

Reality Therapy for Marital and Family Systems Counseling

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Abstract

Reality therapy and choice theory have been applied to many counseling settings. The following work will review available literature and theory as to how choice theory is applied to marital and family systems counseling, including a review of the foundational concepts of reality therapy, characteristics of a counselor that practices reality therapy, needs profiles, needs genograms, and the reality therapy solving circle.

In the mid-60's a psychiatrist named William Glasser became disillusioned with the way his field was treating patients. He believed they needed to reconnect with reality and close relationships instead of focusing on unconscious forces and the past. Through a series of trials that is well beyond the scope of this paper to cover, he began to organize and publish his ideas into what would become Choice theory and Reality therapy. Reality therapy is the method of counseling that uses choices theory to inform and direct its application (Wubbolding, 2011). Choice theory has been described by Glasser as a theory of personal freedom, one that can help us become closer to the important people in our lives that we need (Glasser, 1998).

The following work will contain a brief review of reality therapy applied to marriage and family counseling. The difference between choice theory and reality therapy will be discussed along with a quick review of the foundational concepts. This shall be followed by a section on the type of therapist that can best apply reality therapy to marriage counseling, and the WDEP system. Finally the basic needs profiles, basic needs genograms, and the reality therapy concept of a solving circle will be explored.

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Ten Axioms of Choice Theory

Glasser (1998) listed ten important beliefs that underlie choice theory and directly apply to marital and family counseling. The first belief is that the only behavior we can control is our own. Second, that all we get from others and give back to them is information. Third, that all psychological problems are relationship problems. Fourth, that all those problem relationships are always in the present (meaning they are not unresolved childhood relationship issues with a parent). Fifth, that the past influences who we are but it is our current choices that need to be looked at. Sixth, that the five basic needs drive our behavior (which will be expanded upon shortly). Seventh, that by satisfying pictures in our quality world we satisfy those five needs. Eighth, that all behavior is total behavior. Ninth, that behavior is designated by verbs (depressing, angering, etc), and finally that all behavior is chosen (Glasser, 1998). The concepts that make up these ten axioms will be briefly described in the following sections, as well as how they relate to marital and family counseling.

Foundations: Needs

William Glasser (1998) posits the existence of five basic, genetic, needs that are universal among all people in all cultures. These needs are the physiological need for survival and the psychological needs for love, power, freedom and fun. The need for survival was the first need to emerge in us as a species during our long evolution; without a powerful need to survive and pass on our genes we wouldn't be here. Over time the ones that developed a need for love and belonging had a stronger chance to survive by banding together, cooperating, raising the young as a group, and so forth. When humans started to band together some were in positions of more authority over the others and were, yet again, more likely to survive and pass on their genes. In response to this need for power, the need to have choices available and be free from others' inappropriate use of power grew. The final need, fun, Glasser theorizes is the genetic reward for learning (Glasser, 1998).

The five basic needs motivate our behavior; it is very frustrating not to have any of our needs met and people seek to remedy any such dissonance with the most

seemingly-effective behavior they can think of at the time. Even though we all have the same needs, we fulfill them differently. Glasser writes; “A Chinese infant girl has the same needs as a Swedish king” (Glasser, 1975, p. 9). The king will meet his need for love and belonging much differently than the infant girl, for instance.

Mickel and Hall (2009), discuss the basic needs in the context of loving relationships. They discuss how the personalities of some couples are complimentary yet different and enhance each other, and also how some couples’ personalities are very similar. Glasser (1998) makes note of individual needs profiles as well, which will be discussed in a later section in more detail. Mickel and Hall (2009), write “One needs to responsibly meet one’s needs. In order to develop the significant relationship, one must contribute to the other’s picture of significance. The relationship if it is to succeed must be need fulfilling” (Mickel & Hall, 2009, p. 24). They also comment on how if our needs for love and belonging aren’t met we will suffer from a wide range of symptoms; anxiety, depression, discomfort, etc. Jill Duba (2009) combined the idea of the five basic needs with a family genogram, which will be described in a following section.

Foundations: Quality World

Mickel and Hall (2009), mentioned in their article that a couple needs to have similar pictures in their quality worlds. They say that the more pictures which are shared by the partners, the deeper the partners will perceive themselves to be in love. The quality world, as described by Glasser (1975) is an internal picture album of all the things that have ever met needs for us, or that we believe will meet our needs. It is our personal Shangri-la where a person would live if they could. People, things, and ideas or beliefs we have or want are all represented in our quality worlds. Our needs greatly influence our quality worlds, as they are how we base our decisions on what to put in. It is when our quality worlds and perceived worlds are incongruent that we are unhappy and seek to change or control something to get them back in line (Glasser, 1975). For instance, we all have a picture in our quality worlds about what an ideal relationship is and what our spouse should be like. If our current relationship doesn’t match up to our quality world picture then problems develop if we try to force them to change.

