

# Introduction

The Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) was conceived in 1975 in Greenhaven prison in New York by **Quakers** and prisoners, to reduce the levels of violence in prisons.

It soon spread out to the community, and different states in the USA, and is now offered in more than 40 countries worldwide in prisons, communities, schools, refugee camps.

# What AVP does

- addresses sources of anger by letting participants explore their own feelings and those of others.
- Participants acquire insight into their own and other people's feelings and reactions.
- offers participants new ways of communicating with one another and strategies to de-escalate conflict and resolve conflict non-violently.

# AVP philosophy

- there is a non-violent solution and potential non-violent power present in every conflict situation.
- This **Transforming Power** resides within everyone and can transform potentially violent situations into non-violent situations where a creative win-win outcome can result

# Five factors

## Alternatives to Violence Project



Quaker Peace Centre  
3 Rye Road, Mowbray 7700  
Cape Town, South Africa  
Tel: 021 685 7800, Fax: 021 686 8167  
E-mail: [qpc@qpc.org.za](mailto:qpc@qpc.org.za)  
Web: [www.quaker.org/capetown](http://www.quaker.org/capetown)

Quaker  
**PEACE**  
Centre

# Standard AVP agenda

- **Affirmation**
- Communication
- Co-operation
- Community Building - creating a safe space for participants to share their feelings and thoughts
- Transforming power

# AFFIRMATION

- Affirmation is the **positive affirming** of the good in people
- Participants are encouraged to seek and acknowledge the good in others
- Affirmation, more than any other pillar or guideline, is particularly well-received in the communities in which we work

# Self-esteem

- Oppression, poverty, marginalisation of communities contributes low self-image.

# Low self-image

- Shaming (gating, dissing) – the putting down of a person - is common practice at home, in class and socially.
- Start at birth with derogatory comments made about the quality of the hair on the baby's head and it can continue throughout the person's life.
- Put-down take place in classrooms, where pupils are mocked or bullied for knowing an answer to a question the teacher asks.
- Leads to fear of rising above the lowest level and can affect achievement as adult.
- Also lead to a fear of excellence and can lead to mediocrity.
- All forms of put-downs are often internalized.

- Continual shaming results in a systematic break-down of self-worth.
- It is typically experienced in every sphere of a person's life and is internalized, resulting in low self-confidence and an inability to interact successfully with other people.
- We observe again and again the effect that this **continual shaming** has on teachers and students alike.

# crab effect

- Some explanations may be that people are not encouraged to shine above the rest.
- Not unusual, but particularly noticeable amongst coloured people on the flats, and especially in gang ridden areas.
- Very often people trapped in poverty, in poor family surroundings, in gangs, or in destructive lifestyles attempt to get out.
- Like the hopeful crab, the journey out of the box begins.

- For those trapped in poverty, the most accessible route out may be through **education**.
- However, gangs give you cars and money.
- If such a person studies hard and begins to excel, he may find that those around him begin to actively discourage his efforts, even mocking his success.
- He is seen as betraying those left behind who feel inadequate.
- Like the rest of the crabs, friends and family will then actively try to pull the riser down.
- This is often felt strongest within families.
- Rising above means betrayal of the tribe, and often results in severe ostracizing by the members of the tribe

- The Crab Effect may also occurs because some people are afraid of change or may not have sufficient confidence in themselves, and feels threatened by success.
- You don't feel good about yourself, and have to **put others down in order for you to feel good about yourself**

- Among coloured people, success often means **going for white**, as white (still) represents opportunity and success.
- Tremendous pressure on coloured people to remain mediocre, one with the others, and proud to be one with everyone.

- While we are not victims of the past, we cannot simply wish away the society we inherited, nor the institutions and attitudes carried over from the past.
- To a large extent, this channel and shape the possibilities of today.
- We can only shake off the negative influences of the past once we become aware of how they shaped us.
- 300 years of institutionalized oppression and apartheid, forced removals, votes that were taken away have all contributed to a lack of self-worth and a belief in the inability to achieve much in life.
- This attitude is passed down from generation to generation and informs the way people begin to see themselves.

