

# choice theory:

## don't give others your *mental health!*



*IN DECEMBER 2005, several staff attended a 2-day counselling workshop on the principles and practices of Choice Theory. It was an interesting and stimulating workshop presented by Judy Hatswell, an educational psychologist and training consultant from Sydney. Rita Riedel reports.*

Choice Theory highlights that we are each 100 percent responsible for how we behave. No matter how others treat us, we always have a choice in how we respond.

In essence, this means no one can “make” us feel anything: neither angry or guilty or sad, or happy. People may inspire us or push our buttons, but our response is our choice. Nor can we make others feel or do anything. The only person we can change is our self.

This is a very empowering concept: we are always free in “how” we respond. Instead of blaming, punishing, rejecting or manipulating others – or allowing others to treat us this way (playing the victim) – we have a choice to reclaim our power and be responsible for ourselves.

Choice Theory also emphasizes that we are not responsible for how others choose to behave. The only person we can control is our self.

Dr Glasser, the founder of Choice Theory (see next page), believes that by taking ownership of our thoughts, feelings and actions we can more effectively deal with all challenging relationships, whether at school, home, work or in public.

Knowing that we can choose more effective ways of relating to others, we can create relationships based on empowerment, honesty and respect instead of feeling helpless, hard done by or out of control. As Judy highlighted in the workshop: “If you can’t change the world, change your response to it.” Or put another way, “Don’t give others your mental health!”

### meeting our basic needs

Choice Theory is based on the premise that all our behaviour is internally motivated to satisfy physical and/or psychological needs. It recognizes that all humans have five basic needs, and, when these aren’t being met, we experience strain and pain in our relationships. Our five basic needs are:

- **survival** – to have shelter, food, health, security and safety;
- **love and belonging** – to know we are cared about; to give and receive love; to have friendship and involvement; and to have connectedness with others;
- **power** – to believe and know we are capable and successful; using our skills to achieve; applying our knowledge to improve the quality of our lives and others; having competence and influence; and having positive recognition from ourselves and others;
- **freedom** – being independent and making choices and having the right to experience the consequences of those choices; to be able to think and act without restriction or coercion; practicing helping others through our own generosity;

- **fun** – experiencing play, recreation and enjoyment; learning and laughter; laughing with people (not at them).

When one or more of our basic needs isn’t met, our conditioned response is often to try and control others to get our way, however subtle this may be. Alternately, we may act helpless and give our power away, believing we are not capable or responsible for ourselves.

Identifying what basic needs we aren’t meeting in our lives can help us to re-choose our response, which Glasser refers to as our Total Behaviour.

Choice Theory encourages people to stop thinking/behaving like a “victim, persecutor or rescuer” and, instead, to think/behave like a “collaborator, initiator and facilitator”: to be responsible.

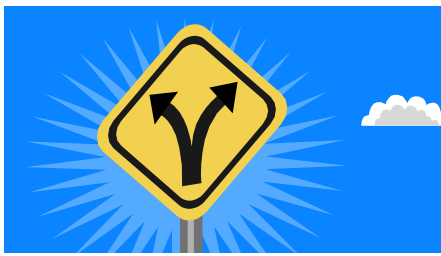
### regaining control on the road

While I learned many things throughout the workshop, I enjoyed learning about this next concept the most, as Judy made it simple and playful, two things which always make learning easier.

Choice Theory identifies whatever we do in a given moment as Total Behaviour, which is made up of four components (or 4 “wheels”):

- our thinking (front wheel)
- our behaviour (front wheel)
- our feelings (back wheel)
- our physiology (back wheel)

Choice Theory recognises that the first two components (thinking and acting), →



we have direct control over (like the front wheels of a car), and the latter two (feelings and physiology) we have indirect control over (like the rear wheels of car).

