

Community Building & Track Two • Fall 2021 Newsletter

Discretion is often considered a cornerstone of Track Two, and while there is demonstrated value in this, what is the impact on Track Two facilitators? Can Track Two be an isolating practice? This practitioner piece seeks to explore the question of community building and mental health in Track Two, and the potential need for further work in our field to emphasize self-care and burnout prevention for Track Two conveners. We also explore current community building efforts and events in the Track Two field.

The Ottawa Dialogue hopes that this brief newsletter feature will serve as a steppingstone in exploring all sides of this discussion, breakdown stigma surrounding conversations on mental health, and spur further exploration of community building strategies in Track Two.



About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world. We create forums where parties can explore difficult issues in an analytical, problem-solving way to develop new paths forward. We then work with our partners to transfer these ideas to places where they can make a difference. As a complement to its field work, Ottawa Dialogue pursues a rich research agenda focused on conflict analysis, third party dialogue-based interventions, and best practices relating to “Track Two Diplomacy”.

Community Building & Track Two

An isolating practice?

Discretion is often considered a cornerstone of Track Two, with Track Two dialogues often (but not always) being held in confidential settingsⁱ. Track Two facilitator(s) are thus largely not at liberty to share the details of their work and the exchanges they may witness between participants. While this often lends itself to valuable cultures of trust and frankness between Track Two participants and facilitators, there is a question as to the level of isolation a Track Two facilitator may experience in their profession. While isolation does not necessarily mean burnout and/or adverse effects on one's mental health, the two are not so disconnected. This brief paper seeks to explore the question of community-building, isolation, and self-care for Track Two professionals and current approaches being taken by members of our community to build networks between facilitators. This paper is underpinned by a belief in destigmatizing mental health, which is still considered taboo in many professional circles, despite progress being made in the past decade or so in normalizing conversations around mental health and wellness.

Self-care (or lack thereof?) in the field of Track Two

Track Two, unlike many other fields (e.g.: medicine, law, or other highly regulated professional networks) does not have a national or international board and/or association that governs, registers, and connects all practitioners. As such, there are not necessarily any regulated self-care practices (i.e., practices that focus on healing and/or preserving mental health and wellness) that connect or widely encourage Track Two facilitators to check-in with themselves. Zelizer (2008) takes a critical approach of the field's work to support practitioners (& staff), writing "the field has done a poor job of addressing the importance of self-care. Most helping professions, from social working to psychology, have well-established systems of self-care that often include peer-support groups, mentors, and training provided in instances of burnout and secondary trauma. As a field, peacebuilding is only now beginning to incorporate these concerns into practice."ⁱⁱ While the field has certainly evolved since Zelizer's comments were made, there may be merit in considering the ways in which we may integrate self-care and/or mental health support into our work as Track Two professionals and organizations.

It is worth further noting that scholarly literature on mental health and/or self-care for conflict resolution professionals is largely absent. Scholars of Track Two (and peacebuilding more broadly) have written on tactics like mindfulness and trauma-informed approaches to dialogue. That being said, these conversations are often framed as conflict resolution techniques, as opposed to mental health practices for practitioners themselves. Literature on second-hand (or vicarious) trauma more broadly is fairly sparse and relatively recent, especially literature on vicarious trauma for those in "helping professions." Izzo & Miller (2010) write that "the cost of helping others cannot really be assessed by the naked eye. Perhaps that is why so little has been written or done about it. In truth, the toll for many helpers is high and the amount of recovery

resources is low.”ⁱⁱⁱ While many practitioners may never feel burdened by their work, it is true that for those that do, there must be space for these facilitators to recoup and prevent the development of vicarious trauma from their Track Two work, without shame.

Mindfulness is defined by Waelde, Panting and Heise (2019) as “continued redirection of one’s attention to their experience as it occurs moment-to-moment through. A lens of openness, non-judgement, and acceptance.”^{iv} While mindfulness could be integrated into Track Two practices, it could also be a potential tactic for practitioners to ground themselves in their work and/or avoid emotional “pile-ups” and feelings of isolation. Other suggested measures, such as the ones above – i.e., peer-support groups, mentoring programs, and preventative trainings could also be integrated in Track Two practices to avoid psychological turmoil.

