



Love &
Belonging

Power

FUN

Survival

Freedom

Reality Therapy (Choice Theory)

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Choice Theory

- Choice Theory, which was formulated by psychiatrist Dr. William Glasser.
- He posits that all humans have 5 basic needs (survival, freedom, fun, power, and love/belonging) that we attempt to satisfy through our behavioral choices.
- According to choice theory, almost all behavior is chosen, and we can only control our own behavior.
- Although everyone has all 5 of these needs, the drive for love and belongingness tends to be the most important.

Choice Theory

- According to choice theory, it is through the development of close, caring relationships that we can most effectively fulfill our other needs and achieve happiness.
- Unfortunately, people frequently use external control (i.e., various types of coercive force such as criticizing, threatening, and nagging) to attempt to get others to do what they would like them to do with the misguided belief that this will help others to best satisfy their needs.





Choice Theory

- In reality, using external control on others tends to result in conflict, frustration, and disconnected relationships.
- In turn, disconnected relationships ultimately produce unhappy people that may manifest mental health problems such as depression and anxiety.

Reality therapy

- Reality therapy is Dr. Glasser's counseling approach using choice theory.
- Within reality therapy, there is much emphasis on a person learning to develop a strong internal locus of control (i.e., belief that one can attain desired results through one's choices) and a strong sense of responsibility for one's behavior.
- Like CBT, reality therapy tends to be focused on the present, problem and solution oriented, and time limited.
- Importantly, like CBT, a main goal in reality therapy is to aid clients in gaining new perspectives and techniques that will help them to manage challenges on their own.



Reality therapy



- Reality therapy is a form of counseling that views behaviors as choices. It states that psychological symptoms occur not because of mental illness, but due to people irresponsibly choosing behaviors to fulfill their needs.
- A reality therapist's goal is to help people accept responsibility of these behaviors and choose more desirable actions.
- Dr. William Glasser developed this method in 1965. He used reality therapy in mental hospitals, prisons, and jails.
- Dr. Glasser has written many books on the subject, and the William Glasser Institute still teaches his methods today.

Five Basic Human Needs

At its core, reality therapy is a form of therapy that aims to help people with unmet needs, **set goals**, problem solve, and create more meaningful connections with others.

It recognizes five basic human needs that must be met to allow for healthy functioning and **life satisfaction** (Good Therapy, 2015a):

- Survival (food, water, shelter, sexual fulfillment)
- Love and Belonging (via family, friendships, community, etc.)
- Power (sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, **self-esteem**)
- Freedom (independence, sufficient personal space, autonomy)
- Fun (satisfaction, pleasure, and enjoyment)

Reality therapy and choice theory

Reality therapy is based on choice theory, which Dr. Glasser also created.

Choice theory states that humans have five basic, genetically driven needs called “genetic instructions.” These are:

- survival
- love and belonging
- power or achievement
- freedom or independence
- fun or enjoyment

Choice Theory

In choice theory, these needs don't exist in any particular order. But it does state that our primary need is love and belonging, which explains why mental distress is often related to relationships.

The theory also states that we choose our behaviors to satisfy unmet needs. And in order to meet these needs, our behavior must be determined by internal forces. If our behavior is influenced by external factors like people or situations, it will result in psychological problems.

Client's Role in Reality Therapy

A client in reality therapy will likely be encouraged to do the following:

- Focus on the present, not the past
- Avoid discussing symptoms
- Focus their energy on changing their thoughts and behavior
- Avoid criticizing, blaming, and/or comparing themselves to others
- Avoid relying on excuses for their behavior, whether they are legitimate or not
- Make specific plans and smart goals (William Glasser Institute, 2010).

SAMIC3

Clients may be encouraged to make “SAMIC3” plans, plans that are:

- S – Simple
- A – Attainable
- M – Measurable
- I – Immediate
- C – Consistent
- C – Client-centered
- C – Committed to (Wubbolding, 1991)

The WDEP System

The WDEP system is a fundamental system in reality therapy.

