

Edited by
**Patricia A. Robey,
Robert E. Wubbolding,
and Jon Carlson**



Contemporary Issues in Couples Counseling

A Choice Theory and Reality Therapy Approach



Contemporary Issues in Couples Counseling

The Family Therapy and Counseling Series

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Patricia A. Robey, Robert E. Wubbolding, and Jon Carlson

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To Bill and Carleen Glasser, the “first couple”
of choice theory and reality therapy

And also to our spouses
Rich Robey, Sandie Wubbolding, and Laura Carlson
With much gratitude for your loving support, patience, and
unfaltering commitment to our marriage relationships

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SERIES EDITOR'S FOREWORD

What happened in the past that was painful has a great deal to do with what we are today, but revisiting this painful past can contribute little or nothing to what we need to do now.

William Glasser (1998, p. 334)

In 1969, my wife Laura and I visited Los Angeles following the APGA (now ACA) Convention that was held in Las Vegas. We were recently married and didn't have much money (especially after one week in Las Vegas!). We had prepaid our LA trip and were finding that money was going to be tight on this trip extension. We decided to walk around and see the sights near the hotel as that was free. We came upon a local bookstore with one of the two front-display windows full of *Reality Therapy* and *Schools Without Failure*, both by William Glasser, MD. I was mesmerized, as I had heard about Dr. Glasser being one of the top therapists but knew nothing about his work. Laura must have seen the look on my face and she said (knowing we couldn't afford it) that I should get one. I chose *Reality Therapy* and spent all of my free time on the trip reading, although, as Laura reminded me, we had to take public transportation everywhere as the cost of the book had impacted our meager sightseeing budget.

Since that time I have read all of Dr. Glasser's books and become friends with him and his wife, Carleen. I have marveled at the brilliant simplicity of his ideas and have found myself frequently using his ideas to explain behavior or to create an intervention with individuals and couples. Most professionals see Glasser's ideas as having value for

individuals as well as for school guidance but have been unaware of how effective they can be with couples.

This book addresses that knowledge gap and shows how effective reality therapy and choice theory can be with couples. I hope that the readers are open to these ideas and appreciate their application with a complete range of the issues that face today's couples. It is only fitting that the lead editors, Pat Robey and Bob Wubbolding, have trained therapists around the world in these important ideas. The chapters have been carefully selected, and a group of exceptional professionals share their insights as to how to work effectively with couples from this viewpoint. As William Glasser asserts, "We almost always have choices, and the better the choice, the more we will be in control of our lives" (1998).

Jon Carlson, PsyD, EdD, ABPP

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REFERENCE

Glasser, W. (1998). *Choice theory*. New York: HarperCollins.

PREFACE

Everyone agrees: Times are difficult and we stand at the fork in the road. We can consume our time with worrying, fretting, complaining, and rebelling against what everyone agrees is an uncertain future. Another option is to focus attention on what we can control. From the perspective of choice theory and reality therapy, human beings can control only their own behaviors. If athletes control their own choices during the game and pay less attention to the score or the apparent outcome, their performance is more effective than if they focus on the future results of their toil. If a baseball batter focuses his attention on the outfield fence and not on the incoming pitch, he will likely strike out. Similarly, if a soccer player looks to the goal rather than the ball, the kick is less likely to result in a score.

It is easy for a couple continuously to discuss topics over which they have little control. These might include job security, possible unemployment, erosion of savings, foreclosures, future education of children, family loss, sickness, and a host of economic worries. This book describes the alternative path at the fork in the road with the hope that it will be *the road taken*. This path is a road paved with a sense of hope and joy, a rewarding journey but not without detours, delays, and potholes. Yet there are rest stops that provide tools for coping with unavoidable uncertainties, contingencies, obstacles, and emergencies. Couples can control how they spend their time together, the topics of conversation, and their attitudes toward the world around them, as well as how they relate to each other.

