

choice theory by william glasser

Understanding Choice Theory by William Glasser: A Comprehensive Guide

William Glasser's Choice Theory offers a profound and practical framework for understanding human behavior, motivation, and relationships. This influential theory posits that all behavior is chosen and driven by our attempts to fulfill our fundamental psychological needs. Unlike external control theories that suggest we are pushed by external forces, Choice Theory emphasizes internal motivation and self-determination. By exploring the core concepts of Choice Theory, individuals can gain significant insights into their own actions and interactions with others. This article delves deeply into the principles of William Glasser's Choice Theory, examining its foundational ideas, practical applications, and the profound impact it can have on personal growth and interpersonal dynamics. Understanding how our choices shape our reality is key to a more fulfilling and empowered life.

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The Revolutionary Framework of William Glasser's Choice Theory

William Glasser's Choice Theory is a groundbreaking psychological model that fundamentally shifts our perspective on human behavior and motivation. At its core, the theory asserts that we are not passively reacting to our environment but are actively choosing our behaviors in an effort to satisfy our deeply ingrained psychological needs. This perspective stands in stark contrast to traditional views that often attribute behavior to external forces or predetermined causes. Glasser argued that understanding these internal drivers is the key to unlocking personal freedom and improving our relationships. This comprehensive exploration will illuminate the foundational principles of William Glasser's Choice Theory, guiding you through its core tenets and practical implications.

The Fundamental Psychological Needs in William Glasser's Choice Theory

A cornerstone of William Glasser's Choice Theory is the assertion that all humans are born with five fundamental psychological needs that drive their behavior. These are not survival needs like food and water, but rather needs that contribute to our mental and emotional well-being. Glasser believed that fulfilling these needs is the primary motivation behind every choice we make. Understanding these needs is crucial for comprehending how Choice Theory explains our actions and how we can work towards satisfying them in healthy ways. When these needs are unmet, individuals often resort to less effective or even destructive behaviors in their attempts to gain satisfaction.

The Need for Love and Belonging

The need for love and belonging is arguably the most fundamental of the psychological needs outlined in Choice Theory. This need encompasses our desire to be connected to others, to feel cared for, and to have meaningful relationships. It's about feeling accepted, appreciated, and valued by those around us. This can manifest in friendships, family bonds, romantic partnerships, and even a sense of community. When this need is unmet, individuals may experience loneliness, isolation, and feelings of worthlessness. Choice Theory suggests that many of our social behaviors, from seeking companionship to joining groups, are driven by this innate desire.

The Need for Power (Achievement and Recognition)

In William Glasser's Choice Theory, the need for power is not about

dominating others but rather about developing competence, achieving goals, and gaining recognition for our accomplishments. This need drives us to learn, to strive for excellence, and to feel a sense of mastery over our lives and our environment. It's about feeling capable and effective. Unmet power needs can lead to frustration, a sense of helplessness, and a feeling of being insignificant. Individuals may then seek power through less constructive means, such as asserting authority inappropriately or engaging in competitive behaviors that are solely focused on winning.

The Need for Freedom (Choice and Autonomy)

The need for freedom, as defined in Choice Theory, is the desire for autonomy, choice, and the ability to make our own decisions. It is about having control over our own lives and being able to explore, experiment, and make our own way in the world. This need is about independence and the freedom to express ourselves authentically. When this need is stifled or denied, individuals may feel restricted, controlled, or resentful. They might then rebel against perceived authority or become resistant to guidance, all in an effort to assert their desire for self-determination.

The Need for Fun (Enjoyment and Play)

The need for fun, according to Glasser's Choice Theory, is the desire for enjoyment, laughter, and pleasurable experiences. It's about finding joy in life, engaging in activities that bring us happiness, and experiencing a sense of playfulness. This need is vital for mental and emotional resilience, allowing us to cope with stress and maintain a positive outlook. When the need for fun is consistently unmet, life can feel dull, monotonous, and draining. This can lead to a search for excitement through risky behaviors or a general sense of dissatisfaction with everyday life.

The Need for Survival (Physical and Mental Security)

While the other four needs are psychological, William Glasser's Choice Theory also acknowledges the fundamental need for survival, which includes both physical safety and mental security. This is the most basic of all needs, encompassing our requirements for food, water, shelter, and protection from harm. However, it also extends to our need for a sense of security and predictability in our lives. When these survival needs are threatened, our focus narrows, and all other needs become secondary. Choice Theory posits that even our pursuit of the psychological needs is ultimately aimed at enhancing our overall sense of survival and well-being.

