



Module Eleven: Establishing an Environment Conducive to Change

When we get to Module 21 in the Quality Schools section, we will be discussing how relationship is the root of all influence. Allow me to let you in on a little secret, it's not only true in Quality Schools! Relationship is the root of all influence in every aspect of our lives. Don't you do more for people you like? You respect? You trust? Of course you do!

People who threaten and intimidate you might get you to do what they want you to do but you will mostly do it grudgingly. You don't willingly do it. You are being coerced and controlled. No one welcomes that. In the process of Reality Therapy, the helper is often the one and only relationship the client has that is absent external control. In a Reality Therapy situation, the therapist is working hard to keep the relationship devoid of any hint of external control.

As a therapist, you want to only use Caring Relationship Habits, never deadly ones. In fact, using the powerful questions of Reality Therapy, sometimes called the procedures that lead to change, too early in the therapeutic process can be perceived as external control, particularly when you have not yet established a need-satisfying environment.

The keys to establishing an environment that is conducive to change are developing a relationship with your client that is first, absent of external control, and second, a need-satisfying environment.

Do you remember when we talked about preventing helper stress and burnout in Lesson 9? We were discussing how to create a need-satisfying environment. This part of the process is so central to success that I discussed in Lesson 9 and will also be repeating the concepts in this week's lesson and lessons 19, 21, and 22, as well. Building positive relationships absent external control may be the most important thing you can do, no matter what your relationship is to the person with whom you are interacting.

One of the things I personally love about Glasser's ideas is they are so empowering. They empower people by helping them distinguish between those things they have power and control over and those they don't. Once recognized, people work to put their energy into those things over which they have power and control, which turns out to be their own thoughts and behavior.

Therefore, when therapists are working on creating an environment conducive to change, they must focus totally on what they are doing to bring themselves closer to their client and avoid doing those things that move them further apart.

Please do not get hung up on the name, Reality Therapy, or the role of therapist/counselor. Any time you are functioning in the role of helping someone look at their alternatives while coming to a decision, you can use the Reality Therapy process. Think of it as a questioning process to facilitate another person's self-evaluation of the effectiveness of his or her behavior in moving that person toward his or her goal.

You are simply asking questions to help a person come to understand if what they are doing is working or if they might need an adjustment in behavior to be more successful.

The first step in that helping process is to create a need-satisfying environment. So, what is a need-satisfying environment? It's the place and space you create in your relationship with another person that allows him or her to get their needs met within the context of their professional relationship with you. (I am not talking about the blurring the boundaries of personal and professional relationships.)

You are providing a place and space for your client to get the needs of survival, love & belonging, power, freedom and fun met. This involves a lot of the same things we talked about in module 9.

Survival:

You want your client to feel safe and secure with you. This involves establishing trust. One of the best ways I know to establish safety is to prove yourself to be a trustworthy individual. The basics of trust begin with the physical environment you make available for your sessions. Is it comfortable? Is it private? Do you have something to drink and eat available? Do you have tissues? Do the personal things you have in your office show others that you can be trusted? Do you have a different exit and entrance so your current client and your next client do not have to bump into each other? Does your client have an unobstructed exit from your office, in other words, is there anything between your client and the door should he or she feel the need to leave abruptly?

Next would be confidentiality. Have you explained the limits of confidentiality? Does your client know what will happen if he or she discloses certain information. Understanding the limits and boundaries help people to know what is safe.

Being non-judgmental helps your client to feel safe with you. Knowing that things do not shock you and that you can handle whatever is going on with this person goes a long in helping him or her to feel safe with you.

Keeping your relationship free of external control is also important. You must always remember who has the right to decide what is best any given situation. It is always the person who is in the situation, not the helper. The helper can only know what would be best for him or her in a similar situation. It is not for the helper to decide what the client needs to do. If you find yourself believing you know what your client should do in a particular situation, then you might want to seek supervision so you can work through that. You can't possibly know what would be best for another person to do. You don't get to live their life, only your own. Allow your clients the right to choose their destiny, even if you don't agree.

You can help them by providing information they may not have so they can make an informed decision but you are only providing information. You are not advising them what they should do. That would be abuse of your power position in the relationship and the use of external control, however subtle.

Demonstrating integrity in the counseling process is important. When you say you are going to do something, make sure you do. When you tell someone about the type of person you are, stay consistent to what you describe. Talk the talk and walk the walk. This will also help establish trust and a sense of safety.

Love & Belonging:

This is an area where you must be careful not to blur the personal and professional boundaries. You do not want to cross the line into creating a personal relationship with your client. This is against most ethical practices I know. It isn't appropriate to go out socially with a client, go to their home or have them come to yours. Nor is it appropriate to talk with your clients about your problems. Maintain a professional, but connected, relationship.

Do you like and care for your client? This often happens when you find something you have in common with someone. When I find I am having a difficult time connecting with someone, I mentally tell myself I must need to get to know that person better. There is almost always something to like or empathize with if you take the time to find it. I say "almost always" to allow for those extremely rare times when you really can't find something to connect with. In those cases, I strongly recommend referral to another therapist as I don't think you will do much good for a person you don't like.

