

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

William Glasser and Reality Therapy (aka Choice Theory)



Dr. William Glasser, MD, a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and educator, developed a theoretical approach based on the firm belief that we are products of the past but that we do not have to continue being victimized by that past. It is called Realty Therapy or Choice Theory.

Although able to prescribe medication as a physician, Glasser did not use it as a rule, and relied almost completely on his method of focusing on empowering his clients to fulfill their needs and desires in the present and in the future. It is our present perceptions that influence our behavior, he shows. Changing our present behavior is the key to changing how we feel and to obtaining what we want.

Glasser stated that there are five basic needs that everyone wants. They are: **POWER** (including achieving goals, winning, and feeling worthwhile); **LOVE AND BELONGING** (including being part of families and other groups of friends or loved ones); **FREEDOM** (including having your own space and feeling independent and in control of your life); **FUN** (including having pleasure and enjoyment), and; **SURVIVAL** (including food, shelter, protection from the elements, and sex).

At the very core of Reality Therapy are emotions. Emotions tell us how we are doing, whether or not we are happy with our lives or situation, and tell us about the here and now. We cannot, however, change our emotions at will. We can, however, change our thinking and decide to do what we can and want to do rather than what everyone else tells us we should do. We also must stop seeing ourselves as victims, and move to empower ourselves to get what we want from life. We must ask ourselves three questions: (1) What is it that we want in our lives? (2) What are we actually doing in order to get what we want? (3) Is our plan and method actually working?

The counselor using Reality Therapy helps the client formulate a plan for getting what (s)he wants by concentrating only on things that they can control. Perhaps you can't get the boss to give you a raise or promotion by just being a good worker, but you can actively talk to your superiors and try to convince them to pay you what you're worth or give you a better position. If you have a spouse that doesn't initiate communication or romance with you, you can initiate that communication. If you are mistreated you have the option of leaving your job or abusive spouse, of discontinuing 'maid service' and extra privileges to a child that mistreats you, and so on. When you have certain options to control the situation, you can take these options and thus relieve the stress of being a powerless victim. You always have some options and power available to you if you choose to take them.

Others can control you if you let them, but in the end the only person that you can really control is yourself. To try to control others will eventually lead to frustration. If you think others can control you (and therefore let them) you may think you can blame the others for your unhappiness or failure, but it is really you who can and must change your life by taking charge of it.

Some people use alcohol and drugs because it gives them a sense that they are in control, when in fact they are more out of control than ever. What they need is to find something else to do in order to get what they want out of life. It is essential that we attend to only what we can control in ourselves to meet our needs and let other people do what they have to do to meet their own needs.

Choice Theory/Reality Therapy is often used for people who are depressed; it understands that sometimes depression has some positive aspects, like preventing us from being extremely angry and acting out this anger – as long as we can overcome the depression. Glasser listed four things that depression can do for us; knowing what they are can help us change what we want or how we act. These items are listed as an acronym – the first letter standing for the item – ACHE.

A stands for ANGER, which has its function and helps energize us for change or to stand up for what we believe. However, it can also be destructive to relationships and to the self, sometimes with disastrous consequences. Depression is a safe alternative to anger, as long as it does not last too long or lead to suicide or complete debilitation of the spirit.

C stands for CONTROL. We can use depression to gain sympathy and control over others, to get our way, to avoid risk-taking and confrontation, to get others to pander to us and take care of us. The bottom line, however, is that depression is a deep spiritual pain.

H stands for HELP, which is what we get from friends and medical providers when we are depressed. Often this help comes after we are deep in the depths of depression; however it is help that we don't have to ask for, because by this time it becomes obvious that we are in trouble.

E stands for EXCUSE. It is a way of avoiding responsibilities, work, pain, and in general for doing what we need to do. When we are under the care of a psychotherapist using the choice/reality approach, we are shown that we have the options or choice to carry on with our responsibilities and begin to pull ourselves out of the deep hole of depression.

Only by taking control of our lives, by taking action, by making positive choices to move past situations that we cannot change – death of a loved one, an “empty nest”, spousal abuse, loss of income, declining health, and so on – can we move ahead and not rely on depression as a substitute for getting angry appropriately, for having real control, for acting helpless, and for a poor excuse to do anything more than feel sorry for yourself. It takes help, and often good counseling can show you how to recognize your situation and change your thinking and actions.

TIP OF THE WEEK: Opioids are painkillers such as hydrocodone plus acetaminophen (Vicodin, Norco, Zydone, Panacet, Lortab, Lorcet, Co-gesic, Anexsia), tramadol (Ultram), propoxyphene plus acetaminophen (Darvocet), and hydrocodone. They are taken, officially, by about 4.3 million Americans regularly and by about 10 million adults in any given week. They are officially prescribed, above all for head and back pain, and for arthritis, and are abused by many others who use them as a recreational drug, although accurate statistics are not available for this illicit and underground market. Those who use opioids are much more likely to take certain other medications than non-users, such as laxatives (6 times more likely), antidepressants (4 times), and anticonvulsants (10 times). These are dangerous drugs, often appropriate for pain but never appropriate just for getting high. I am currently running the drug treatment program (Stages of Change Therapy) at the Monroe County Jail in Tompkinsville, and have worked with several abusers and understand from first-hand observation the physical and mental harm caused by this addiction.