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Introducing the “Basic Needs Genogram” in Reality Therapy-based Marriage and Family Counseling

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Introducing the “Basic Needs Genogram” in Reality Therapy-based

Marriage and Family Counseling

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to address how a genogram can be incorporated in Reality Therapy based family counseling. We will review the core tenets of Reality Therapy, the general therapeutic use of genograms, while introducing the Basic Needs Genogram. Secondly, we will provide a case example to illustrate the use of the Basic Needs Genogram to a family. Finally, we will offer our final thoughts about the therapeutic implications of this intervention tool.

Introducing the “Basic Needs Genogram” in
Reality Therapy-based Marriage and Family Counseling

Introduction to Choice Theory

Choice Theory developed by William Glasser is an internal control psychology (1998). Human behavior is guided by internal factors. Glasser (1998) postulates all human behavior is a choice and said choices are driven by internal instincts and basic needs. A component of Choice Theory is the concept of a “quality world” or a “picture album.” Throughout a life span, individuals consign things of value such as relationships, beliefs, and cultural rituals to create an ideal picture of a world in which they aspire to live. Human behavior and choice are an individuals’ attempt to align experiences with quality world vision (Glasser, 1998; Wubbolding, 2000). According to Glasser (1998), the basis of misery for many people is the lack of healthy relationships with those individuals in a persons’ “quality world” or “picture albums.” Woven within the “picture album” are five basic needs intrinsic to all humans. These basic needs are satisfied or thrown off balance by choices made to create the ideal “picture album.” The five basic needs in all people are survival or self-preservation, love and belonging, power or self-worth, freedom or independence and fun or enjoyment.

The core and most physiologically based need is survival or self-preservation. Survival occurs by staying alive through basic physiological behaviors. The need for love and belonging focuses on relationship of mutuality, giving and taking, belonging and connectivity within ones family and support system. Power is the drive and instinct for accomplishment, self-worth and competence. Freedom or independence centers on the need for autonomy and opportunity of choice. Fun and enjoyment is the need for humor, activity and pleasure. The described basic needs are interconnected; although depending on the individual do not require equal attention

(Glasser, 1998; Wubbolding et al. 2004, Wubbolding, 2000). Some individuals have a greater need for fun while others have a higher need for freedom or independence. However, in order for a person to be in balance, he or she strives to meet all basic needs to their degree of satisfaction. The choices made by an individual to meet the basic needs will directly impact their psychological balance. When individuals see that they are getting what they want from the outside world, their immediate wants and basic needs are satisfied. When an individual perceives a disparity between what is aspired for and what he or she is receiving, the individual is “motivated” to make a behavioral choice that influences his or her external world (Wubbolding, 2000). That is, “from this perspective, behavior serves a purpose, which is to close the gap between what a person wants and what a person has in the given moment” (Wubbolding, 2000 pg. 21).

Choice Theory tenders the theoretical foundations of practice for Reality Therapy. Reality Therapy is the path for therapists to work with clients on assessing needs fulfillment, effectiveness of behavior and growth toward behavior change (Wubbolding et al. 2004).

Reality Therapy

Reality Therapy is based on the principals of Choice Theory; furthermore, it is used as a means in therapy to facilitate problem solving. In the late 1980’s Dr. Robert Wubbolding developed an acronym congruent with Reality Therapy techniques. The WDEP represents a group of ideas and choice of possible therapeutic interventions within the Reality Therapy framework. The W corresponds to the process of counselors assisting clients in examining what they are seeking in counseling. The D encourages the counselor and client to explore what the client is actively doing to meet basic their needs. The E is the evaluative component. The counselor assists the client in a self-evaluative process that examines level of commitment to

change. The final intervention in the acronym is the P representing the plan. The counselor and client develop a plan of action both immediate and longer term to assist the client in working to balance their psychological wants and basic needs. The WDEP is not a linear process. The therapist often times, within a single session or multiple sessions, relies on the revisitation of the WDEP component (Wubbolding, 2000; Wubbolding et al., 2004). The WDEP is used to assist clients in examination of their behaviors, choices, needs and wants to facilitate psychological balance.

