

REALITY THERAPY AND CHOICE THEORY

Our five basic needs.

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The solution is in the present and the future.

Reality Therapy & Choice Theory

Reality Therapy has been around since the 1960s when a book of that name was published in the United States by Dr William Glasser.

The name, though catchy, is easily misunderstood by those who assume that Reality Therapy has something to do with giving people "a dose of reality."

In fact the approach is far more people-friendly and people-centred than that.

Our Five Basic Needs

Almost all approaches to psychology assume that people have certain basic needs and, indeed, there is broad agreement on what these needs are.

In Reality Therapy they are classified under five headings:

- **Power** (which includes achievement and feeling worthwhile as well as winning).
- **Love & Belonging** (this includes groups as well as families or loved ones).
- **Freedom** (includes independence, autonomy, your own 'space').
- **Fun** (includes pleasure and enjoyment).
- **Survival** (includes nourishment, shelter, sex).

One of the core principles of Reality Therapy is that, whether we are aware of it or not, we are all the time acting to meet these needs.

But we don't necessarily act effectively. Socialising with people is an effective way to meet our need for belonging. Sitting in a corner and crying in the hope that people will come to us is generally an ineffective way of meeting that need - it may work, but it is painful and carries a terribly high price for ourselves and others.

So if life is unsatisfactory or we are distressed or in trouble, one basic thing to check is whether we are succeeding in meeting our basic psychological needs for power, belonging, freedom and fun.

In this society the survival need is normally being met - it is in how we meet the other four "psychological" needs that we run into trouble.

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But the key is what we want

Now, nobody ever gets up in the morning and says, "I must meet my Love & Belonging need today."

We are more likely to say something along the lines of, "I wonder if Mary is free for lunch today" or "Maybe we can get the gang together on Friday night." We want to have lunch with Mary or to marry John or to go out with our pals on Friday night or we want "our" football team or "our" political party to win.

So what really drives us as social beings is our wants. We don't think of our needs as such. We think of what we want, behave to get what we want, fantasise about what we want and so on.

So while a counsellor in Reality Therapy would check out whether a client is meeting his or her needs the three basic questions that are asked are:

1. What do you want?
2. What are you doing to get what you want?
3. Is it working?

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A workable plan

The counsellor helps the client to make a workable plan to get what he or she wants.

The essence of a workable plan, in Reality Therapy, is that it is a plan you can implement - in other words, it concentrates on the things that are in your control to do:

- Maybe you can't make your spouse talk to you but you can talk to your spouse;
- Maybe you can't make your teenage son treat you with respect but you can decide that you will no longer provide a laundry and catering service to a son who treats you with contempt;
- Maybe you can't make the company give you a promotion but you can look for a promotion, lobby for it and apply for the job when it comes up;

In this way, Reality Therapy empowers the client by emphasising the power of doing what is in your control to do.

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Doing: the heart of Reality Therapy

Doing is placed at the heart of Reality Therapy.

Emotions are a wonderful, immediate and "alive" source of information about how we are doing and whether we are happy with what is going on in our lives. But it is very, very hard to change our emotions directly.

It is easier to change our thinking: to decide, for example, that we will no longer think of ourselves as victims or to decide that in our thoughts we will concentrate on what we can do rather than what we think everybody else ought to do.

But to practitioners of Reality Therapy *changing what we do is the key to changing how we feel and to getting what we want.*

Indeed, we are sometimes so caught up in anger, depression or resentment that even changing how we think seems an impossible task - in such situations a positive change in what we do may be the best we can manage.

The issue of control is also of great importance in Reality Therapy. Indeed, the theory underpinning Reality Therapy was, until recently, called Control Theory: it is now called Choice Theory.

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The key issue of control

To meet their needs human beings need control: one person seeks control through position and money; another wants to control his or her physical space, like the teenager who bans all parents and parent-like persons from her room; another wants to chair the committee; another wants an office with a corner and two windows; another wants two lamb chops, Heinz beans and three boiled potatoes on the table at precisely 6.30 pm.

Control gets us into trouble in two primary ways: when we try to control other people, and when we use drugs and alcohol to give us a false sense of control.

At the very heart of Glasser's Choice Theory is the idea that the only person I can really control is myself.

If I think I can control others I am moving in the direction of frustration.

If I think others can control me (and so are to blame for all that goes on in my life) I tend to do nothing and again head for frustration.

There may indeed be things that "happen" to us and for which we are not personally responsible but we can choose what we do about these things.

Trying to control other people is a mug's game, from the point of view of Reality Therapy. It is a never-ending battle, alienates us from others and causes endless pain and frustration.

This is why it is vital to stick to what is in our own control to do and to respect the right of other people to meet their needs.

We can, of course, get an instant sense of control from alcohol and some other drugs. Unfortunately, our lives are never more out of control than when we are drunk or drugged. There are very few people in this world who ever woke up with a hangover to find that they had fewer problems than they had when they started

drinking the night before.

Excessive drinking and the use of drugs have to be replaced by doing something else - and that something else has to have a fair chance of getting us what we want in life. Many people working in the addiction field have found this approach useful.

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The solution is in the present and the future

Counselling is often thought to involve delving into the past. Practitioners of Reality Therapy also visit the past but probably to a lesser extent than those who use other therapies - this is not a criticism of those who use other therapies, it is simply a way in which Reality Therapy is different.

In Reality Therapy the past is seen as the source of our wants and of our ways of behaving.

Not only are the bad things that happened to us there but our successes are there too. The focus of the practitioner of Reality Therapy is to learn what needs to be learned about the past but to move as quickly as feasible to empowering the client to satisfy his or her needs and wants in the present and in the future.

This is because it is our present perceptions that influence our present behaviour and so it is these perceptions that the Reality Therapy practitioner helps the client to work through.

It is very much a therapy of hope, based on the conviction that we are products of the past but we do not have to go on being its victims.

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