This book presents a wide range of applications of choice theory and reality therapy. The book also includes an explanation of choice theory and reality therapy as a means for gaining practical ideas immediately usable in human relationships. [Part I](#) begins with an overview of choice theory and reality therapy, including the application of the WDEP system to counseling. This chapter provides a context for understanding specific applications offered in subsequent chapters. Also in this section is an interview with William and Carleen Glasser, who discuss how they apply choice theory and reality therapy in their own relationship. Dr. Glasser first formulated reality therapy in a mental hospital and in a correctional institution in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the early days of its application to severe mental health and behavioral issues, it has been applied to counseling, education, management, and virtually every human relationship.

[Part II](#) of the book emphasizes the issues couples face and, through hypothetical or compilation case studies, provides practical strategies and techniques that counselors can apply in their work. The authors are experts in counseling, counselor education, and choice theory and reality therapy. Collectively, they have used reality therapy and choice theory successfully with thousands of clients. The topics in this section address a broad range of issues. One of these issues is addiction and recovery. The author explains how reality therapy complements the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon. Several chapters focus on issues related to diversity, including challenges facing interfaith couples, multicultural couples, aging couples, gay couples, and military couples. Other chapters focus on mental health issues, chronic illness, parenting conflicts, sexuality, infidelity, medication management, and power conflicts.

[Part III](#) focuses on proactive approaches to building solid couple relationships. Counselors will learn how to facilitate workshops in which couples learn how to bring out the best in one another before they enter committed relationships. Using reality therapy along with traditional tools like individual genograms is another proactive technique that can help couples define their relationships. The author describes how assessing the pictures of what is important to them can help couples get their relationships off to a good start. The third chapter in this section demonstrates how couples can be taught the skill of negotiating to create common pictures where differences exist. This exercise teaches couples to communicate their specific wants and learn how to compromise and negotiate.

[Part IV](#) summarizes the overall map of more effective living provided in [Parts I](#) through [III](#) and presents a vision of the future.

Contemporary Issues in Couples Counseling: A Choice Theory and Reality Therapy Approach demonstrates that the ideas formulated by William Glasser are applicable in many ways to individuals seeking to fulfill their need for belonging through intimate relationships. Participants attending training seminars often ask how reality therapy connects with family life. This book answers this question and points the reader toward the far reaching frontiers and the systemic applicability of reality therapy as used by practitioners trained in choice theory and reality therapy.

Robert E. Wubbolding, EdD

EDITORS

Patricia A. Robey, EdD, LPC, NCC, CTRTC, is an assistant professor of counseling and program coordinator for the Masters in Counseling Program Coordinator at Governors State University, University Park, Illinois. She is a licensed professional counselor and specializes in applying reality therapy and choice theory in her work with individuals, couples, families, and groups. Dr. Robey is a senior faculty member of the William Glasser Institute and has taught the concepts of choice theory and reality therapy in the United States and internationally.

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I

Choice Theory and Reality Therapy

1

INTRODUCTION TO CHOICE THEORY AND REALITY THERAPY

Robert E. Wubbolding and Patricia A. Robey

INTRODUCTION

Why is there occasional or chronic pain in friendships, marriage, and all human relationships? How can individuals improve these relationships and increase intimacy, thereby diminishing stress? Choice theory and reality therapy offer both an explanation and possible choices for improving human alliances, interpersonal bonds for fulfilling the innate need for belonging. The use of choice theory and reality therapy provides both a map and specific useful tools for enhancing relationships, especially if both parties subscribe to and practice the principles contained in these life-changing ideas. A relationship built on choice theory and reality therapy leads to a sense of belonging, inner control, freedom, enjoyment, and increased contentment.