Choice Theory and Reality Therapy are utilized with individuals, groups, in schools and with families and couples in counseling. The focus of this article is the examination of these principles in couples counseling. Primarily the use of Choice Theory and Reality Therapy with couples and families is grounded in the examination of individual wants and basic need satisfaction within the relationship. Reality Therapy assists couples and families as a whole in problem solving and awareness of needs and the integration of one another in individual “picture albums” (Glasser, 1998; Wubbolding, 2000).

Reality Therapy in Family Counseling

According to Wubbolding (1988) when family or marital discord exists, so will an incongruence or lack of commonality between and among the wants or “picture albums” of each family member. As a reminder, these “picture albums” hold images of how each person wishes to fulfill the five basic needs. All families entering counseling initially meet two conditions. First, one individual wants the other family member to match his or her own pictures. Secondly, this individual (the one wanting the match) is unwilling to change this want.

The Three Stages of Marital and Family Counseling within a Reality Therapy Context

Within a Reality Therapy framework, marriage and family counseling takes place over three stages with the goal of family and marriage counseling being to help members increase the overlap or commonality of their “picture albums” or the ways in which they perceive getting their needs met. The stages include: (a) assessment, (b) intervention, and (c) action. In the first stage, family members are encouraged to define and evaluate the following information: (a) Their individual wants; (b) the family’s (or couple’s) wants; (c) their perceptions about the other family members and about the family in general (i.e., what is working and what is not, context of arguments, alliances, what is hurting and helping the family); and (d) expectations for counseling. In stage 2, various interventions can occur including psychoeducation (about how to build strong relationships), disrupting alliances, heightening anxiety, and teaching new ideas (Wubbolding, 1988). Finally, in the third stage, family members evaluate and carry out a plan. Readers may review Chapter 8 in Wubbolding’s (1988) text, *Using Reality Therapy* for a thorough review of the three stages suggested for marriage and family counseling.

In the remainder of the article, we will propose and describe the integration of a genogram during the intervention stage in order to bring about greater awareness among family members about each other’s “picture albums.” We will review the general therapeutic use of genograms, while focusing in detail on the Basic Needs Genogram. Secondly, we will provide a case example to illustrate the use of the Basic Needs Genogram to a family. Finally, we will offer our final thoughts about the therapeutic implications of this intervention tool.

The “Basic Needs Genogram”

An Introduction

Genograms have been used historically to illustrate the emotional patterns within a family unit that are typically repeated from generation to generation (Papero, 1990). Patterns include

basic emotions and feelings, as well as subjectively determined values, attitudes, and beliefs. A genogram used within an intergenerational framework provides a foundation from which clients and counselors can talk about emotional patterns affecting or contributing to their present symptoms or presenting problem (Gilbert, 2006). Further, the use of genograms often brings clients to greater insight, awareness, and understanding about their own interpersonal patterns, as well as the communication patterns between themselves and others. In addition, greater mental clarity about such familial influences provides clients with a basis from which to challenge and change how they interpret the world, as well as how they behave.

Over time, therapists have integrated and applied genograms as an intervention tool in various clinical settings (Magnuson & Shaw, 2003). For example, genogram appear beneficial in couples counseling to address sexual, intimacy, and conflict related concerns. Additionally, therapists have constructed genograms as a part of family counseling, in treating symptoms associated with parental separation and divorce, re-marriage, grief, while also eliciting family strengths. Lastly, counselors have incorporated genograms in individual counseling, as an intervention tool in treating addictions, religious-spiritual, sexuality, and career and academic related concerns.

The Basic Needs Genogram

We believe that the Basic Needs Genogram will allow individuals, as well as family members to consider how current and past generational patterns influence the formation of their “picture albums.” Moreover, this intervention tool might help clients challenge and modify their “picture albums” in ways that bring greater accord and commonality among their interpersonal relationships. In order to illustrate how the Basic Needs Genogram can be instrumental in heightening one’s awareness and insight about the construction of one’s “picture album,” we ask

that you take part in a brief self-assessment. First, consider the five basic needs and evaluate the strength you, personally attribute to each of those needs.

