

**Reality Therapy: A Book by William Glasser
Or
A Psychology of Choosing Dominant Morality**

A Review by Lynda L. Hinkle

The basic concept of Reality Therapy by Dr. William Glasser is that traditional psychoanalysis fails to rehabilitate patients because of its focus on past behavior and motivations rather than shaping future behaviors in a positive way. All mental illness, according to Glasser, comes from the patient being unable to meet his or her needs in a socially acceptable way. Instead the patient acts out in maladaptive ways that they perceive has gotten them closer to getting their needs met. Glasser describes these needs as "the need to love and be loved and the need to feel that we are worthwhile to ourselves and to others (9)."

In Reality Therapy, the patient is described as "irresponsible" and moved toward a place of "responsibility" which is defined for this purpose as "the ability to fulfill one's needs, and to do so in a way that does not deprive others of the ability to fulfill their needs (13)." Part of this process is moral education which is completed by a therapist who models acts of responsibility while becoming involved enough with the patient that he or she feels comfortable modeling their behavior after the therapist as well as becoming desirous of the therapist's approval (an extrinsic reward for achieving movements toward responsibility).

On first glance, Reality Therapy seems like a logical and sound approach. Originally published in 1965, the book contains a wealth of examples of how Reality Therapy was employed in mental hospitals, juvenile detention centers and even in the classroom with great success.

Unfortunately, the age of the book and prevailing attitudes of the time it was written allow critical eyes to see some very serious flaws in the theory. The basis in moral education and the therapist's perhaps biased view of what is "right" and "wrong" can turn this therapy into a tool for oppression of various groups. Glasser himself is horribly guilty of using this approach to suppress his patients who express that they identify as homosexual.

In one startling case, Glasser brags of his success with a young woman named Linda who is being rehabilitated after a bout with crime. The women of the juvenile detention center frequently mark themselves with tattoos, a behavior Glasser feels is maladaptive. Linda, obviously worshipful of Glasser and his opinions, writes from the outside while on parole that she is having her tattoos removed. She states, "I have learned that one must accept the foibles of society and tattoos on a girl shakes them up to no end. I wonder why (100)?"

Apparently, this is not the only foible of society that Linda felt the need to expunge. She writes in several letters of her struggle with her sexual orientation, speaking of a crush she has on a woman on the outside:

"I pray to God that it is only a temporary infatuation, because if it ain't then I have finally jumped the fence! She totally fascinates me, her mind, her personality, her body, just her. Wow! I am too torn up but I am trying to stay away from her. She is 20, soon to be 21. She is too pretty and too sweet, altogether wonderful. Maybe it is just a throw back, huh? I sure hope so, because this juggling I must do is too much (101)."

A few months later, Linda decides to end her conflict by a sudden marriage with a young man she meets. She writes "I ain't queer in any manner any more! I gave up girls totally (102)."

Linda's struggle with her feelings echoes so many case studies of men and women trying to deny their homosexuality to find approval in a society that echoes Glasser in its belief that homosexual behavior is just plain wrong.

The danger of Reality Therapy is obvious in this case...should we adapt people to total compliance with the dominant norms of society even when those norms can and often are at odds with their true nature or with differing moral viewpoints that may have equal or greater value? Who chooses what "reality" is? Must we all accept the "foibles of society" without questioning in order to find mental health? Or should we, in face, occasionally "shake them up to no end" to correct illness in the culture?

Without question, Reality Therapy posed important questions about the treatment of mental illness at a time when the psychoanalytical approach seemed the only way to go. But now, we must also question it. Reality is not only a society that enables you to get your needs met in a responsible way. Reality is also patriarchal values that oppress women and men alike, homophobia, sexism, racism, classism. These are not "foibles" we should or must accept. This juggling we must do is too much.