- The low self-esteem results in people accepting mediocrity without questioning why this is so.
- They begin to believe that they are not as good as other groups and begin to feel angry and bitter about their lot in life and feel resentful and unable to change this.
- These feelings of resentment, often repressed, find expression in violent behaviour

- Coloured people largely are not comfortable with speaking out in a group, for fear of being shamed, being made fun of, of giving the 'wrong' answers, being ridiculed endlessly when brave enough to venture a wrong answer.
- Young, bright pupils in class often know the answer to a question, but will not put their hand up, and will often even pretend that they do not know the answer.
- Their fear about being shot down, ridiculed, made fun of, is greater than the desire to be affirmed when they answer correctly.
- And often, when they do know the answer and say it, they will be shot down as 'soek witbroodjie – currying favour' with the teacher.

- **Affirmation** tool for building self-esteem, to recognise and affirm the good in a person.
- The Quaker principle :There is that of God in everyone comes to mind.
- A person is separated from the deed he/she does.
- One bad deed does not mean you're necessarily a bad person.
- It also means that everyone is
  - equal, and that everyone is
  - important, and therefore everyone's
  - opinion is valid.
- This is very important.

# Example: Affirmation

- Community agreement: No interrupting
- By interrupting, we really say 'I believe that what I have to say, is more important than what you have to say' and therefore, by implication that 'I am more important than you'.

# Testimonies

- ‘it is the first time in my life that anybody has ever listened to me - I felt so important’.
- Boy left the workshop
- 50year old woman doing matric, enrolled for social work studies
- Abused woman finding her voice
- Boy scared of Xenophobia finding acceptance in his school

- Affirming oneself and others is difficult,
- It may make people feel conceited and arrogant, or vulnerable and embarrassed.
- In an AVP workshop participants are often asked to list a few things that they are good at, and they struggle to come up with even one, but when asked to list a few they have seen in others, they can quickly list 20 without the blink of an eye.
- This is evidence of a lack of self-worth.

- AVP workshops give a voice to people who are often never heard.
- Each individual is acknowledged as worthy and is respected and heard in a workshop.
- People often comment on how they feel to be ‘invisible’ people at times, not heard, not seen, not acknowledged.
- Being heard is an acknowledgement of one’s existence and worth.
- A good self-esteem, feeling good about one self, is an essential ingredient for achievement – positive self-worth leads to better choices, which may ultimately lead to improved living conditions.

- The more you are acknowledged, the better you feel about yourself, the more likely it is that you may overcome any deep-seated anger and frustrations
- Therefore you are more able to co-operate with other people and less likely to be obstructive and aggressive.

- AVP workshops are for sharing thoughts and feelings.
- Often deep feelings emerge, coming from past or current experiences.
- The intensity of a feeling is acknowledged.
- The leader of the session affirms a speaker for being as brave and trusting as to share such an intense experience of the workshop.

# What we do

- Affirm the dignity and humanity of a person.
- This helps in forgiveness and moving on.
- It may mean letting go of unresolved issues.
- It reduces the option of violence because one has more alternatives in one's survival kit, as well as fewer unresolved issues which may flare up when triggered by something seemingly trivial or totally unrelated.

- Affirmations are used light-heartedly throughout the AVP workshop, so as to avoid situations which may feel too uncomfortable, awkward, embarrassing or stupid, and which may cause participants to tune out, and miss the other important points presented in the workshop.

- Alternatives to Violence exercises give people the opportunity to experience the process of **forgiveness** – of themselves and of others.
- Often participants comment on how difficult they find it to put themselves in other peoples' shoes, and how good it feels when people try to understand where they come from.

# Conclusion

- Because of poor self-image, and daily conditions of abject poverty and marginalisation faced in townships on the Cape Flats, they value and appreciate affirmation exercises in particular. Very often AVP workshops are the only source of affirmation they get.
- Affirmation is an important step in non-violence training.
- Affirmation is key to building self-respect, which in turn is key to unlocking the door to other key areas,
  - caring for others,
  - expecting the best,
  - seeking a non-violent solution,
  - thinking before reacting
  - transforming power.
- Before peace can be restored, healing needs to take place. Affirmation can begin the healing process of a damaged self-image.