Next, consider *how* you think about satisfying those needs and *what you do* to satisfy those needs. For example, consider that your need for self worth and power is very high. How has your family (throughout the generations) informed you about why feeling empowered, competent, and valued is so important? Who else in your family (or extended family) has a similar degree of need for self worth and power? How has this need been transmitted across the generations (i.e., through family tradition, rules, work ethic, expectation)? Consider how you satisfy this need. What do you do to be recognized, to achieve, to feel competent and “worth it?” How are these behaviors the same to other members in your family? What happens to persons in your family who don’t have such a high need for self-work and power? What are the motivators within your family system for maintaining power and autonomy, and for being valued?

Thirdly, how does your need for self-worth and power, and how you are meeting this need interfere or contribute to your present relationships with family members? Do your goals in meeting this need overlap with the overall goals of any given relationship with you are involved in? Is this overlap or lack thereof a common pattern among your family members intergenerationally? How do members alter their need for self-worth and power or the ways in which they satisfy this need to get along better with family members?

After much discussion regarding the intergenerational influences on one’s basic needs and how such needs alter and contribute to familial relationships, clients can consider a plan regarding how to change or alter their need strength and ways in which to achieve satisfaction so as to bridge and repair family-related problems (e.g., strains in relationship). For the purpose of

this article, however, our focus remains on the introduction of the Basic Needs Genogram rather than how it contributes to the third stage of the marriage and family counseling process.

Case Conceptualization

Presenting Problem

Bob and Donna entered counseling after 20 years of marriage. Bob is career oriented and a top executive at a large law firm. Donna is a stay at home mother of three boys ages 15, 17, 19. For the past year Donna has been feeling disconnected to Bob. Bob works long hours, leaving the house by 6:00 am and often times not returning until 7:30 pm. Based on the demands of his job he works most weekends. Prior to this year, Donna has focused a great deal of time and energy on parenting her sons. Lately her sons seem distant. One son has left the home for college, one is preparing for graduation of high school and the youngest is involved in many social friendships and activities, and often absent from the home. Now that her sons are “disengaging,” Donna feels isolated and lonely. She indicates she has been satisfied with her life and roles for the past nineteen years; however, for the first time she is feeling sad and abandoned most of the time. Bob reports he has encouraged Donna to seek a part-time job or hobby to fill her time.

Tension in the relationship exists. Bob indicates he does not have enough time to “entertain” Donna. He feels she is constantly complaining and nagging him about being more intimate and connected. Bob thinks Donna is acting like a “child” and needs to take responsibility for her at least some of her happiness. Bob feels a great deal of stress and pressure from work and home and reports being at the “breaking” point. He indicates he cannot spend his energy worrying if Donna is enjoying herself as he has “real” responsibilities needing attention.

He does not see a problem in their marriage; nevertheless, to appease Donna he agrees to counseling.

Course of Treatment

The following illustrates how a therapist in couples counseling can use the basic needs genogram, consistent with Reality Therapy principles, to bring about a better understanding between a couple regarding their “picture albums.” The case example will illustrate how the therapist can lay a foundation using the basic needs genogram to open up communication patterns between Donna and Bob and to facilitate the appreciation of varying levels of needs in a relationship. First, the goal of marriage and family counseling is to provide an environment where each spouse and family member can self-evaluate what they are willing to do to bring out the best in one another concurrently with significantly decreasing the use of external control (Glasser & Glasser, 2007). The deadly relationship habits related to external control undoubtedly have surfaced in Bob and Donna’s relationship. Such habits include “criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and bribing or rewarding to control” (Glasser & Glasser, 2007, p. 68). These attitudes and behaviors have enormous power to contaminate each family member’s need for love and belonging, freedom, fun, power, and even threaten health and overall physiology. However the antidote for external control and promote movement towards a satisfying marriage and family life, is to choose attitudes and behaviors related to supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences (Glasser & Glasser, 2007).

