Ordinary People Application Paper: Reality Therapy

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Reality therapy, founded by William Glasser, is a unique counseling approach with existential roots (Wubbolding, 2000, as cited in Tan, 2011). Focused on implementing behavioral change and action in the present to meet needs and wants, it appeals to people's freedom and responsibility to choose and control what they do (Corey, 2017). This therapy is based on Glasser's *choice theory* which explains human nature in terms of needs/wants and behavior.

According to choice theory, human beings are driven throughout their lives by the same five basic needs- survival, love and belonging, power (achievement and internal control), freedom (independence), and fun- (Corey, 2017). While each person needs them in varying degrees, the most important need remains to be love and belonging through relationships. Though most people are not very aware of their needs, they do keep track of what makes them feel good. Specific memories and images of what made them happy are compiled over time into a mental list of specific wants and needs along with the precise ways to satisfy them (Tan, 2011). This inner "*picture album*" of unique wants or priorities becomes the foundation of a person's *quality world*- an ideal world one would like to live in if possible. Choice theory also asserts that another key characteristic of being human is the fact that people behave with purpose. Known as *total behavior* (one's actions, thoughts, feelings, and physiologic responses), almost everything a person does is generated from within as one's best attempt to satisfy needs and wants (Corey, 2017). Individuals are therefore responsible for their behavioral choices.

To the reality therapist, unmet needs lead to feelings of unhappiness and suffering (Corey, 2017). But instead of choosing constructive ways to feel better, people often resort to ineffective or self-destructive behaviors, which result in more emotional and psychological

symptoms. Most clients are therefore not viewed as “mentally ill” in the traditional sense but as making behavioral choices that bring about psychopathological misery.

Conrad from the movie “Ordinary People” is a young man suffering from unmet basic needs. Most prominent is his lack of love and belonging, he is without satisfying relationships in his present life and especially cannot relate to important people in his quality world (his parents). Conrad also lacks a sense of power and of independence. He doesn’t feel accomplished (i.e., he doesn’t swim fast enough), feels like a victim to outside forces (i.e., parental expectations and brother’s boating accident), and believes he doesn’t have the freedom nor control to choose what he wants (i.e., wants to but is afraid to quit the swim team). In addition, his life is without any signs of fun or enjoyment. Though Conrad has not identified these unsatisfied needs, he does know he is unhappy and miserable. To deal with this inner pain, he chooses to engage in actions and thoughts that are ineffective, such as isolating himself from family and friends, “depressing” himself, making himself anxious when interacting with others, and even attempting suicide. As his total behavior choices cause increasing psychological, emotional, and physical distress, Conrad finds himself in therapy, asking for help to “feel more in control” (Redford, 1980).

As Conrad’s reality therapist, I believe he has the capacity to change and to take more effective control of his life by choosing better ways of behaving. To help him make these life changes in the present, I will first strive to establish a caring and trusting relationship with him within a supportive and non-coercive counseling environment (Corey, 2017). This is a prerequisite to therapeutic success because it allows clients like Conrad to learn how to get close to people they need and to feel free to explore new behaviors. Then, I will guide him through the WDEP system with skillful questioning along with empathic confrontation. This will help Conrad to explore his quality world, identifying his unmet needs (with a specific focus on the

unsatisfying relationship with his parents) and prioritizing his wants. He will be asked to examine his present total behavior, focusing on what he is doing and thinking, and will be challenged to accept responsibility and evaluate whether they are effective ways of satisfying his needs and wants. Once Conrad realizes that his behavioral choices are self-destructive and adding to his misery, change can finally begin as he formulates plans of other possible more effective behaviors. Carrying out plans of new behavior will not be easy, so I hope to support and empower him through encouragement and positive feedback (Tan, 2011).

I think reality therapy is a very helpful and practical counseling approach to treat Conrad. First, it offers the kind of therapist he needs- a caring and supportive mentor who is willing to challenge and coach him through the difficulties of self-evaluation and change. Second, reality therapy's focus on interpersonal problems, especially with a significant relationship, would help Conrad deal with the main source of his dissatisfaction- his disconnected relationship with his mom. Instead of waiting for someone who may never change, he would be encouraged to act first by changing his own thinking and doing. Making better behavioral choices would give him a sense of inner control that he desires. Third, reality therapy would also help Conrad, who is stuck in his past, to live and plan in the present and have hope for a better future.

References

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