The Role of Wants, Needs, and the Quality World in Choice Theory

William Glasser's Choice Theory introduces the concept of the "Quality World" as a crucial internal component that guides our behavior. The Quality World is a mental gallery, a unique and deeply personal collection of images and experiences that represent what we want most in life. These wants are directly linked to our fundamental psychological needs. Essentially, we are motivated to do what we believe will bring us closer to fulfilling these deeply held desires and satisfying our needs. The more vivid and valuable an image in our Quality World, the stronger our motivation to pursue it.

Understanding Your Quality World

The Quality World is not static; it evolves as we grow and have new experiences. It's a dynamic mental construct filled with people, possessions, beliefs, and achievements that are most important to us. For example, an image in someone's Quality World might be a loving relationship (satisfying the need for love and belonging), a successful career (satisfying the need for power), or a peaceful vacation (satisfying the need for freedom and fun). Choice Theory emphasizes that our actions are always an attempt to bring reality closer to the images in our Quality World, thereby fulfilling our unmet needs.

Wants as Proxies for Needs

In the framework of William Glasser's Choice Theory, our "wants" are the specific things, people, or experiences we desire because we believe they will help us satisfy our fundamental psychological needs. For instance, the need for love and belonging might translate into wants like a close friendship, a supportive family, or a romantic partner. The need for power could manifest as wants like a promotion at work, recognition for a talent, or mastering a new skill. Choice Theory highlights that these wants are the tangible goals we pursue, driven by the underlying, often unconscious, desire to meet our core needs.

Understanding the Perceived World and the Control System

William Glasser's Choice Theory explains how we navigate the world through our "Perceived World" and utilize an internal "Control System." The Perceived World is our subjective interpretation of reality, influenced by our past experiences, our needs, and the images in our Quality World. This means that

no two people perceive the same event in exactly the same way. Our brains are constantly processing sensory input, comparing it to our Quality World, and generating a "total behavior" designed to close the gap between what we perceive and what we want.

The Perceived World: Our Subjective Reality

The Perceived World is essentially our personal map of reality. It's how we see and interpret everything happening around us, including other people, events, and circumstances. This perception is filtered through our Quality World and our current needs. For example, if someone has a strong need for recognition and their image in their Quality World is that of a celebrated artist, they might perceive a neutral comment from a colleague as dismissive and an obstacle to their goal, whereas another person with different needs and a different Quality World might perceive the same comment as simply an observation.

The Control System: Orchestrating Behavior

The Control System is the part of us that manages our Total Behavior. According to William Glasser's Choice Theory, this system constantly works to reconcile the discrepancy between what we are perceiving and what we want (the images in our Quality World). When there's a difference, the Control System initiates a behavior designed to bring our perceived world closer to our desired world. This behavior is not just a single action but a complex interplay of sensing, thinking, feeling, and doing, all working in concert to achieve our desired outcome.

How Behavior is Always Chosen: The Concept of Total Behavior

A central tenet of William Glasser's Choice Theory is the concept of "Total Behavior." Glasser proposed that all behavior is a choice and is composed of four interconnected components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. These four elements work together as a unified whole, orchestrated by our internal control system to try and satisfy our unmet needs. When we experience a discrepancy between what we perceive and what we want, our entire system, encompassing our actions, thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations, is mobilized to address that gap. Understanding Total Behavior is key to recognizing that even seemingly involuntary responses are, in fact, chosen behaviors.

The Four Components of Total Behavior

William Glasser's Choice Theory breaks down Total Behavior into four distinct but interconnected parts:

- **Acting:** This refers to the observable actions we take, such as walking, talking, working, or engaging in a hobby.
- **Thinking:** This encompasses our internal mental processes, including our thoughts, beliefs, and self-talk.
- **Feeling:** This includes our emotional states, such as happiness, sadness, anger, or fear.
- **Physiology:** This refers to our bodily functions and sensations, such as our heart rate, breathing, and muscle tension.

Choice Theory emphasizes that we have direct control over our acting and thinking, and indirectly over our feelings and physiology. By choosing our thoughts and actions, we can influence our emotional states and bodily responses, thereby influencing our Total Behavior.

The Purpose of Total Behavior

The purpose of Total Behavior, according to William Glasser's Choice Theory, is always to meet our fundamental psychological needs. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, every behavior we engage in is an attempt to get closer to what we want, to bridge the gap between our perceived reality and the images in our Quality World. Even seemingly negative behaviors like anger or sadness serve a purpose within the context of Choice Theory; they are chosen behaviors that the individual believes, at that moment, will help them satisfy a need or protect themselves from further unmet needs.

