

“Somehow we’re all on parole now”: work in the Austrian probation service during Corona

An article written by Bernhard Eisl

Shutdown!

While I am waiting for my next client in a small office, I think about how this pandemic will change my life and affect my work. It is March 16th, and it seems like every minute there are new horrific reports about the worldwide disease on the Internet: death rates, curfews, travel warnings. But also, hectic action by authorities, assessments by politicians and advice from experts. Behind all this I perceive helplessness, excessive demands and great fear.

My phone rings and a client says: “I prefer not to come, I am really worried, and I have to check on my mother again”. His voice sounds agitated and slightly panicky. I try to read his mood and feel that I am not at all sure what I actually want to say to him, because my own feelings and perceptions react to his. I cancel the appointment, ask him to take care of himself and to call me regularly on the phone. This I will continue doing many times in the coming weeks with other clients.

Our organisation responds very carefully to the crisis, but is noticeably affected by the requirement to almost completely discontinue our various care services in the shortest time possible. Finally, we are asked to cancel all personal appointments and to provide support by phone – shutdown.

Who are you, in the crisis?

Probation services in Austria are based on regular personal contact, intensive examination of life and delinquency. How can this be done, exclusively by phone?

The clients’ reactions show all types of behaviour that can occur in a crisis: a young, aggressive man who hoards bottled water, a psychotic who thinks everything is panic-mongering and is a conspiracy, an addicted woman who worries how to get her drugs, a depressed elderly gentleman who speaks calmly of the coming end... There is hardly anyone who does not take the situation seriously, and even those who make fun of it are concerned of the rising deaths, especially in our neighbouring country Italy. These reactions challenge me, as the clients confront me with my own fears and doubts.

Bonding and support

In such a situation it is essential to reflect with my colleagues. As a probation officer in a rural area, I am very often a “lone fighter” – like my colleagues. And yet, during this time of shutdown, we have come closer to each other than ever before in the often-hectic everyday work. We have our own chat group and the serious but also often humorous exchanges and the many long phone calls for reflection, give me security and the chance to process what I experienced by caring for others.

The further the crisis progresses, the more it becomes clear how important the basis of a stable, trust-based care relationship was and is. It makes me able to counter the massive social restrictions to which we all, and also our clients, were and to some extent still are subject to.

Many of my colleagues and clients are very disciplined, some even experience a halt in their work but feel that the time gained for the family is liberating. I am very worried about those who live alone and who are indeed very lonely. These people are most affected by the temporary change in their personal situation and some of them need actual care. I find it most difficult in those situations in which I notice that people slip into psychological crises, withdraw and are difficult to reach. In such cases I would have simply gone to check, just to be there. Now I am confronted with my own helplessness and powerlessness not to be able to offer the help that seems so urgently needed. "Somehow we are all on parole now," says a young man, in view of the discipline required, the restricted and reduced way of life in isolation. A "house arrest for all", are the words of another one who is supervised by electronic monitoring.

That is how I found myself at times, between annoyed and overstrained: when working from home, household, childcare and the relationship becomes a multi-tasking project that feels like it takes up every minute of the day. I could very much encourage and reach my clients when they did not know what was coming next. However when horrible news appears all over the world and death comes very close, then also I reach the limit of my resilience.

Clients from other countries find themselves in other unexpected difficulties, in situations where their German is simply not sufficient. Quite a few of them pay very high fines because they simply do not understand some of the new rules. My translation work is not only about language, but also about the social meaning of some measures, which are simply not comprehensible for some people. Why should two good friends no longer hug each other, share cigarettes or hang out in a car park?

A second chance

New prison sentences and court hearings are now suspended for a longer period of time, which gives space to many people who actually should be in prison by now. Two of my clients were able to improve their situation during the shutdown, so they perhaps can avoid imprisonment altogether.

The forced intimacy is not only negative for the social relationships of our clients. I experience many families and couples who have created a closeness to each other that would have been hard to imagine otherwise. But there are also the terrible cases of violence in relationships. I often worry about the wives of the men I look after, who now have to suffer silently. Here I then curse the phone and the restrictions to my possibilities. Then for me it is important to listen carefully, to talk and to take the pressure off, which sometimes arises in a very tangible way: to reduce stress, to find patience with others and above all yourself. If there is no solution to be found cooperation with organisations for victim-protection and the court is necessary to clear the situation and bring back security, but leaving the actual conflict unsolved.

What works? What works!

Now that the shutdown is slowly moving into a phase of controlled care, the question arises what we learn from this difficult time?

Quite pragmatically? Many appointments and some meetings are not necessary! I realized that I often actually do “non-essential trips”. I think it will do us good to think carefully about what it really takes to organize our work.

So, considering this worldwide crisis and its consequences for all of us, is it possible to find take-away for the probationary care services, for social work? This is simply how important social work is. In addition to all specialised action and our professionalism it is crucial for me to do my work as personally and directly as possible. The masks will challenge and ultimately sharpen our perception. We will conscientiously examine proximity and distance. The personal encounter takes on a new value. For me personally, as a social worker and as a human being, it is an important decision to give others what is probably the most precious thing to have, namely your presence and your lifetime.

PS: This text may be emotional and sensitive in some situations. But I have always taken this pandemic very seriously: two colleagues from other institutions, who are dear to me, have fallen seriously ill with Covid-19, and one colleagues' parents have been fatally affected. This has had a great impact on my perception.

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