

COUNSELING FOR RESULTS: USING REALITY THERAPY

Every youth worker knows the frustration of attempting to counsel a person and getting "stuck," not knowing what to say next, and ~~not knowing how to help the counselee.~~

Reality Therapy provides a practical outline for "figuring out what to say when you don't know what to say."

One of the most important skills to be developed in Reality Therapy is the ability to ask pertinent questions. This skill differs from other counseling skills which often involve reflective listening, perception checks, paraphrasing, active listening, and many other non-directive feeling-oriented skills. The questioning skills related to Reality Therapy provide a structure and a direction for counselors which enable them to put the responsibility on the clients, prevent getting "stuck," and enable them to feel more confident in working with youth.

Questions should revolve around the following elements:

1. Determination of wants and needs of clients. Ask them to define their wants; what they want from parents, school, the program, and especially from themselves and from you, the counselors. They could be asked about their needs, which needs do they wish to build up: Belonging, Achievement, Fun, Freedom.
2. Determination of what they are doing. Ask them to describe what they are doing, i.e., how they are spending their time, what specifically happened in a given instance. Avoid "why" questions which only elicit excuses. Thus, to ask why someone is fighting is to elicit an excuse, "He started it" or "He hit me first," etc., etc.

Also, in Reality Therapy it is more effective to discuss "doings" rather than "feelings." To talk endlessly about feelings is to avoid dealing with them. Just as hunger, thirst, and fatigue are not dealt with by talking but rather by action, so too, anger, guilt, resentment, depression, rejection, etc., are the most effectively handled by taking action, i.e. by changing what the person does. Reality Therapy is thus very

effective in dealing with feelings. For feelings are the symptoms of effective "doing" behaviors.

3. Determination of what is helping and not helping. Ask questions about what the person does that is working for him/her. In this component the counselor helps the clients make value judgements on their own behaviors. Questions such as "Is coming late for school going to help you get along better?" Are very powerful questions. Questions are, of course, geared to specific counselors and to specific instances.
4. Determination of Plans. "What is your plan?" is an example of a question which is very useful in Reality Therapy. Help in planning can be given through suggestions. In many instances clients cannot make plans on their own and cannot clearly answer questions on any of the first four components. The counselor helps them by telling them what is expected of them, what is helpful, and the rules of the program. This is especially true of many youth in the early stages of treatment. The aim of these first four components is to help clients develop skill in formulating their own wants or goals, examining their own behavior, and in making their own plans.
5. Determination of a commitment. Ask them to make a commitment to the plan. This might be a handshake, a written plan, a follow-up session, etc. It can take many forms. Component 5 is an extension of #4.

Below are described 4 more components of Reality Therapy which are helpful for a counselor to remember when implementing Nos. 1 through 4.

6. Accept no excuses. Generally it is useless to ask someone why he/she failed to perform a plan, or when he/she got into trouble. Such questions result in excuses characterized by the fault being attributed to someone else! It is rare that even a staff person says

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"I'm late for work because I did not plan adequately!" This would be a highly responsible statement. Yet we all are late because of traffic, children, alarm clocks, unexpected emergencies!! In other words, we all have excuses. And so, rather than asking why someone fails, it is more effective to return to questions revolving around components 1-4.

7. Don't argue or belittle clients. Allow and impose consequences. Diminishing the self-respect of any client will only result in more of the same behavior. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have consequences to all human behavior. Few of us would keep the 55MPH speed limit if there were no consequences to speeding! Every agency has rules which must be kept. Consequences should be imposed when rules are broken. Application of consequences should be matter of factly, without apology, and with no vindictiveness.
8. Don't give up on the counselee easily nor on the use of the above components. Many clients have experienced adults who have given up on them. The youth worker using Reality Therapy hangs in there according to the motto, "when the going gets tough, the tough get going." Also, it is crucial to remember that Reality Therapy is hard work, not magic. It will not instantly turn a juvenile offender into "Mayor for a day." Clients make choices and no matter what a helper does, some clients will continue to make destructive choices. At that time, the worker might be tempted to abandon these components of good counseling. Component 8 states "Don't give up on Reality Therapy because you found out it isn't magic."
9. Talk it over! This component implies that consultation is often necessary. When counselors have difficulty with clients it is wise to discuss the case with a Reality Therapist. It is often helpful to role play a situation when the counselor pretends to be the client and the Reality Therapist-Consultant uses the above components to talk to him/her. In any event, it is useful to discuss how these components can be applied to difficult cases.

Finally, it is clear that Reality Therapy is based on assumptions that people are responsible for their behavior; that past experience, heredity, previous stress are not the determiners of present behavior. We all act to fulfill needs NOW. Most of these behaviors are chosen and thus more effective behaviors can be made available to use through skillful counseling. Reality Therapy should not be seen, therefore, as an offshoot of Behavioral Counseling. A more detailed study of Reality Therapy shows it is vastly different in that it lays emphasis on internal motivation, fulfillment of needs, and on CHOICE.

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