The Seven Connecting Habits and the Seven Deadly Habits

William Glasser's Choice Theory distinguishes between two sets of habits that profoundly impact our relationships and personal well-being: the Seven Connecting Habits and the Seven Deadly Habits. The Connecting Habits are those that foster positive relationships and help us satisfy our psychological needs in healthy ways, while the Deadly Habits create distance, hinder connection, and often lead to the frustration of needs.

The Seven Connecting Habits

The Seven Connecting Habits, as outlined in Choice Theory, are essential for building and maintaining healthy, fulfilling relationships. They are:

- **Caring:** Showing genuine concern and affection for others.
- **Communicating:** Engaging in open, honest, and respectful dialogue.
- **Cooperating:** Working together towards common goals.
- **Caring and Appreciating:** Valuing and acknowledging the contributions of others.
- **Crediting:** Giving people credit for their work and ideas.
- **Trusting:** Believing in the integrity and intentions of others.
- **Supporting:** Offering encouragement and assistance.

When we consistently practice these habits, we create an environment of trust, respect, and mutual support, which is conducive to meeting our psychological needs and fostering strong bonds.

The Seven Deadly Habits

In contrast, the Seven Deadly Habits are destructive patterns of behavior that damage relationships and prevent the satisfaction of psychological needs. They are:

- **Criticizing:** Pointing out faults and flaws in others.
- **Complaining:** Expressing dissatisfaction and blaming others.
- **Competing:** Trying to outdo or win against others.
- **Controlling:** Trying to force others to behave as we wish.
- **Condemning:** Expressing strong disapproval and judgment.
- **Concealing:** Hiding or withholding information or feelings.
- **Challenging:** Provoking or daring others, often with negative intent.

Choice Theory posits that these habits stem from external control approaches and are fundamentally ineffective in building positive relationships and fulfilling needs. Replacing the Deadly Habits with the Connecting Habits is a primary goal for those applying Choice Theory.

Applying Choice Theory in Relationships

William Glasser's Choice Theory provides a powerful lens through which to understand and improve interpersonal relationships. By recognizing that each individual is choosing their behavior to meet their own needs, we can shift from trying to control others to understanding and influencing them through connection and mutual respect. This perspective encourages empathy and reduces conflict, as we can appreciate that behaviors, even problematic ones, are often a result of unmet needs rather than malicious intent.

Building Stronger Connections

The application of the Seven Connecting Habits is central to building stronger connections within relationships, whether they be familial, romantic, or professional. By focusing on caring, communicating, cooperating, appreciating, crediting, trusting, and supporting, individuals create an environment where all parties feel valued and understood. This fosters a sense of security and belonging, which are fundamental to satisfying our psychological needs. Choice Theory encourages us to be partners in meeting each other's needs, rather than adversaries.

Resolving Conflict Effectively

Choice Theory offers a constructive approach to conflict resolution. Instead of trying to force our will upon others (which is a Deadly Habit), we can use the principles of Choice Theory to explore the underlying needs driving the conflict. By communicating openly about our own wants and needs and by actively listening to understand the other person's wants and needs, we can work collaboratively to find solutions that satisfy everyone involved. This shifts the focus from blame and accusation to problem-solving and mutual understanding.

Choice Theory in Education: The Importance of the Classroom

William Glasser's Choice Theory has significant implications for the field of education, offering a more student-centered and intrinsically motivating approach to learning. Traditional educational systems often rely on external motivators like grades and rewards, which Glasser argued are less effective than fostering internal motivation derived from meeting students' psychological needs within the classroom environment. A Choice Theory-informed classroom aims to be a place where students feel connected, empowered, and enjoy the learning process.

Creating a Positive Learning Environment

Applying Choice Theory in education involves creating a classroom where students feel a sense of belonging and connection with their teachers and peers. This can be achieved through collaborative activities, group projects, and opportunities for students to contribute to classroom decisions. Teachers who practice the Seven Connecting Habits, such as caring, communicating, and cooperating, build trust and rapport, making students more receptive to learning. Furthermore, providing opportunities for students to exercise choice in their learning activities can enhance their sense of freedom and autonomy, increasing engagement and motivation.

Fostering Student Motivation and Engagement

According to William Glasser's Choice Theory, students are most motivated when their psychological needs are met. This means moving away from controlling practices like excessive grading, punishment, and constant external pressure. Instead, educators can focus on fostering a love of learning by making lessons relevant, engaging, and allowing students to pursue their interests. When students feel competent (power), connected (belonging), free to choose (freedom), and that learning is enjoyable (fun), their intrinsic motivation flourishes, leading to deeper understanding and sustained engagement.