Community-building in Track Two

Arguably the most powerful way to fight a sense of isolation as a Track Two facilitator is to build community with fellow Track Two practitioners. This may look like closed-door roundtable discussions and workshops between facilitators, public knowledge exchanges, and/or one-on-one conversations between colleagues.

The Ottawa Dialogue, for example, has regularly taken part (and often helped to organize) the annual Convener’s Community of Practice (CCOP) workshop, with the goal of creating a forum for discussion between practitioners in Track Two to discuss the issues they have faced, the successes they’ve experienced, exchange best practices, and connect with one another. Initially hosted in the Point of View Retreat outside of Washington, D.C., in 2017 by Dr. Susan Allen and George Mason University, then again [in Ottawa in 2018](#), our most recent CCOP was co-hosted with the United States Institute of Peace in [January of 2020](#), in D.C.^v

Another example of up-and-coming community building measures in peacebuilding is the [Better Evidence Project](#) (BEP), a recently created practitioner hub at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. BEP describes itself as an “institutional hub to initiate, fund, and disseminate research [on better evidence] in an understandable, convincing way, while complementing existing platforms.”^{vi} While certainly multi-purpose, this stated need in conflict resolution as a field to consolidate practitioner (& local) perspectives could possibly reflect a shift towards increased community-building efforts in our field.

It is worth noting that both of the above efforts were not created to solely be self-care measures for facilitators, but also as platforms for discussion on best practices in Track Two. However, knowledge exchanges, community-building efforts, and group reflection could arguably be said to be inevitable self-care measures.

What does the future hold?

Community-building between Track Two practitioners and general tactics of self-care will likely continue to be larger conversations in the field of conflict resolution. Particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually everyone in the world has felt pangs of isolation; and remote workers have had to adjust to a professional context that necessarily limits human interaction. We as a global community have thus been forced to reflect on ways to combat feelings of isolation, how to build community in non-traditional ways (i.e., away from the water cooler), and have largely recognized the increasing importance of taking care of one's mental (and physical) health. These conversations will likely continue to trickle into the field of Track Two. Moreover, local Track Two conveners face a unique position, wherein they may face feelings of isolation as a facilitator, but also firsthand trauma through lived experience in a particular conflict. While these perspectives may be often missing in current literature, this experience could likely be the subject of continuing research in the coming years.

Generally, the subject of mental health and self-care is still being normalized in a broader sense. Particularly in a professional setting, talking about mental health is still sometimes seen as taboo and/or unprofessional. As a "helping profession," however, we are already often dealing with conversations of empathy-building, reflective exercises, and/or strengthening existing group dynamics. Mental health, whether acknowledged or not, already plays a key role in our work as conflict resolution professionals. Discussing practitioner health and wellbeing is thus not too far off and may need to be further explored in the coming years.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Jones, P. (2020). Best Practices in Track Two Diplomacy, *International Negotiation*, 26(1), 1-4.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-25131256>
- ⁱⁱ Zelizer, C. (2020). Trauma Sensitive Peace-Building: Lessons for Theory and Practice.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Izzo, Ellie, and Vicki Carpel Miller. *Second-hand shock: Surviving and overcoming vicarious trauma*. Unhooked Books, 2010.
- ^{iv} Njoku, G. M. C., Jason, L. A., & Johnson, B. R. (2019). *The Psychology of Peace Promotion: Global Perspectives on Personal Peace, Children and Adolescents, and Social Justice*. Springer International Publishing.
- ^v The upcoming CCOP will be hosted by Conciliation Resources. For information on the most recent CCOP, please see the [following link](#).
- ^{vi} [Better Evidence Project](#), housed within George Mason University.

Additional Resources:

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2011). Some reflections on the origins of MBSR, skillful means, and the trouble with maps. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12, 281–306,

Bishop, S., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., Anderson, N., Carmody, J., and Devins, G. (2004). Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 11, 230–241