Have you found something you share in common? Can you relate to some life experiences you have shared? If not similar experiences, can you relate to a particular emotion that's being expressed?

Creating a relationship that can meet your client's need for love & belonging involves providing what Carl Rogers called, unconditional positive regard. This basically involves accepting and supporting your client regardless of what he or she says or does. It doesn't mean you have to approve of what your clients do, it simply means you accept them as humans, with flaws, and you care for them anyway.

Do your clients know you support their efforts and want them to succeed? Therapists can struggle with a balance in wanting to help their clients to succeed and wanting to be needed. We, as helpers, usually have our own high need for love & belonging. When we discharge a client, as much as we want that for our client, we sometimes struggle with the thinking that they may not make it without us.

Power:

How do you help clients feel powerful within a therapeutic relationship? One of the first things is to listen, really listen, to what they have to say. Often, this is the very first time someone is actually listening and that, in itself, is extremely powerful.

Respecting clients as people of value also helps in the power department. Helping your client to see the impact he or she has in the world can increase one's sense of power, as well.

Another way to access the power need is to structure your sessions so your client will be successful. Do not set your client up to fail by assigning something he or she might not be capable of. Give assignments that lead to success and are a bit of a stretch so he or she will feel a sense of accomplishment when completed.

Another way to help your clients feel more powerful is to teach them Choice Theory, helping them focus on the things they can change--their own behavior and thoughts. Many clients come either stuck in the past where they cannot affect change or focused on life improving if only someone else would change. Again, a place of disempowerment. Help them see where they have control and show them how to focus their energies there.

Freedom:

Providing freedom within the therapeutic relationship is important. You don't want to make your client feel dependent upon you or anyone else for that matter. Your work together should be focused on increasing a client's independence.

Also, whenever you are offering choices to a client, one choice is not very freeing. It is actually advice. Giving advice to clients is a dangerous thing to do. If you give advice that has a positive outcome, then your client will never make another decision without you. You've successfully set up dependence. If you provide advice that has either a negative or neutral outcome, then you are the bad guy or ineffectual, neither being the way you'd like to be perceived by your clients.

If you provide two options, thus saying, "You could do this, or you could do that," you have created a dilemma. Neither feels like a great choice. Sometimes it sounds like, "You can do it your way or you can do it my way."

When you provide at least three options to a client, then there really is choice involved. Clients get to choose the option with the greatest chance for success in their minds, thus making the choice their own. Providing three or more choices is freeing.

Opening up possibilities for your clients can be freeing, as well. Many clients limit what they believe is possible based on restrictions they, or others, have placed on themselves. Whenever a client tells me, "I couldn't do that," I often say, "Well, you could, but maybe you don't want to." I want my clients to see they always have a choice, even when it doesn't feel like much of a choice.

Opening up possibilities and engaging creativity are two ways to increase freedom. Another way is to communicate to your clients that you have no interest in making decisions for them. It isn't your job. I like my clients to know they have the freedom to choose whatever they like, as long as I've informed them they will have to also accept the consequences of whatever choice they make. I'm not talking about imposing any consequences myself (that would be external control), but there are natural consequences to every decision and sometimes there are also consequences imposed by others. I teach my clients that responsibility and freedom go hand in hand. They have the right to choose whatever they want, as long as they are willing to pay the cost of those choices, whether positive, negative or neutral.

Fun:

This need can be met in three different ways, depending on your personality and the personality of your client. The fun need can be met by laughing and joking with your client. Having a sense of humor is often a big plus in counseling and if used, you want to be very careful you are not laughing at your client. It is always best, in my opinion, to laugh at yourself. And if you are anything like me, you provide yourself with new material daily.

Another way of having fun is relaxing. Do you provide a relaxing environment for your clients who like to meet their fun need through relaxation?

And finally, another way to meet your fun need is through meaningful and useful learning. Hopefully, you are teaching your clients Choice Theory, and creating lots of opportunities for your clients to meet their fun need in this way.

Summary:

Relationship is the root of all influence. Make sure you have established a need-satisfying environment before you begin to ask any of the procedures that lead to change, which we will be talking about over the next three weeks. Rapport needs to be in place before you start asking self-evaluation questions. If you don't have the relationship established, then you run the risk of getting dishonest self-evaluation and that is not helpful for anyone.

Your assignment this week is to think of person with whom you work to promote better decision-making or problem-solving. If you have professional counseling or coaching clients, then use one of them. If you don't, then use a friend, family member, co-worker, supervisee, etc.-- someone with whom you could see yourself using the Reality Therapy process. Complete the Building Rapport worksheet by writing down all the things you are already doing to create a need-satisfying environment under each of the needs. And then make a commitment to add one or two things under each need to make the environment even more conducive to change.

In the next module, we will begin looking at exploring your client's Quality World. There is great power and energy when you are able to tap into the Quality World of your client. It won't happen unless you've established the need-satisfying relationship discussed in this module but we next week we will begin to understand the power of the Quality World. I'm really looking forward to it.