Choice Theory in Counseling and Therapy

William Glasser's Choice Theory forms the basis of Reality Therapy, a therapeutic approach that focuses on helping individuals identify and change their current behaviors to better meet their unmet needs. The core idea is that individuals are always choosing their behavior, even if that behavior is self-defeating. Therapy, within this framework, is about empowering clients to make better choices by understanding their Quality World, identifying the discrepancy between reality and their wants, and developing more effective Total Behaviors.

The Role of the Therapist

In Reality Therapy, grounded in William Glasser's Choice Theory, the therapist acts as a guide and facilitator rather than an authority figure. The therapist's role is to help the client understand that they are choosing their behaviors, even those that cause them pain. They work collaboratively with the client to explore what the client wants, what they are currently doing, whether their current behaviors are working, and what they can do differently. The focus is on the present and future, rather than dwelling on past events, and on taking responsibility for one's choices.

Empowering Clients to Make Effective Choices

Choice Theory empowers clients by emphasizing their inherent ability to choose. Therapy helps clients to:

- Identify their fundamental psychological needs and the specific wants that are intended to satisfy those needs.
- Understand how their current Total Behavior (acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology) is either helping or hindering their ability to meet those needs.
- Develop a plan for making new, more effective choices that will lead to greater satisfaction and well-being.
- Recognize that while they cannot control external events or other people, they can always choose how they respond to them.

This approach fosters self-reliance and personal responsibility, enabling clients to become the architects of their own lives.

Criticisms and Limitations of Choice Theory

While William Glasser's Choice Theory offers a compelling and influential perspective on human behavior, it has also faced criticism and scrutiny from various psychological perspectives. Understanding these limitations provides a more balanced view of the theory's strengths and weaknesses.

Oversimplification of Complex Behaviors

One common criticism is that Choice Theory might oversimplify the complexity of human behavior. Critics argue that not all behaviors can be directly traced back to the fulfillment of the five basic psychological needs. For instance, behaviors influenced by significant trauma, severe mental illness, or biological factors might not be adequately explained solely through the lens of chosen behaviors driven by unmet needs. The theory's emphasis on conscious choice may not fully account for the impact of unconscious drives or involuntary physiological responses.

The Role of External Factors

Another point of contention is the theory's strong emphasis on internal locus of control. While empowering, critics suggest that Choice Theory might downplay the significant impact of external factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, systemic oppression, or environmental stressors, on an

individual's behavior and opportunities. For individuals facing extreme adversity, the ability to simply "choose" a different behavior might be severely limited by their circumstances, leading to potential victim-blaming if not carefully applied.

Debate on "Wants" vs. "Needs"

There is also ongoing debate within psychology regarding the precise distinction and hierarchy between "wants" and "needs." While Glasser's framework is clear about the fundamental needs, the translation of these needs into specific wants can be highly individualized and sometimes misguided. Critics question whether all chosen behaviors are genuinely aimed at satisfying fundamental needs, or if some behaviors are simply learned habits, addictions, or reactions to external conditioning.

Conclusion: Embracing Choice Theory for a Better Life

William Glasser's Choice Theory provides a transformative and empowering perspective on human behavior, motivation, and relationships. By understanding that all our actions are chosen attempts to satisfy our fundamental psychological needs – love and belonging, power, freedom, fun, and survival – we gain profound insight into ourselves and others. The concepts of the Quality World, Total Behavior, and the distinction between Connecting and Deadly Habits offer practical tools for improving our lives and interactions. Embracing the principles of Choice Theory encourages us to take responsibility for our actions, focus on building positive connections through the Seven Connecting Habits, and ultimately create a more fulfilling and autonomous existence. By shifting from an external control model to an internal one, individuals can navigate challenges more effectively and foster healthier, more meaningful relationships.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the core concept of William Glasser's Choice Theory?

Choice Theory posits that all behavior is chosen and originates from within the individual. We are driven by five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Our actions are attempts to fulfill these needs and are guided by our 'Quality World' – a mental picture of what we want and need.

How does Choice Theory explain 'bad' or undesirable behavior?

From a Choice Theory perspective, behavior that appears 'bad' or undesirable is simply the individual's best attempt to fulfill one or more of their basic needs at that moment. It's not inherently bad, but rather a chosen strategy that may be ineffective or have negative consequences.