Relationships, especially marriage, fail when one of the partners attempts to control the other person to a degree unacceptable to that person. For example, one spouse dominates the other by refusing to negotiate differences and bulldozes decisions that affect both of them. When the submissive person believes that such controlling behaviors are unacceptable, the relationship begins to crumble. The second reason relationships fail is varying degrees of incompatibility in their respective quality worlds. For instance, a person with a high desire or want

for freedom or independence might seek a lifestyle filled with autonomous activities or other behaviors from which the partner recoils and thus the relationship is strained, damaged, or even ruined.

CHOICE THEORY

Theologians might explain dysfunctional relationships as due to original sin. Because of human weakness, people are prone to shatter their lives to a greater or lesser degree. Sociologists would elaborate on the failing of society to provide proper supports and the temporary nature of relationships as evidenced in the mobility of families. Psychoanalytic therapists might emphasize the lack of balance between ego, id, and superego as well as unconscious conflicts due to early childhood relationships. Cognitive theory would emphasize irrational thinking as the root cause of conflict when partners indulge in self-talk statements such as *the world must arrange itself so that I experience only pleasure*.

Conversely, choice theory offers a positive but not naïve view of human nature—a comprehensive explanation of personal problems, personal growth, and interpersonal relationships. It stresses current motivation rather than past experiences. It emphasizes conscious drives rather than attempts to resolve unconscious and unresolved illusive fantasies. It is a “here and now” theory expressed in jargon-free language understandable to clients, students, and licensed professionals. People wishing to learn choice theory read books about it, attend training seminars, and seek professional consultation.

Origin

William Glasser, MD (1998), developed choice theory from a cybernetic theory that has existed for many decades. Norbert Wiener (1948, 1950) described the human mind as a negative feedback input control system. A rocket is such a system. When it “perceives” that it is heading off target, it provides information to the targeting mechanism that corrects its course. Similarly, human behavior aims at impacting the external world so as to gain input.

Glasser’s immediate predecessor, William Powers (1973), expanded what was called “control theory” or “control system theory” in his landmark book, *Behavior, the Control of Perception*. He asserted that human behaviors originate *within* human beings and are therefore not thrust upon them from the external world. Furthermore, how human beings behave toward their external environment (i.e., the collection of their experiences toward their external world) determines their perceptions of it. Because of the emphasis on behavior as a choice and because of

the introduction of five human needs driving human choice, Glasser (1998) changed the name of his interpretation of control theory to choice theory.

Human Motivation

As seen from the perspective of choice theory, the human mind functions as a control system. The analogy of the rocket helps to understand the goal centeredness of human behavior and its ability to correct itself. Another useful analogy is that of the thermostat. This mechanism controls its environment (i.e., gains a “perception” of its impact on the world around it). If the thermostat is set at 70 degrees, it sends a signal to the furnace or air conditioner to generate goal-centered and specific behaviors. The result is that the environment matches the thermostat’s “desire.” By analogy, it can be said that the thermostat has attained its goal of maneuvering its external world to make it congruent with its internal “wants.” The thermostat, therefore, perceives that it is successful.

An interesting sidelight is that the control system can be fooled. If a match is held under the thermometer, the thermostat will read an inaccurate message and will mistakenly adjust the room temperature. A human relationship suffers stress and strain when one person functions under the erroneous illusion that “all is well” between the parties. Drugs, alcohol, gambling, and other addictions, as well as extramarital affairs, can appear to satisfy an individual and yet poison the relationship. It is as though one party in the relationship lit a fire under his or her thermostat.

Human Needs

Glasser (1998, 2005) has provided a schema of five individual human motivators signifying the internal nature of human behavior. He sees these as genetic and universal human needs. This array of internal motivators common to all people links humanity together by crossing age, ethnic, racial, and gender differences. The needs are general, not specific, and they include the possibility of many additions and extensions. For example, the third need, power or achievement, could include the ongoing propensity to learn and to attain an increasing amount of knowledge.

Survival, Self-Preservation Most fundamental to human motivation is the need to continue living. The human body seeks to preserve itself in a variety of ways. It digests food, it circulates blood, it shivers when it is cold, it perspires when it is hot, and, without a conscious