

COUNSELING SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES

6. REALITY THERAPY COUNSELING

6.1. Introduction to Reality Therapy

Reality therapy (RT) is an approach to psychotherapy and counseling. Developed by William Glasser in the 1960s, RT differs from conventional psychiatry, psychoanalysis and medical model schools of psychotherapy in that it focuses on what Glasser calls psychiatry's three Rs: realism, responsibility, and right-and-wrong, rather than symptoms of mental disorders. Reality therapy maintains that the individual is suffering from a socially universal human condition rather than a mental illness. It is in the unsuccessful attainment of basic needs that a person's behavior moves away from the norm. Since fulfilling essential needs is part of a person's present life, reality therapy does not concern itself with a client's past. Neither does this type of therapy deal with unconscious mental processes. In these ways reality therapy is very different from other forms of psychotherapy.

The reality therapy approach to counseling and problem-solving focuses on the here-and-now actions of the client and the ability to create and choose a better future. Typically, clients seek to discover what they really want and how they are currently choosing to behave in order to achieve these goals. According to Glasser, the social component of psychological disorders has been highly overlooked in the rush to label the population as sick or mentally ill. Reality therapy attempts to separate the client from the behavior. Just because someone is experiencing distress resulting from a social problem does not make him sick, it just makes him out of sync with his psychological needs.

Reality therapy was developed at the Veterans Administration hospital in Los Angeles in the early 1960s, by William Glasser and his mentor and teacher, psychiatrist G. L. Harrington. In 1965, Glasser published the book *Reality Therapy* in the United States. The term refers to a process that is people-friendly and people-centered and has nothing to do with giving people a dose of reality (as a threat or punishment), but rather helps people to recognize how fantasy can distract them from their choices they control in life. Glasser posits that the past is not something to be dwelled upon but rather to be resolved and moved past in order to live a more fulfilling and rewarding life. By the 1970s, the concepts were extended into what Glasser then called "Control Theory", a term used in the title of several

of his books. By the mid-1990s, the still evolving concepts were described as "choice theory", a term conceived and proposed by the Irish reality therapy practitioner Christine O'Brien Shanahan and subsequently adopted by Glasser. The practice of reality therapy remains a cornerstone of the larger body of his work. Choice theory asserts that we are self-determining beings because we choose our behavior and we are responsible for how we are acting, thinking, feeling and also for our physiological states. Choice theory explains how we attempt to control our world and those in it.

6.2. Approach

According to Glasser, human beings have four basic psychological needs after survival: the most important need being to love and be loved by another person or group for a feeling of belonging; the need for power, through learning, achieving, feeling worthwhile, winning and through being competent; the need for freedom, including independence and autonomy while simultaneously exercising personal responsibility; the need for fun, pleasure seeking enjoyment and relaxation is also a very important need for good psychological health.

One of the core principles of reality therapy is that, whether people are aware of it or not, they are always trying to meet these essential human needs. These needs must all be balanced and met for a person to function most effectively. However, people don't necessarily act effectively at achieving these goals. Socializing with others is one effective way of meeting the need to belong. But how a person chooses to interact with and gain attention and love from others is most often at the root of their psychological dismay. Reality therapy stresses one major point which is that people are in control of what they are currently doing in their lives whether or not it is working in their favor toward meeting their basic psychological needs for power, belonging, fun and freedom. And it is through an individual's choices that he or she makes change happen for the better or worse.

In our current society, the survival need is normally being met, it is then in how people meet the remaining four psychological needs that they typically run into trouble. Reality therapy holds that the key to behavior is to remain aware of what an individual presently wants and make choices that will ensure that goal. Reality therapy maintains that what really drives human beings is their need to belong and to be loved. What also drives humans is the desire to be free and with that freedom comes great responsibility (one cannot exist without the other). Reality therapy is very much a therapy of choice and change, based on the conviction that even

though people are often products of their past, they don't have to be held hostage by it forever.

6.3. Core Ideas

Action

Glasser believes that there are five basic needs of all human beings: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom or independence, and fun. Reality therapy maintains that the biggest reason a person is in pain and acting out is because he/she lacks that one important 'other being' to connect with. Glasser believes the need for love and belonging is the primary need because we need other people in order to satisfy all the other needs. Therefore in a cooperative therapeutic relationship, the therapist must create an environment where it is possible for the client to feel connected to another 'responsible' person (the therapist) that they actually like and would actually choose as a friend in their real life. Reality therapy maintains that the core problem of psychological distress is that one or more of the client's essential needs are not being met thereby causing the client to act irresponsibly. The therapist then addresses this issue and asserts that the client assume responsibility for their behavior. Reality therapy holds that we learn responsibility through involvement with other responsible people. We can learn and re-learn responsibility at any time in life. The therapist then focuses on realistic goals in order to remedy the real life issues that are causing discomfort.

William Glasser's choice theory is composed of four aspects; thinking, acting, feeling, and physiology. We can directly choose our thoughts and our actions; we have great difficulty in directly choosing our feelings and our physiology (sweaty palms, headaches, nervous tics, racing pulse, etc.). Emotions (feelings) are the client's self-evaluation is a critical and crucial first step. A self-realization that something must change, realization and acceptance that change is, in fact, possible, leads to a plan for making better choices, plans that are at the heart of successful reality therapy. The therapist helps the client create a workable plan to reach a goal. It must be the client's plan, not the counselor's. The essence of a workable plan is that the client can implement it. It is based on factor under the client's control. Reality therapy strives to empower people by emphasizing the power of doing what is under their control. 'Doing' is at the heart of reality therapy.

