



## Module Thirteen: The Powerful Questions

If this eBook were about most other counseling approaches, then it wouldn't even have this module. Once you get the client to declare what it is he or she wants, then you swiftly move into the planning stage of just how to obtain the desired object or state. This can work well with a highly motivated client who already knows what he or she has been doing is ineffective. However, many clients who come into treatment are not necessarily internally motivated to be there. Someone else has "sent" them for treatment. In this case, the client usually doesn't believe there is anything wrong with his or her life. The only problem is this other person who is nagging them into going to counseling.

People generally do not change until the pain of staying the same exceeds their fear of change. As a good therapist, your job is to "comfort the afflicted, and [to] afflict the comfortable" (Dunne, Finley Peter). Do you remember the scales or comparing place from Choice Theory, Lesson 7? The frustration signal becomes stronger the more out-of-balance our scales are. Therefore the urge to behave increases when we become aware that what we are doing isn't working to get us what we really want.

Hence the reason for the Powerful Questions. These questions, which were originally unique to Reality Therapy, are now used in other counseling approaches and were further popularized by Dr. Phil.

### **Exploring Current Total Behavior:**

When you know what your client wants, the next thing to do is explore what he or she is currently doing to get it. Only you don't just want to know the things clients are engaging in that are helping them get what they want. You also want to explore those things that may be getting in the way of them getting what they want.

And whenever you explore what a client is currently doing, you want it to be present tense. You are not yet attempting to make a plan by asking, "What else could you do?" Or, "What would you need to do to get what you want?" Those questions point to a future planned behavior. At this point, you want to find out what has already been done and what the person is currently doing as it relates to his or her stated Quality World picture.

In essence, you are asking your clients to reveal their total behavior to you. A client will proudly declare the behaviors that are helping but are not so quick to confess those things they do that may be sabotaging their forward progress.

Also, remember the concept of Total Behavior from Lesson 7? When you are exploring current behavior, you are not limited to actions only. Remember, you can also ask questions about a person's thoughts, emotions and their body's physiology in relation to whether they are helping or hindering progress toward a particular Quality World picture.

Here are some examples of possible questions:

1. What are you doing to get what you want?
2. Is there anything you are doing that might be getting in the way?
3. What are you thinking as it relates to your goal?
4. What things do you tell yourself about obtaining this Quality World picture?
5. When you imagine yourself doing, having, and/or being what you want, how do you feel?
6. How do you feel now without it?
7. Is your body sending you any signals?
8. Is there anything else you are doing?
9. Are you hoping and wishing for it?
10. Do you have any thoughts that get in the way of accomplishing your goals?

Of course, there are many other ways of asking the same questions. The idea is for you to find a way that is comfortable to you and that honors the person you are. You want to develop a style of questioning that works for you and your clientele. You don't have to sound like me.

When you are exploring current total behavior, it is acceptable for you, the counselor, to mention behaviors you have noticed that the client might not report. This should never be done with an accusatory or judgmental tone. You would simply add the behavior to your summary of what the client has already mentioned. So, for example, your client says he wants better grades in school and the behavior he is using is taking books home every night, going to all classes, and having the teachers like him. And you know the student is also not studying for tests or doing homework, then you would say, "You want better grades so you are going to all your classes, having good rapport with your teachers, taking your books home and not studying for tests or doing homework." You are simply adding it to the list with no value judgment about whether it is good or bad. It's simply another thing the client is doing. You want your clients to look at all behavior--the good, the bad and the ugly.

### **Facilitating Self-Evaluation:**

This is by far the most powerful part of the Reality Therapy session--securing a self-evaluation from your client. This is the part where you hold up a mirror for your clients and ask whether the behaviors they have been engaging in are likely to get them to the goal they want. It is critically important that the client answers this question, not you.

For example, you may be tempted to say, "So, what you are doing doesn't seem to be helping you get to your goal." That would be a mistake. This process is called self-evaluation for a reason. If you answer the evaluation question, it is no longer your client's self-evaluation; it is a counselor-evaluation. Your opinion really isn't important here. It's what your client evaluates that's important.

Ask the question and then wait for the answer. There may be pain in the silence but remember, you are attempting to "afflict the comfortable," so the more pain, the better. Resist the urge to make it all better by answering the question for the client. Let him or her sit with it for as long as it takes.

When the counselor does the evaluating, you are in essence, giving your client an excuse not to look at his or her own behavior. With you doing the evaluating, the client can focus their attention on you and how you are wrong. And just who do you think you are anyway?

An evaluation by you can be perceived as criticism. This is one deadly relationship habit you want to avoid in counseling.

Here are some ways to ask self-evaluation questions:

1. If you keep doing things the way you have been, do you think you will get what you want?
2. If you change nothing, will you get there?
3. Does all this help you move in a forward direction?
4. Is that helping or hurting?
5. If you keep doing "nothing," will you accomplish your goal?

These questions represent ways of asking your client to look at their present behavior and compare it with their Quality World picture. If you remember, the model of Choice Theory shows a person comparing their Perceived World to their Quality World in the Comparing Place. This is the way our systems are wired. This is what we naturally do.

During the Reality Therapy process or the procedures that lead to change, you are asking your client to shift the focus from their Perceived World to their own behavior. This is not usually a comfortable shift to make. Excuses exist in the Perceived World. Clients can play the role of the victim there.