“WDEP” stands for:

- W – Wants
- D – Doing (or Direction)
- E – Evaluation
- P – Plan

OVERVIEW OF THE THERAPEUTIC PROCESS

In reality therapy, the therapist might begin the therapeutic process by guiding a person's attention away from past behaviors in order to focus on those that occur in the present. Present needs are what are relevant, as they are the needs that can be satisfied. Reality therapists also tend to not focus on a person's symptoms, as Glasser believed symptoms of mental distress manifest as a result of a person's disconnection from others.

Individuals who enter reality therapy generally have a specific issue of concern, and the therapist may ask them to consider the effects their behavior has on that area, helping that person focus on things they can actually change rather than things beyond their control. In reality therapy, the focal point is what the person in therapy can control. By understanding one's own needs and desires and developing a plan to meet those needs while refraining from criticizing or blaming others, reality therapists believe that a person may be able to form, reform, or strengthen connections with others.

ROLE OF THE THERAPIST IN REALITY THERAPY

Because reality therapy seeks to treat individuals who experience difficulty in their relationships with others, forming a connection with the therapist is an important beginning in reality therapy. This connection is considered by reality therapists to be the most important dynamic in facilitating healing. Once this relationship is stable, it can be used as a model to form fulfilling connections outside of the therapeutic environment.

Those in therapy can learn how to best strengthen relationships outside of therapy while in the “safe” therapeutic relationship and as a result, be able to more easily expand on those methods in daily life. Reality therapists hold that when a person in therapy can employ the behaviors, actions, and methods developed through therapy in life successfully, they will often be able to improve external relationships and experience a more fulfilling life.

Core ideas of reality therapy

Reality therapy applies the main principles of choice theory. It aims to help you recognize the reality of your choices and choose more effective behaviors. The key concepts include:

1. **Behavior**
2. **Control**
3. **Responsibility**
4. **Action**
5. **Present moment**

Behavior

Behavior is a central component of reality therapy. It's categorized into organized behaviors and reorganized behaviors.

Organized behaviors are past behaviors that you created to satisfy your needs. The therapist will help you recognize any ineffective organized behaviors.

After identifying ineffective behaviors, you'll work on changing them into more effective behaviors or making completely new ones. These are called reorganized behaviors.

By presenting behaviors as choices, reality therapy can help you feel more in control of your life and actions, according to advocates of the technique.

Control

The choice theory suggests that a person is only controlled by themselves. It also states that the idea of being controlled by external factors is ineffective for making change.

This concept emerges in reality therapy, which states that behavioral choices are determined by internal control. A reality therapist works to increase your awareness of these controllable choices.

Responsibility

In reality therapy, control is closely linked to responsibility. According to Dr. Glasser, when people make poor choices, they are irresponsibly trying to fulfill their needs.

Based on this notion, reality therapy aims to increase your accountability of your behavior.

Action

According to reality therapy, your actions are part of your overall behavior. It also maintains that you have control over your actions. Hence, the therapist will focus on modifying actions to change behavior.

The method involves evaluating your current actions, how well they're satisfying your needs, and planning new actions that will meet those needs.

Present moment

Reality therapy states that present behavior and actions aren't influenced by the past. Instead, it claims that current behavior is determined by the present unmet needs. It uses a "here and now" approach to responsibility and action.

When is reality therapy used?

You can use reality therapy for many different scenarios and relationships, including:

- individual therapy
- family therapy
- parenting
- marriage counseling
- education
- management
- relationships with colleagues
- friendships
- addiction

Reality therapy vs. traditional psychiatry and psychotherapy

Traditional psychiatry and psychotherapy aim to understand the underlying causes of a person's problems. They also focus on unconscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Reality therapy, on the other hand, emphasizes the present. The goal is to change current behavior in order to address a mental health issue.