Behavior

Behavior, in the real world is an immediate and alive source of information about how we are doing and whether we are happy with what is going on in our lives. However, it is very hard to choose and 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. Reality therapists approach changing "what we do" as a key to changing how we feel and how we will work to obtain what we want. These ideas are similar to those in other therapy movements such as re-evaluation counseling and person-centered psychotherapy, although the former emphasizes emotional release as a method of clearing emotional hurt.

Control

Control is a key issue in reality therapy. Human beings need control to meet their needs: one person seeks control through position and money, and another wants to control their physical space. Control gets a client into trouble in two primary ways: when he or she tries to control other people, and when he or she uses drugs and alcohol to give him or her a false sense of control. At the very heart of choice theory is the core belief that the only person the client can really control is him or herself. If the client thinks he or she can control others, then he or she is moving in the direction of frustration. If the client thinks others can control him or her and follows up by blaming them for all that goes on in his or her life, then he or she tends to do nothing and heads for frustration. There may be events that happen to the client which is out of his or her control, but ultimately, it is up to the client to choose how to respond to these events. Trying to control other people is a vain naive hope, from the point of view of reality therapy. It is a never ending battle which alienates the client from others and causes endless pain and frustration. This is why it is vital for the client to stick to what is in his or her own control and to respect the rights of other people to meet their needs. The client can, of course, get an instant sense of control from alcohol and some other drugs. This method of control, however, is false, and skews the true level of control the client has over him or herself. This creates an inconsistent level of control which creates even more dissonance and frustration.

Focus on the present

While traditional psychoanalysis and counseling often focus on past events, reality therapy and choice theory solutions lay in the present and the future. Practitioners of reality therapy may visit the past but never dwell on it. In reality therapy, the past is seen as the source of the client's wants and his or her ways of behaving, not as a cause. A client's quality world is examined as to what this person wants in his life and is it realistic. Supposedly each person from birth has taken pictures or stored mental images that he wants in his quality world. Also, each person strives to attain these things that have given pleasure in the past. Everyone's quality world is different, so naturally when people enter into a relationship their quality world most likely will not match up with their new partner.

6.4. Basic Principles

There are several basic principles of reality therapy that must be applied to make this technique most successful.

- Focus on the present and avoid discussing the past because all human problems are caused by unsatisfying present relationships.
- Avoid discussing symptoms and complaints as much as possible since these are often the ineffective ways that clients choose to deal with (and hold on to) unsatisfying relationships.
- Understand the concept of total behavior, which means focus on what clients can do, directly act, and think. Spend less time on what they cannot do directly such as changing their feelings and physiology. Feelings and physiology can be changed indirectly, but only if there is a change in the acting and thinking.
- Avoid criticizing, blaming and/or complaining and help clients do the same. By doing this, they learn to avoid these extremely harmful external control behaviors that destroy relationships.
- Remain non-judgmental and non-coercive, but encourage people to judge all they are doing by the choice theory axiom: Is what I am doing getting me closer to the people I need? If the choice of behaviors is not getting people closer, then the therapist works to help the client find new behaviors that lead to a better connection.
- Teach clients that legitimate or not, excuses stand directly in the way of their ability to make needed connections.

- Focus on specifics. Find out as soon as possible who clients are disconnected from and work to help them choose reconnecting behaviors. If they are completely disconnected, focus on helping them find a new connection.
- Help them make specific, workable plans to reconnect with the people they need, and then follow through on what was planned by helping them evaluate their progress. Based on their experience, therapists may suggest plans, but should not give the message that there is only one plan. A plan is always open to revision or rejection by the client.
- Be patient and supportive but keep focusing on the source of the problem: disconnectedness. Clients who have been disconnected for a long time will find it difficult to reconnect. They are often so involved in the harmful behavior that they have lost sight of the fact that they need to reconnect. Help them to understand Choice Theory and explain that whatever their complaint, reconnecting is the best possible solution to their problem.

6.5. Applications in Education

In education, reality therapy can be used as a basis for the school's classroom management plan. Reality therapy has been shown to be effective in improving underachieving junior high school students' internal perception of control. Their internal perception of control refers to their locus of control being internal or external. Reality therapy can be used to help school psychologists improve students with emotional and behavioral disturbances. Some propose using reality therapy methods will help school counselors develop positive therapeutic relationships and improve students' self-esteem.

Reality therapy has also been found effective with improving the self-concept of elementary school students. Many at risk and alternative schools across the nation have implemented reality therapy techniques and methods to improve school functioning and the learning and social environment. Other areas of application have been used in athletic coaching, childhood obesity, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many successful coaches use some aspects of reality therapy. According to Klug, reality therapy in coaching helps build relationships, a healthy teaching environment and brings a definitive purpose to goal setting. Reality therapy can also be used to prevent or control childhood obesity. It is suggested that applied reality therapy methods may help children evaluate their eating behaviors, set realistic goals and integrate effective self-evaluation.