Foundations: Total Behavior

Another fundamental concept in choice theory and reality therapy is that of total behavior. This concept describes all behavior in terms of four inseparable components: Acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. When a person claims to be depressed, they are encouraged to look at the other three components of that feeling-word and evaluate how their thoughts and actions are contributing to that feeling. The idea is that we have more direct control over our thoughts and actions than we do over our feelings and physiology, which follow along after our actions and thoughts. If we are 'depressed' it is more accurate to say we are 'depressing,' since our thoughts and actions (probably thinking negative thoughts, and doing lazy, unhelpful things) are a large part of the total behavior, and those are for the most part, choices (Glasser, 1975).

Application to Marriage and Family Systems Counseling

Characteristics of a Therapist That Uses Reality Therapy

In their interview with Dr. Wubbolding, one of the leaders in the field of reality therapy, Christensen and Gray (2002), asked him about what a therapist would need to know in addition to reality therapy and choice theory to effectively work with couples. He responded that knowledge of systems theory is required, and reminded his audience that when working with a couple or family there is another entity involved in addition to the people present: the family or marriage as a whole. Combining systems theory with reality therapy, each member is asked what they choose to bring to the table to improve the relationship. Wubbolding also said that a counselor needs to be able to direct the counseling process so that issues can be presented with "...a minimum of arguing, blaming, criticizing, demeaning, excuse making, and fault finding" (Christensen & Gray, 2002, p. 247). On the more mundane front, the counselor also needs to be a good teacher, able to listen effectively, make sure each person is involved, and help each person evaluate their own choices/behaviors and make plans for change (Christensen & Gray, 2002).

WDEP in Marriage and Family Counseling

When Christensen and Gray (2002), interviewed Robert Wubbolding they also asked him about how he personally applies choice theory and reality therapy to working with couples and family systems. After a brief review of reality therapy the authors recorded this quote as to what reality therapy can do in marital counseling situations: “Teaching the importance of effective and mutual need satisfaction in families and couples lead to increased cohesiveness” (Christensen and Gray, 2002, p.245). He also gave an acronym to teach families of what not to do: ABCDEFG. A: Argue, Antagonize, Accusing, B: Belittling, Blaming, Bossing, C: Criticizing, Coercing, Condemning, Complaining, D: Demeaning and Demanding, E: Excuses, F: Fear and Finding Fault, G: Giving up on each other (Christensen & Gray, 2002). The meat of their interview then turned to the WDEP system and how to apply it to marital counseling.

WDEP was developed by Robert Wubbolding and has been described in a number of sources (Christensen & Gray, 2002). The acronym WDEP stands for wants, doing, evaluation, and planning. The acronym is a simple way to remember a lot of information, because each of the four components has a number of facets and techniques involved with it (Wubbolding, 2000). From the interview Christensen and Gray recorded with Dr. Wubbolding, the ‘W’ part of WDEP system can help a couple define their individual and mutual needs and wants, as well as if their current choices are creating greater cohesion for the system or are breaking it apart. While exploring the couples’ wants, Wubbolding often asks “Do you want me to be a marriage counselor or a divorce counselor?” (Christensen & Gray, 2002, p. 246). Discussing wants also naturally reveals perceptions and leads to a discussion of what is controllable and not, which is a valuable teaching moment in reality therapy (Christensen & Gray, 2002).

The ‘D’ of WDEP stands for doing, in other words the actions and choices that the partners are making. In his interview, Dr. Wubbolding encouraged making a discussion of how the couple spends time together and specific actions taken during those times. In rough times the time spent together will rarely be enjoyable and their actions will reflect it. The ‘E’ stands for evaluation, which is a vital component of reality

therapy. In relation to couples counseling a lot of the evaluation stage centers on helping the clients self-evaluate their behavior in terms of bringing each other closer together or further apart. The 'P' is for planning, and is founded upon the other three stages. When the couple identifies what they want, what they are currently doing, and how that counteracts those wants, they can make a plan to make better choices. The acronym SAMIC is mentioned, which means plans are: "Simple, attainable, measureable, immediate, controlled by the planner and not contingent on the behavior of others" (Christensen & Gray, 2002, p. 246).

Mickel and Hall (2009), also mentioned the WDEP system briefly, writing that; "In order to act lovingly, one must be aware of how one's behavior impacts each person in the relationship. Awareness allows self-evaluation" (Mickel & Hall, 2009, p. 25). Self-evaluation needs three things to happen, according to these authors: Awareness of one's own quality world pictures, awareness of your significant other's quality world pictures, and the creation of shared pictures. They say that when these three things happen the relationship can become a significant one, and the relationship's needs can be placed above the needs of either individual (Mickel & Hall, 2009).