Additionally, reality therapy rejects the idea of mental illness. Dr. Glasser believed that people aren't mentally ill, they just choose inappropriate behaviors to satisfy their needs instead.

Criticisms and limitations of reality therapy

Not all health professionals accept reality therapy. Some criticize it due to its:

- Opposition of mental illness. Dr. Glasser claimed that mental illness doesn't exist, which has received pushback from the psychiatric community.
- Potential to impose views. A reality therapist helps people develop new actions. Some say this allows the therapist to impose their values and judgments.
- Anti-medication stance. Dr. Glasser stated that medication is never required to treat mental illness. Critics say he could have mentioned the benefits of conventional therapy over drugs, instead of dismissing them entirely.
- Disregard of the unconscious. Some people say that reality therapy fails to recognize the power of our unconscious.
- Limitation to the present. Reality therapy doesn't aim to understand past conflicts, unlike traditional forms of therapy.

Reality therapy techniques

Reality therapy involves different techniques to change your current behavior. Some examples include:

Self-evaluation

A therapist will use self-evaluation techniques to help you recognize your present actions. This serves as a foundation for planning new actions.

They might ask questions like:

- “What are your perceptions of the goals you’ve achieved and those you haven’t?”
- “Are your current goals realistic?”
- “How willing are you to make a change?”

Typically, a therapist will repeatedly use this technique throughout your sessions.

Action planning

After self-evaluation, your therapist will guide you through action planning. The goal is to plan new actions that better serve your needs.

Generally, these actions are:

- simple
- specific
- measurable
- attainable
- focused on results, rather than the action to be avoided
- immediate or time-limited

Reframing

In reframing, a therapist expresses a concept in a positive or less negative way. This can help shift your mindset from problem-focused to solution-focused.

For example, you might say that you can't stand being disrespected by others. A reality therapist may relabel the problem and say, "Feeling respected by other people is important for you." This helps you find solutions within problems.

Behavioral rehearsal

Behavioral rehearsal involves practicing appropriate social behaviors. For example, your therapist might have you imagine or talk about these behaviors. Or, you might act out the situation with your therapist.

When the situation happens in reality, you'll be prepared to respond with the appropriate behavior.

What to look for in a reality therapist

Seek a licensed mental health professional who is trained in reality therapy. This could be a:

- psychiatrist
- psychotherapist
- clinical counselor
- school counselor
- cognitive behavioral therapist

You might ask for referrals from your doctor or a trusted friend. Be sure to look at their credentials and consider online reviews. Importantly, always choose someone you feel comfortable talking to; if you don't connect with the first therapist you contact, reach out to another.

APPLICATION OF REALITY THERAPY

Reality therapy is considered an effective therapeutic strategy for addressing many issues, but it can be especially valuable in treating difficulties faced by children and young adults at school and in their communities.

Research has shown improvements in overall classroom functioning, cooperation, and a decrease in challenging behaviors when teachers and school counselors are adequately trained in reality therapy. Studies have also indicated that reality therapy is useful when applied to certain issues with behavioral components, including teen pregnancy. Reality therapy works from the perspective that people must assume responsibility for their behavior if they wish to change it.

Reality therapy has also been effective in the broader community, such as when integrated into athletic coaching and in work with juvenile offenders, to facilitate behavioral change. This form of therapy can help bridge the gap between intolerance and ignorance through education and equality, often resulting in a more unified group.



CONCERNS AND LIMITATIONS OF REALITY THERAPY

Findings show that reality therapy has been applied with positive results in schools for problems concerning behavior. However, little long-term research on the effectiveness of this approach in school populations has been conducted. These studies are also limited due to the lack of experimental control in areas such as sample size and training of teachers, as well as questions concerning voluntary participation.

While reality therapy has been found to reduce issues with misbehavior of target groups in schools, findings are limited regarding its capacity for improving the personal experiences of youth, their self-esteem, and self-concept. These findings suggest that reality therapy is effective in addressing symptomatic behavioral issues but not underlying causes and reasons for the behavior.



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