



Module Fifteen: Who's Responsible?

When you take on the role of a helper, you can put yourself in a precarious position. As a helper, you sometimes have preconceived ideas about what is best for your client. When you think you know what is best, you will often work harder than your client at getting them to choose what you think they should.

It can put you in the situation where you want results for your client more than they do. When this occurs, you are susceptible to some issues often experienced by people in the helping professions.

First of all, you will notice that in sessions, you are working harder than your client. You will know this because you are exhausted at the end of a session. You spend a lot of time trying to convince your client he or she should see things the way that you do. You want your client to make the "right" decision. You want to protect your client from any negative consequences of making the "wrong" decision.

The problem with this approach, naturally, is that it isn't your life or your decision to make. Your job is to merely provide all the information you have available to you to help your client make the best decision he or she can possibly make. It may not be the same decision you would make but remember, you and your client are not the same person. They are experiencing life differently than you. They have different Knowledge and Valuing Filters and want different things than you do in your Quality Worlds.

Another challenge occurs when you take responsibility for your client's progress. If your client chooses the "right" path, as defined by you, then if they choose differently, you run the risk of taking it personally. If this happens, then you can develop negative feelings toward your client or yourself.

Does any of this sound familiar? "That client is just resistant." "That client refuses to see what's good for him." "That client just doesn't understand how things work." "That client is just lazy and doesn't want to do the work that's required."

The other alternative is that you start to develop negative feelings about yourself. You begin to feel ineffective because you can't get your client to do what's "best" for her. You begin to have self-doubts and start to think you might be in the wrong line of work.

Hopefully, none of these scenarios last too long and don't become an ingrained pattern of thinking. The way to avoid all this is to recognize who is responsible for the bulk of the work in therapy.

You are merely a guide. All you can ever give another person is information. You will ask questions so your client can evaluate the effectiveness of his or her actions toward their stated goals. If planning options are discussed, then it is your job to help your client evaluate the effectiveness of those goals.

There is no place for your values and morals in therapy. The only way your values and morals are relevant is if you own them. For example, if your client asks what you would do in a similar situation, it is all right to say what you might do as long as you make it clear that you and your client are two different people. It might sound like this: "I would likely do this but you have to remember, that's me. What I would do may not be the best thing for you to do."

Another way for you to share your opinion, and remember all values and morals are your opinion based on your life experiences, is to ask your client if he or she would like to hear it. If you gain their consent, it's all right for you to share what you'd like to see. I once worked with a teenager who was determined to quit school. Of course, my opinion was she should stay in school. However, I knew it was her decision to make and not mine. When she gave me permission to share my opinion, I said, "Charlotte, look, I hear you loud and clear that you want to quit school and that certainly is your choice. I just want to share with you what I see when I look at you. I see a competent and caring young woman. I see someone who loves to help others and I can see you in college studying to be a nurse or caregiver. I know that may not be what you want but I just wanted you to know what I see when I look at you."

In this way, I'm being true to my need to let her know I believe in her, while honoring her right to make whatever decision she thought best. I owned my values and opinion. I wasn't trying to make them hers. I was merely giving her some information she could consider in making her decision if she wanted to.

Another case I want to share is the case of Jamal, a case study I use to make a point about counselor value systems. Jamal was a senior in high school and seemed to have the world in the palm of his hands. He had a full paid football scholarship, a girlfriend he loved and a bright future. One night, he got caught up in a family drama and his girlfriend, Keisha, asked him to go to her sister's house to protect her from an abusive ex-boyfriend. Even though he thought it wasn't a great idea, Jamal went to Keisha's sister's apartment. He knew the sister was jealous of Keisha and was always making life difficult for her.

As soon as Jamal knocked on the door, he was in trouble. Keisha's sister had set him up for a seduction. She was scantily clad and immediately began kissing and rubbing him. His body responded, while his head kept telling him this wasn't a good idea. Keisha's sister insisted no one would ever know and that there was nothing to worry about. She would keep quiet and after all, she was on birth control. This was supported by showing Jamal her pack of pills with the appropriate number of pills missing.

Since Jamal had been dating Keisha, he had not had sex in two years. She wanted to wait until they were married to have sex. When her sister began touching Jamal, he lost his resolve, even though his brain kept telling him not to proceed.

Immediately after this act, Jamal felt horribly guilty. He wasn't too worried about Keisha's sister telling Keisha about their indiscretion because even if she did, he would deny it. He knew Keisha would believe him over her sister because she was always telling lies to upset her and causing trouble for Keisha. If it came down to her word against his, he would be the victor.

Then about six weeks later, Keisha's sister came to Jamal to explain that she was pregnant, showing him the test with the plus "+" sign. Jamal insisted she have an abortion. When she refused, saying her biological clock was ticking, he begged her. He knew Keisha would find out he'd been unfaithful if there was an actual baby's DNA to test. He also knew his football career would be over before it started if he had to get a job to pay child support. On top of everything, the sister was insisting Jamal marry her! This seemed to have been her plan all along--to hurt her sister by entrapping Jamal.

How many of you are angry already with Jamal for his selfishness and tunnel vision? He's already cheated and lied to his girlfriend, right? Well, it gets worse. He has a plan to "get rid" of the baby. When he spoke to his counselor, he didn't want to do it but he was thinking he would go to Keisha's sister's apartment and "rough her up" a bit so she would lose the baby. This decision was obviously weighing heavy on his mind. He had never done anything to intentionally hurt another person and he didn't want to start now but he was desperate and couldn't see any other way.

The counselor helped Jamal to see that if he followed through on his plan, he could end up facing legal charges. Jamal was surprised by this. Where he lived, it was not uncommon for a woman to get smacked around by her man and no police ever got involved. However, he knew he couldn't get arrested! That would also end his football career and Keisha would definitely find out.

After much thought, he finally figured out another plan. The counselor didn't think it was destined for success but Jamal was determined. He thought he would go to Keisha's sister's apartment, as planned. He would offer to marry her but only if she had an abortion. He would tell her they could have other children but he wouldn't be much of a supporter if he couldn't attend college and begin his football career. He hoped she would fall for the ruse and then as soon as the abortion was done, he would laugh at her and leave her.

Yes, he knew she might tell Keisha everything but again, he felt strongly that Keisha would always believe him over her sister. He had never before lied to her and he vowed to himself, he would never do it again. When his counselor assessed the plan, he knew Jamal was not going to be a danger to himself or others. Yes, there may be an abortion, but that was legal so the counselor felt good Jamal was leaving with a much safer plan than the one he originally presented. He also figured Jamal would be willing to talk with him again if his plan did not work out the way he hoped.

Summary:

As a helper, one of the toughest lessons to learn is that your value system is absolutely "right." It's absolutely right and correct for one person--YOU!!! Yet, values are such a core part of who we are, we don't realize how much they affect everything we do, think and feel. They give us a strong sense of right and wrong and when left unchecked can lead to a deadly case of righteousness. Even as I type these words, I recognize this lesson is being vastly colored by my own value system. Of course, if your values do not match mine, then you may decide you need to use another form of helping others that's more directive.

But if you are going to use Reality Therapy as your process for helping others, then you need to recognize your values are important and right for you. You can't remove them from the equation. They are an integral part of you. However, you find your values getting in the way of your thinking process with a client, you can recognize your values are pushing you to try to get your client to do what you think is best and stop pushing. You can share your values with clients when you own them, however, unless asked, your values are quite irrelevant when helping clients decide what's best for them.