For example, a friend you know doesn't invite you to their party. A conditioned response might be:

- Thinking – “There must be something wrong with me.”
- Behaviour – go to the fridge and eat a tub of icecream
- Feelings – down and depressed
- Physiology – de-energised, heavy, lethargic

Yet Choice Theory highlights that our thoughts and actions have an indirect influence on our feelings and physiology. Or put another way: we can indirectly affect our feelings and physiology by what we think and do.

If we re-visit the above example, knowing that the first option makes us feel down and depressed, a Choice Theory response might be:

- Thinking – “I'm disappointed I'm not invited, but my happiness doesn't depend on one party. I going to go out and create my own good time.”
- Behaviour – call up a good friend and arrange to go dancing
- Feelings – excited and uplifted
- Physiology – stimulated, energised

There is a conscious decision (choice) to do things differently. Because our thoughts and actions influence how we feel, if we are feeling 'lousy' and unwell (depressed, angry, anxious, resentful, tired, helpless etc) we can 're-steer' ourselves back on track by re-choosing our thoughts and behaviour.

## the choice to change

Just as you can only drive a car when the front wheels are on the ground (it's hard to steer when you're doing a wheely!), if you're not engaging your thinking or behaviour, you won't get far: you will be driven by your feelings and physiology (and most probably crash!).

To help make ourselves “feel” better we have a choice to change what we think and do.

I particularly find this part of Choice Theory helpful, because it breaks down what can potentially be an overwhelming concept into something that is easy to understand. It also gives us a practical tool for getting out of situations where we feel stuck.

I don't believe changing who we are (or how we relate to others) is as simple as  $A+B=C$ , as most of us carry unconscious pain from our past which requires courage, awareness, patience and perseverance to work through.

For example, giving up alcohol (or any addiction) is not as simple as just saying, “I will stop drinking now”; a decision like this will trigger many old emotional patterns and beliefs. Likewise, if we have become used to letting others treat us in a negative way (aggressive, rude, insulting, punishing, controlling), it will take a lot of practice to relearn – rechoose – new respectful ways of relating and communicating.

Yet, it is encouraging to know we don't have to do a PhD in psychology in order to make a positive change.

## ... and counselling

Throughout the rest of the workshop, we learned how to apply some of these fundamental concepts to counselling through a framework Glasser has developed called Reality Therapy.

We looked at several techniques for helping a person move out of their problem situation toward a solution, by focusing on what a person wants (their preferred choice) rather than what they don't want (their current problem).

A key question you can ask yourself in difficult situations is: “If I say or do this now, will it bring us closer together or will it take us further apart?” (The cartoon on page 24 clearly illustrates the harmful impact of abusive speech.) Each moment is a crossroads of choice.

Other key strategies include:

- Focus on the present and how you can do things differently (not on the past or what hasn't worked)
- Ask yourself how you would like (prefer) things to be and take a step in this direction – let your “quality world” motivate you towards creative solutions.
- Our problems are not the problem – it's how we let them affect us.

To write about the useful benefits of Choice Theory would require a book! ... so if you would like to learn more refer to the reader-friendly text by Glasser called *Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*.

In closing, it seems fit to say: we don't have to let others drive us round the bend! Nor do we have to drive ourselves round the bend.

Despite our pain, we are not powerless but 100 per cent responsible for how we think and behave. Through awareness – learning about positive programs and models such as this one – we can test out new ideas which help us regain control over our life. ✕

For more info on Choice Theory workshops in Alice Springs contact Kalikamurti Suich on 8952 3638 or 0412 179 957. Also visit [www.wglasser.com/whatisct.htm](http://www.wglasser.com/whatisct.htm) or [www.judyhatswell.com](http://www.judyhatswell.com).

Choice Theory was developed by Dr William Glasser, a psychiatrist from the US and head of the William Glasser Institute in Los Angeles. Dr Glassner believes that, for there to be progress in human relationships and happiness, people must give up the punishing, relationship-destroying external control psychology (dominant in the world) and, in turn, has developed Choice Theory, a new, non-controlling psychology based on our personal freedom to choose.

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