

“Ordinary People”

Reality Therapy/Choice Theory Approach to Counseling Conrad Jarret

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Conrad is a high school junior who suffers from severe bouts of depression and had prior battles with suicidal ideation after the accidental death of his brother, which he witnessed. Recently, Conrad attempted suicide and was placed in a psychiatric hospital for four and a half months, receiving individual and group counseling and electric shock treatment. He is back home with his family and is socially withdrawn, resorting to spending time alone in his room. He feels guilty that he survived the boating accident instead of his brother and repeatedly has dreams about the accident. Conrad misses being at the psychiatric hospital, where he felt a sense of happiness and acceptance. He also has difficulty connecting with his mother.

During my counseling sessions with Conrad, I will apply Reality Therapy, founded by William Glaser, who believes behavior is the product of our choices. Reality Therapy is based on Choice therapy—that whatever unhappiness we are experiencing is the result of decisions we have made and that we are responsible for our choices. Glaser opposes diagnosing people as having a mental health disorder. Instead, he limited mental illness to those conditions consisting of brain abnormalities that needed a neurologist for treatment, not a psychotherapist (Corey, 2015).

Reality therapy postulates that we are not born as a blank slate, but five basic needs genetically drive us: *survival*, also known as self-preservation; *love and belonging*; *power* (internal control); *freedom* (independence); and *fun* (enjoyment) with love and belonging the most dominant. These needs differ in strength and require the involvement of other individuals to be fulfilled (Corey, 2015). How we feel about our lives depends on whether these needs are met.

Knowing our wants is also relevant. Unlike our needs that are genetically driven, our wants are based on our desires. Choice theory, used by reality therapists, teaches that we keep a mental record of what is pleasurable or feels good from infancy. This mental recording system

constitutes our *quality world*—the ideal world we want to live in—consisting of various images that become our inner picture album of precise wants and ways to accomplish them (Corey, 2015). These images, like our five inherent needs, influence the four components of our behavior: acting, feeling, thinking, and physiology. Our behavior is characterized as a language that sends messages and is driven by our inherent needs. It is executed to close the gap between what we want and perceive or predict as what will happen (Corey, 2015).

Reality therapy does not focus on the past, even though it acknowledges that the past may have contributed to the current problem. However, like Existential therapy and Gestalt therapy, Reality therapy emphasizes the present because the problem can only be fixed in the present. We have control over our present, not our past.

While Conrad's former therapist at the psychiatric hospital may have diagnosed him with depression and given him electric shock treatment, I will not focus on applying a diagnosis to Conrad. Labeling or diagnosing his symptoms as depression will only distract him from dealing with the present actions needed to resolve his current problems, including his unsatisfying relationships, specifically with his mother, and prevent him from assuming responsibility for his choices. According to Reality Therapy, it is more accurate to view Conrad's behavior as him depressing or angering himself. Conrad has been passive and must understand that the behaviors he has chosen thus far have led to his depression and contributed to the antagonistic relationship he has with his mother, thus, producing frustration with meeting his basic needs.

The depressed and detached feelings Conrad is experiencing, along with the sense of loss of control, stem from Conrad's lack of conducting a comprehensive self-evaluation of his behavior, wants, needs, and the changes he needs to execute to gain control over his life. Conrad is stuck in the past and needs to prioritize his focus on the present. Conrad has not been intentional with his

behavior to close the gap between what he wants and what he perceives is occurring (Corey, 2015).

As Conrad's Reality Therapist, the two techniques I chose to apply in our sessions are the WEDP System and helping Conrad to stay in the present. The "WDEP" System will allow Conrad opportunities for self-evaluation. I will ask Conrad a series of questions to help him better understand what he wants from these sessions, his family, friends, and life. Self-evaluation is central to behavioral change because it will allow Conrad to assess whether his current behavior was directing him to his desired outcome—to have more control over his life and to mend the fractures in his relationship with his mother. This evaluation will include Conrad clarifying his wants and needs, shifting his perceptions, and devising a plan to orchestrate the required behavior to bring about change effectively.

Conrad must understand that he cannot stay in the past, reliving the guilt of his brother's accidental death and his unsatisfying relationship with his mother. Bringing Conrad into the present will help him learn to reject negative emotions and make better choices to deal with the void or unmet needs in his unsatisfying relationships. I will help him explore his "picture album," or the quality world. For Conrad to gain control over his life, he must understand that the past is over and cannot be changed. His brother Buck is deceased and buried; feeling guilty and depressed will not bring him back. The WDEP System will guide us in reviewing Conrad's "picture album" or "quality world" and put a plan of behavioral strategy in place to help him meet his basic needs and his wants (Corey, 2015).

I choose these techniques because they will help Conrad to learn that he has a more significant deal of control than he perceives and that he shares responsibility for the dissatisfying relationship he has with his mother. However, he must understand that he has no control over his

mother, only over his perception and actions. He can only take control of his life when he takes responsibility for his actions and wants. While he cannot change how his mother relates to him, Conrad can make better choices regarding how he responds to her. He will also learn to live life in the present and as his authentic self rather than trying to fill the void of his deceased brother, further fueling his anger and resentment toward his mother. Finally, Conrad will learn to accept his brother's death and that feeling guilty and depressed will not bring him back or help him achieve the control he wants.

These approaches will help Conrad gain control over his life. First, he will understand that his depression is the feeling part of his choice, and he has control over what he feels, his thoughts, and his bodily sensations. Second, Conrad will learn to understand the discrepancy between what he wants and what he perceives he is getting and develop ways to purpose his behavior to close the gap. Finally, Conrad will continue to self-evaluate and develop a self-directed responsible way of living.

Reference

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