First Session Questions

In his 1998 book *Choice Theory, A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*, Glasser discusses love and marriage and structured reality therapy marriage counseling. To Glasser it is a matter of external control psychology being chiefly responsible for the destruction of many marriages. When one partner begins to believe they can control the other and make them do whatever is wanted, the seeds of separation are planted. Glasser also mentions a systems theory concept here as well: Counsel the relationship's needs, not the individuals. He highlights a list of questions that should be asked in the first session of any marriage counseling. They are as follows:

1. Are you here because you really want help? Or are you here because you have already made up your minds to divorce but want to be able to say you tried to get help?

2. Very briefly, what do you believe is wrong with the marriage?
3. Whose behavior can you control?
4. Tell me one good thing about the marriage as it exists right now.
5. Think of and then tell me something that you are willing to do this coming week that you believe will help your marriage. Whatever it is, it must be something you can do yourself. It must not depend, in any way, on what your partner should or should not do.
6. During this coming week, are you willing to try to think of an additional thing besides what you thought of here? And then do it following the same I-can-only-control-what-I-do conditions as in the previous questions? (Glasser, 1998, p. 179-180).

Glasser (1998) then explains his rationale behind these questions in terms of their utility in reality therapy. The first question reveals whether counseling has a chance at all, if they have already decided to separate and can't convince the counselor otherwise, Glasser believes the counseling is doomed to failure. Both members of the couple need to be committed to fixing the relationship. The second question inevitably brings about blame and a lot of externalizing. The counselor needs to carefully direct this conversation so it does not monopolize the time and infect the entire atmosphere of counseling. This question serves to dramatically emphasize how destructive external control psychology can be, and begins the conversations in which choice theory is taught. The third question lays the foundation for the following questions about what they can do individually. The fourth question usually presents a problem for a couple inundated with blaming behavior, but in the end Glasser writes that it will help a lot of the tension drain out of the room after the blaming of previous questions. Having them think of good things in the marriage also sets them up for questions five and six, in which they begin to take some small steps to make different, more positive, choices in the relationship and hopefully move closer together as a couple, which is the entire purpose of the therapy (Glasser, 1998).

Stages of Marital and Family Counseling in Reality Therapy

Jill Duba (2009), briefly discussed stages that marital and family counseling goes through when approached with a reality therapy mindset. These stages are as follows; assessment, intervention, and action. The first stage, assessment, involves a detailed exploration of each family members' individual wants, the family's (or couple's) needs, how each member is perceiving each other member, how each member perceives the family (or couple) as a whole (including a look at what they think is working, what they think is not working, in what context the arguments occur in, and what is helping or hurting the family at the moment), and their overall expectations of counseling (Duba, 2009).

In the second stage the interventions happen, including psychoeducational work, disrupting maladaptive alliances in the family system, and teaching new ideas. The third stage involves the family members creating and carrying out a plan to fix what has been identified as ineffective or not working how they want (Duba, 2009).

The Solving Circle

Glasser (1998) writes about a concept called the solving circle, which he believes can help any couple with problems to come to an acceptable solution, or give them information about the chances the relationship has to continue. The solving circle is a technique that couples can be taught to use on their own when problems come up. The circle is best used when both partners have a decent grasp on choice theory, due to many of the axioms of choice theory being applied here. Glasser suggests they imagine a large circle on the floor which they can both sit on chairs in. Once inside the circle the couple understands that there is a third entity present with them, that being their relationship. Both must agree that the relationship or marriage takes precedence over their personal desires. When the couple is in the circle they are in a negotiation and compromise-creating process where they don't try to force the other into doing anything, but they express their own needs. They agree not to injure their marriage when in the circle, and rather than telling each other what they want, they tell the other what they are willing to give (Glasser, 1998).

If a compromise or agreement can't be reached while using the circle, one or both partners must say "What I want right now is more important to me than this marriage. I am going to step out of the circle now, but I am willing to try again tomorrow" (Glasser, 1998, p. 96). Glasser believes that if this happens often, then that is important information as to the chances the relationship has of lasting, and that the partners should pursue other opportunities because they obviously don't value their relationship enough (Glasser, 1998). Mickel and Hall (2009, p. 26) wrote "The choice not to communicate is a choice to disconnect," and, "Silence is an irresponsible choice when used to communicate unhappiness," these are pertinent quotes to remember when employing the solving circle technique. When one or more of the partners repeatedly choose not to communicate with the other, they are in the process of disconnecting.

Needs Profiles

Glasser (1998) describes a number of compatible and incompatible needs profiles. A needs profile is a compilation of an individual's five basic needs, strengths of those needs, and how the person meets those needs. He describes couples with similar needs for survival and love being more compatible than when one's needs in those areas are much lower or higher than the other. Frustration can grow when one person in the marriage requires more overt signs of love and affection than the other is willing to give, and the same holds for survival; when one is more reckless than the other is comfortable with or on the other hand, less willing to take risks the couple runs into difficulties.