What is the 'Quality World' in Choice Theory, and how does it influence behavior?

The Quality World is a mental repository of everything an individual values, desires, and believes will satisfy their basic needs. It's a picture of their ideal life. Behavior is then directed towards trying to make reality match the pictures in their Quality World.

What is the difference between 'total behavior' and 'specific behaviors' in Glasser's theory?

Total behavior is the entirety of what we do, think, feel, and our physiology, all working together to get us what we want. Specific behaviors are the observable actions, thoughts, and feelings that make up total behavior. Choice Theory emphasizes that we can only directly control our specific actions, and by choosing those wisely, we can influence our total behavior.

How is Choice Theory applied in education or parenting?

In education and parenting, Choice Theory encourages focusing on helping individuals fulfill their needs in positive ways. Instead of punishment or coercion, it promotes cooperation, fostering relationships, and helping individuals learn to make choices that lead to personal satisfaction and success, rather than focusing on external control.

What is 'Gaining Control' in the context of Choice Theory?

Gaining Control refers to the internal process where an individual recognizes that their current behavior is not meeting their needs and consciously chooses a new behavior that is more likely to fulfill those needs. It's about taking responsibility for one's actions and making deliberate choices to improve one's situation.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to William Glasser's Choice Theory, with short descriptions:

1. Choice Theory: A New Psychology of Personal Freedom

This foundational text by William Glasser introduces the core principles of Choice Theory. It posits that all our behavior is chosen as the best way to deal with what we can or cannot get. The book explains concepts like the "total behavior" model, the "needs" that drive our choices, and the importance of relationships in our lives. It aims to empower individuals to understand and change their own behaviors and improve their relationships.

2. Reality Therapy: A New Approach to Psychiatry

While predating the formal naming of "Choice Theory," this book lays much of the groundwork. Glasser introduces his therapeutic approach that focuses on present behavior and taking responsibility. It emphasizes helping individuals identify what they want, what they are doing to get it, and how they can change their actions to meet their needs more effectively. The book challenges traditional psychiatric models by focusing on choice and responsibility rather than illness.

3. The Quality School: Applying Choice Theory in the Classroom

Glasser applies his Choice Theory principles to the educational environment in this influential book. He argues that traditional schooling often focuses on external control and extrinsic motivation, leading to student disengagement. The book advocates for creating "quality schools" where students are intrinsically motivated to learn, feel a sense of belonging, and are empowered to make responsible choices about their education.

4. Control Theory: A New Understanding of Human Behavior

This is an earlier work by Glasser, where he outlines the initial concepts that would later evolve into Choice Theory. He contrasts "external control psychology" (the psychology of coercion) with what he believed to be a more effective "control theory" (though the terminology shifted later). The book explores how we are all internally motivated and strive to control our own lives and environments.

5. Warning: Psychiatry Can Damage Your Mental Health

In this provocative book, Glasser critiques the prevailing models of psychiatry, particularly those reliant on medication and the concept of mental illness. He argues that many so-called mental health problems are actually the result of unmet needs and the inability to make effective choices. The book champions a return to focusing on behavior, responsibility, and relationship building as the keys to mental well-being.

6. The Glasser Effect: A Revolution in Behavior

This book often explores the impact and application of Glasser's theories in various settings, including education, therapy, and personal development. It delves into how individuals and organizations have successfully implemented Choice Theory to foster positive change, improve relationships, and enhance

overall well-being. The book highlights real-world examples and the transformative power of understanding and applying these principles.

7. Every Child Can Succeed: Read-Fail-Succeed

This book extends Glasser's educational philosophy, specifically addressing reading difficulties. It argues that the "read-fail-succeed" cycle, where children experience failure in reading, leads to a loss of self-esteem and further disengagement. Glasser proposes that by applying Choice Theory principles, educators can create supportive environments that empower all children to succeed in reading and in school.

8. The Discovery of Choice Theory: Creating a Better Life

This work often serves as an accessible introduction to the core concepts of Choice Theory for a broader audience. It breaks down the principles of fulfilling our basic needs, understanding total behavior, and making effective choices in daily life. The book emphasizes the practical application of these ideas to improve personal satisfaction, relationships, and overall life quality.

9. The Disconnect: How to Reconnect with the Life You Want

This book focuses on the pervasive sense of disconnection that many people experience in modern life. Glasser links this disconnection to unmet basic needs and ineffective behaviors, both personal and societal. He offers practical strategies grounded in Choice Theory to help individuals re-establish meaningful connections with themselves and others, leading to a more fulfilling and purposeful existence.

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