When you ask your clients to look instead at their behavior, it isn't a comfortable shift. They may resist. It may require some expert explanation on your part as to why you want them to stop blaming outside circumstances for their situation. There is the past, there are other people, and there are circumstances beyond one's control. I usually tell my client all that may be true. I'm not arguing that things may be difficult.

What I tell clients is that I want them to be in control. I want them to have all their power. And I remind them that the only thing they can control is their behavior and their thinking. If they want to be strong and achieve success, then they must focus on those things over which they have control. History is what it is. People are going to continue doing what they do. Uncontrollable circumstances will continue to exist. What is the variable of change? YOU! This explanation delivered in a supportive, understanding way will generally give clients enough information so they understand the usefulness and importance of looking at their own behavior.

Sometimes self-evaluation questions have nothing to do with looking at a person's behavior in response to getting what they want. Sometimes you may ask them to place two Quality World pictures on the scales, as in:

- Which is most important to you?

Sometimes a self-evaluation question is posed asking for an answer to a question the person knows, but may have temporarily forgotten, as in:

- Whose behavior can you control?
- Is that something that is within your control?

Sometimes a counselor will ask a self-evaluation question to get at the validity of a thought. For example:

- Is that true?
- Is it really true?
- Is that realistic?
- Can that happen now?

The idea here is to help people work toward things that are within their control and in the case of the first two questions, to challenge their beliefs about a certain thing or person.

There will also be times when you want to check out how long a person is willing to stay in their same situation? You might ask:

- How long have you been waiting for that person to change? Are you willing to wait another \_\_\_\_ years?

The idea in that scenario is to unbalance the person's scales or to "afflict the comfortable." You are attempting to have him or her evaluate their willingness to stay the same with no forward movement.

Sometimes when you ask the present behavior questions, a client will answer with "nothing." "There is nothing I'm doing to move toward my goal." When a client makes such a statement, you have a clinical judgment to make. Based on what you know about this client, in your best assessment, do you think your client needs support, a kick in the butt or a combination of the two? Your path would be different depending on your assessment.

If you think the client who is doing nothing needs support, then you would list the behavior you know the person is already engaging in to help them see they are, in fact, doing something. For example, you might say, "Well now, you're talking to me about it. That's something. I'll also bet you are thinking about it, maybe wishing for it. Those are also things you're doing. Is there anything else?"

Should you think your client needs a harder, more confrontive approach, you might say, "So if you keep doing nothing, do you think that will get you what you want?" This must be delivered with a neutral tone of voice. If you sound accusatory in your delivery, you run the risk of criticizing and that will not be good for the therapeutic process.

And if you think your client needs a combination, it might sound like this, "Well now, you're talking to me about it. That's something. I'll also bet you are thinking about it, maybe wishing for it. If you keep doing that, do you think you'll get to your goal?"

Another situation you may encounter is a client who has effective behavior to get what he or she wants but it isn't responsible. What's the difference? Effective behavior simply means it works to get the person what they want. It works, that's all. A bully who wants power and beats people up to get it has an effective behavior to get power. It works and that's all effective means.

However, many times our goal as counselors, therapists and social workers is to help our clients learn responsible ways to get what they want. How is this different? Responsible means you get your needs met while not interfering with others meeting theirs. So there are some additional questions to ask a person who says what they are doing is working but it may only be effective and not responsible.

Here they are:

1. Is it against the rules?
2. Is it against the law?
3. Does it hurt anyone, including yourself?

Once a person admits their behavior is either against the rules, against the law, or hurts someone, then you have some follow up to do. First you want to talk to him or her about the consequences of continuing the behavior. A question might sound like this:

- And if you keep doing what you have been doing, what do you think will happen?
- If you get caught, what will be the consequence?
- Are you willing to pay the price?
- Is it worth it?

The goal in asking these questions is to be able to discuss the consequences. Many people continue in effective, but not responsible, behaviors because they don't know a better way. They don't think they will have to pay the consequences because they either don't know what they are or don't think they will get caught. Having the conversation about consequences, in a nonjudgmental way, can help your clients consider the effects of their behaviors.

It is important to note that you should not be threatening consequences that you are going to impose. That would be using two Deadly Relationship Habits--threatening and punishing. You want to talk about societal consequences or what the demands of your job will force you to do. You don't ever want your client to get the impression you will relish doling out consequences should he or she continue with behavior that isn't responsible. In order for you to maintain a need-satisfying environment with your client, you need to stay as divorced from the consequences as you can.

You would then attempt to reframe the want and you would go back to the beginning of the process and exploring the Quality World. You might ask the question, "If we could figure out a way for you to have the power you want, without breaking the rules and hurting people, would you be interested in at least talking about it?" If he or she says yes, then you now have a new Quality World picture and you can ask the powerful questions about the new want.

### **Summary:**

Using the procedures that lead to change of Reality Therapy involves the skillful formulation of questions to help a person self-evaluate their current behavior as it relates to getting what they want in their Quality Worlds so they can more effectively meet their needs. Questions about present behavior and self-evaluation can help a person get there.

I would like you to practice asking these questions this week. Of course, they won't make much sense unless they are combined with last week's questions. You will want to be clear on what the person is working toward before you ask about their current behavior and its effectiveness. So, take every opportunity you have available to you this week and keep a journal of your progress. Whether you are working with clients, friends, family members, acquaintances or strangers, keep track of your conversations. Keep process notes in terms of what you asked, how they responded,

your assessment of their response and then, what you asked next. In this way, the worksheet looks almost the same as last week's. Please complete Procedures that Lead to Change worksheet.