The basic need for power is different, because when both partners have a high need for power they can be less likely to want to compromise and problems can develop. When both partners have a low need for power they are more likely to compromise and negotiate (perhaps with a solving circle technique described earlier), and when one partner has a significantly higher need for power than the other's low need for power it can actually work out because the lower partner may not mind the other calling the shots (Glasser, 1998).

A high need for freedom can have a negative effect on long-term commitment of any sort, and marriage is no exception. If a person has a high need for freedom they can see marriage as a restricting environment and struggle against it over time. Glasser comments that, "Marriage has the best chance when both partners have a low need for power and a low need for freedom" (Glasser, 1998, p. 100).

A high need for fun, Glasser writes, is helpful in any relationship, but is probably the least indicative needs characteristic for success or failure of a marriage. If the partners have vastly different needs for fun the one with higher need will find some way to meet that need independently. If both have a low need for fun, they simply won't know what they are missing (Glasser, 1998).

Glasser (1998), notes: "Therefore, the best marriages share an average need for survival, a high need for love and belonging, low needs for power and freedom, and a high need for fun. Any deviation from this not-too-frequent pattern will need to be negotiated" (Glasser, 1998, p. 101). The author Jill Duba (2009) expands on the idea of using needs profiles in couples counseling in more depth in her exploration of basic needs genograms.

Basic Needs Genograms

Author Jill Duba, in her 2009 article in the *International Journal of Reality Therapy* wrote about the use of 'basic needs genograms.' In her article she explained, in addition to genograms, about the basic needs, quality world, and the stages of family and marital counseling in relation to reality therapy (as mentioned earlier). Genograms, according to Duba, are used to display connections and patterns within a family or system that generally repeat from generation to generation. She writes that genograms can be beneficially applied to many types of counseling including family therapy, couples counseling, and "...individual counseling for addictions work, religious-spiritual, sexuality, and career and academic related concerns" (Duba, 2009, p. 16).

When applying the concept of a genogram to reality therapy, Duba (2009) writes that one must consider and incorporate the five basic needs. Constructing the genogram is an enlightening process in which the family members evaluate their

personal need strengths and how they typically meet those needs. This gives them, their partner, and the counselor a look at their quality worlds; what they put into them and how it influences their behavior. The genogram includes information about the need strengths of family members connected to the couple and throughout the generations. This can illuminate similarities in needs, commonalities in how those needs influenced and directed behavior, and how this has been transmitted across generations through modeling or observation (Duba, 2009).

The other important use of a genogram in marital work with reality therapy is showing how needs overlap or conflict. According to the author a genogram can show how two or more needs of one or more partners interferes with the other meeting their needs, which would obviously be an area to work on over the course of counseling. By mapping out these problem areas as well as areas of facilitative overlap for the couple present in a counselors' office, insight may lead to inspiration for a plan. It may also identify similar problems in past generations as well as solutions. Duba quoted Robert Wubbolding saying that reality therapists believe in "looking at the past but not staring at it" (Duba, 2009, p. 18). The genogram seems that it could become a tool that runs counter to that statement, but it seems only to be used to "...enable participants to become more aware of attitudes and behaviors that lend themselves to a satisfying picture of marriage and family life" (Duba, 2009, p. 18).

Duba also has an extensive list of questions that can be asked in relation to the genogram. A few of them are: "Describe the most distant and conflictual relationships in the past three generations in your family," "How did specific family members in past generations unsuccessfully deal with adversity?" "How can you be supportive of each other's differing needs?" (Duba, 2009, p. 18). If included in marital and family therapy with a reality therapy focus a genogram can, to quote the author, provide a:

...springboard for more in depth conversation about each other's needs and wants. Learning about one another's family history can provide clues about why each partner needs or wants what he or she is expressing. Consequently,

genograms can provide greater opportunities for understanding and empathy on the part of the other spouse (Duba, 2009, p. 18).

Conclusion

The preceding work has been a brief review of the major concepts in reality therapy applied to marriage and family counseling. The foundational concepts have been reviewed, along with who a therapist needs to be and what they need to know to best apply reality therapy to marriage counseling, the WDEP system, basic needs profiles and basic needs genograms, and the reality therapy concept of a solving circle. Reality therapy seems to be applicable to marriage and family counseling, and the authors certainly support the notion. It certainly seems to be an appropriate theory to use in counseling; however, there is a need for further research.

Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be much empirical research conducted on reality therapy for the specific purpose of marital and family work in the available literature. Wubbolding even commented on this fact in his interview with Christensen and Gray (2002). This is certainly an area that could use further research to support the claims and validate the theories of Glasser, Wubbolding, and the other authors who whole-heartedly support the use of reality therapy for marital and family systems work.

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