There is a high probability that Bob and Donna initial marital and/or family session will be problem saturated. That is, they will likely complain about each other and want each other to change. Furthermore, there is a high likelihood that their marital conflicts systemically influence

their adolescent children's behaviors. Seemingly, the best way to help the entire family is to strengthen the marital subsystem.

Conducting a genogram can be beneficial to diffuse their strong emotions, cultivate empathy, and facilitate understanding of the devastating relational consequences of external control. This can set the stage to begin to evaluate the following: (a) what each partner wants, (b) what attitudes and behaviors are most likely to bring each other closer, and (c) a mutually agreed upon need satisfying plan of action.

Reality Therapists advocate "looking at the past but not staring at it" (Wubbolding, 2008, personal communication). Although the therapeutic process will ultimately focus on the present and future, conducting a genogram can to become more aware of attitudes and behaviors that lend themselves to a satisfying picture of marriage and family life. The following questions have the potential to help Bob and Donna understand what has been more or less helpful in past familial relationships:

1. Describe the closest family relationships in the past three generations in your family?
2. What specific attitudes and behaviors were chosen that contributed to the stated healthy relationships?
3. Describe the most distant and conflictual relationships in the past three generations in your family?
4. What specific attitudes and behaviors were chosen that eroded these relationships?
5. Describe how specific family members in previous generations sought to obtain significance and power in useful ways?
6. Describe how specific family members in previous generations sought to gain significance and power in ways that were damaging to the family?

7. What attitudes and behaviors led to the erosion of these relationships?
8. What family rituals in the past were valued and enjoyed the most?
9. What did specific family members in past generations successfully do to overcome adversity?
10. How did specific family members in past generations unsuccessfully deal with adversity?
11. What family members in past generations made healthy choices that strengthened their overall health and physiology?
12. What have family members in past generations chose to do that have led to health and physiological problems.
13. What was your picture of a wonderful family life on your wedding day?

Following a discussion of Bob and Donna's genogram, the stage is now set to apply the WDEP (i.e., Wants, Doing or Direction, Evaluation, and Plan) system to explore their current relationship and vision of an optimal future. This can be accomplished by conducting the following:

1. Exploration of wants, needs, and perceptions related to each family member's quality of world that will include unfulfilled and fulfilled needs.
2. Examination of what each partner is doing to achieve what they want in their family life.
3. Encouraging each partner to evaluate his and her behavioral choices, including attitudes and belief systems to ensure they are helpful to ensure healthy family relationships
4. Providing each partner with verbal space to contribute to a plan that as a couple, they can agree upon, thus leading to more effective need fulfillment.

Useful questions to ask Bob and Donna may include; however, are not limited to the following:

1. What is your vision of a satisfying in a satisfying marriage?
2. What has worked in the past to bring you two closer together?
3. What do can you do to bring out the best in your spouse?
4. What can you do to become more trustworthy in your marriage?
5. How does each other want to be treated and what can you do to treat your spouse with respect?
6. How can you be supportive of each other's differing needs?
7. What type of encouragement does your spouse want and need?
8. How do you feel when you are closer to each other?
9. What are you willing to do more of and less of to better meet each other's needs?

Summary

We purport that Reality Therapy coupled with the use of a genogram has the potential to help Bob and Donna in various ways. For example, using a genogram provides a springboard for more in depth conversation about each other's needs and wants. Learning about one another's family history can provide clues about why each partner needs or wants what he or she is expressing. Consequently, genograms can provide greater opportunities for understanding and empathy on the part of the other spouse. Through ongoing dialogue, each partner will learn ways of meeting each other's needs, which will serve as a positive model for their adolescent children. Through behavioral shifts, each partner can become more need fulfilling which can essentially lead to an increase in positive feelings toward each other. Finally, through education both Bob and Donna will be more prone to incorporate aspects of Reality Therapy that can help them with future challenges (Wubbolding, 2000).

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