seek to build greater understanding among individuals and groups in the complex world of similarities and differences so that we can function better together.

Celebrating diversity

Dialogue challenges us to be thoughtful about how we see and act when we encounter people who are different from us. In dialogue, we engage diverse stakeholders with openness and acceptance in order to facilitate a welcoming position to those different from us. This is not mere tolerance. When we have a genuine conversation with someone, we do not tolerate him or her as we would tolerate (endure) the pain of a toothache. Instead, we welcome the other as someone who challenges our assumptions and therefore our identity and, in doing so, opens up new possibilities. The beauty of the encounter with "otherness," and the subsequent discomfort, is that it gives us time to stop and reflect.

Therefore, it is not good enough for a group of concerned citizens to gather and discuss solutions that largely relate to others not present. Dialogue requires a commitment to the concept of "nothing about us without us." Celebrating diversity means bringing a group of diverse citizens to the table and engaging them in meaningful and respectful interchange. Dialogue allows us to identify a particular area of misunderstanding, bring stakeholders from across the divide together, build trust and understanding and open ourselves to new possibilities.

Some of the tools that help us get comfortable with, and ultimately celebrate, diversity include: getting comfortable with discomfort, engaging in reflective listening, practicing empathy, and getting to know individuals as people rather than carriers of a position.

Promoting curiosity and learning

When we are confronted with a new situation, it is common to want to know all the facts. This seems completely sensible. But there is a problem. When dealing with complex issues, like substance use, drug policy and rising rates of overdose, no one has all the answers. When we don't know all the facts, we sometimes conclude that we can't do anything. We have to wait for the experts to figure out the answers for us. But this isn't true; there are things all of us can do together.

In dialogue, our intention is to learn from each other – to expand our view and understanding – not to evaluate and determine who has the "best" view. If we focus on learning, we tend to ask more questions and try new things. The openness to explore, to ask, to question is essential to gaining understanding and to moving forward as a community. Putting the focus on posing the right questions – questions around which community members can meaningfully engage – and nurturing an environment of respectful curiosity will help harness the wisdom of the community and provide needed resources for addressing community needs.

This learning together is very much intertwined with empathy. The ability to experience through the other is an essential element of learning. When we listen to another's experience so different from our own, we ask ourselves why things are different for us. Here, we pose an open question based on the difference we witness. Empathy allows us to call ourselves into question and lets us recognize that the world could be disclosed to us otherwise. This recognition is the starting point of learning,

While simple answers may be appealing, they are rarely useful. They do little to bring people together to address complex issues like those related to drug policy and drug use. Instead they provide position statements around which competing factions can coalesce and continue arguing. Closed questions – those with short factual answers – are not much more useful. One of the most powerful ways to bring people together and tap into the collective capacity of the community is to engage around truly open questions. These are questions for which there are

> "Dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people."
>
> – Paulo Freire

no simple answers but that encourage us to explore, to identify our assumptions and think "what if?" This will provide a much stronger foundation for us to function together as a community.

Exposing assumptions and suspending judgement

We all have assumptions and opinions. These may be superficial, or they may be deeply rooted beliefs that provide the framework for our sense of who we are. But what happens when we meet someone with different assumptions that conflict with our own?

Too often we uncritically defend our own assumptions. In fact, we rarely recognize them as assumptions. To us they seem self-evident, so unproblematically "the way it is," that the other's world seems blatantly incoherent. We may feel something is so true that we cannot avoid trying to convince another person how wrong they are to disagree with us. But this stance kills dialogue before it even gets started.

To engage in dialogue, we must first become aware of our own assumptions and recognize how they shape our thinking, our conclusions, our way of seeing the world. Then we are able to critically examine our own thinking and share our way of seeing the world more effectively with others. When we become aware of how our way of seeing the world is influenced by our assumptions and the choices we have made along the way, we are better equipped to recognize how another's position represents another possibility to be explored with curiosity and respect. This requires us to suspend (not suppress) judgements as we engage in this exploration.

Dialogue is one of the few ways of communicating that allow us to suspend judgement about someone else's assumptions while being able to reflect on our own. It is rare that we have an opportunity to confront our opinions and have space to reflect on how our own experiences have shaped them. If we are conscious about our assumptions and are open to learning more of others without trying to "murder the alternative," possibilities emerge that may not otherwise have been realized.

To make the shift into dialogue, we need to pause in our premature desire to "fix" and take the time to explore together. Some of the tools that help us get comfortable with exploring assumptions and suspending judgements include: creating a setting where people feel safe to bring up deeply rooted assumptions without the fear of experiencing hostility, engaging in exercises in which people may reflect on their own experiences and how they have contributed to their way of seeing the world, and developing skill in using open questions to sensitively probe for deeper understanding.

Putting power in its place

Real dialogue requires that participants are able to engage as peers. The subtle – or not so subtle – coercive influences common in other styles of conversation (e.g., discussion or debate) are foreign to dialogue. Hierarchy and power, linked to status, may destroy the very possibility of a genuine conversation.

Yet, some guidance is required to help participants realize the subtle differences between dialogue and other forms of group process. Even more challenging is the observation of thinkers like Michel Foucault who suggest it is not possible for higher-ranking people to simply remove their badges of authority and participate as true equals.

In addressing the first challenge, we should recognize leadership in dialogue as being temporary and non-authoritarian. Leaders and facilitators must lead by example and focus not on controlling people but on shaping the environment that impacts the behaviour of the participants. This is no small challenge as any review of attempts at dialogue will demonstrate. But to the degree that we can achieve this, we enhance the possibility of genuine dialogue and real understanding. Steps that can be taken include starting with small format dialogues before attempting large-scale ones, focusing first on trust before beginning to address areas of conflict, and developing the culture of engagement together with the participants.

The challenge raised by Foucault and others is even thornier. Power is not something we pick up and put down like a tool. Our authority is represented in our roles and engrained in us through our social hierarchies. Attempts to put it aside are often superficial. People in positions of authority can easily deceive themselves into thinking they are treating others as equals when they are not. Or well-meaning authority figures can seek to compensate by trying to be friends and "play nice in the sandbox." But these superficial responses do not address the real issue and often result in mere tolerance and complacency rather than understanding and action. Far better to have authentic conversations in which we can engage in straightforward discussions of the ways unequal power and wealth relations operate in everyday social interactions. This will undoubtedly lead us to a "pedagogy of discomfort" in which all must face up to issues and take responsibility to address them together.

Conclusion

Dialogue is a mode of being, an empathic way of relating, listening to and conversing with others. It is a vital means to a crucial end: mutual understanding of oneself, others and subjects of concern to different people. It need not result in strong consensus and a committed course of collective action, but it can build connectedness. As it brings about enhanced regard for and greater identification with others it provides a foundation for functional, healthy community and collaboration that is respectful of diversity.

Dialogue moves us away from a system of privileging experts to one of more reflective and engaged citizens. Through practice, we share perspectives, increase our understanding of each other and move to a model of widespread public involvement. This requires us to abandon an approach that in the interest of efficient control would impose a formulaic process on community conversation in order to achieve professionally preferred outcomes. By pursuing dialogue instead, we begin to realize the dream of participatory democracy.

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