

Choice Theory: An Introduction

Choice Theory, developed by **Dr. William Glasser**, is the explanation of human behavior based on internal motivation. As Dr. Glasser explains in the most recent of his widely read books, Choice Theory, all of our behavior is chosen as we continually attempt to meet one or more of the five basic needs that are part of our genetic structure.

An understanding of these needs as well as the other major components of Choice Theory (*the Basic Needs, the Quality World, the Perceived World, the Comparing Place, and the Total Behavior System*) can help us build and maintain better relationships with the important people in our lives and lead happier, more satisfying lives.

The Ten Axioms of Choice Theory

1. The only person whose behavior we can control is our own.
2. All we can give another person is information.
3. All long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems.
4. The problem relationship is always part of our present life.
5. What happened in the past has everything to do with what we are today, but we can only satisfy our basic needs right now and plan to continue satisfying them in the future.
6. We can only satisfy our needs by satisfying the pictures in our Quality World.
7. All we do is behave.
8. All behavior is Total Behavior and is made up of four components: acting, thinking, feeling and physiology
9. All Total Behavior is chosen, but we only have direct control over the acting and thinking components. We can only control our feeling and physiology indirectly through how we choose to act and think.
10. All Total Behavior is designated by verbs and named by the part that is the most recognizable.

Choice Theory Basic Needs

According to Dr. Glasser, all behavior is purposeful. It is our best attempt at the time, given our current knowledge and skills, to meet one or more of our basic human needs, needs which evolved over time and have become part of our genetic structure. These needs are the general motivation for everything we do.

1. **Survival** - This need is a physiological need, which includes the need for food, shelter, and safety. Because we have genetic instructions to survive, not only as individuals but as a species, this includes the need to reproduce.
2. **Love & Belonging** - This need and the following three needs are psychological needs. The need to love and belong includes the need for relationships, social connections, to give and receive affection and to feel part of a group.
3. **Power** - To be powerful is to achieve, to be competent, to be skilled, to be recognized for our achievements and skill, to be listened to and have a sense of self worth.
4. **Freedom** - The need to be free is the need for independence, autonomy, to have choices and to be able to take control of the direction of one's life
5. **Fun** - The need for fun is the need to find pleasure, to play and to laugh. Should you doubt that this is as important as any of the others, imagine a life without hope of any enjoyment. Glasser links the need for fun to learning. All of the higher animals (dogs, dolphins, primates, etc.) play. As they play, they learn important life skills. Human beings are no different. It is true that "play is a child's work."

Characteristics of the Five Basic Needs:

1. Universal
2. Innate
3. Overlapping
4. Satisfied from moment to moment
5. Conflict w/ Others' Needs

Choice Theory Quality World

An important part of our Perceived World is the Quality World. Dr. Glasser describes the Quality World as a "personal picture album" of all the people, things, ideas, and ideals that we have discovered increase the quality of our lives.

While the Basic Human Needs are the general motivation for all human behavior, the Quality World is the specific motivation. The Basic Human Needs describe what we need, the Quality World pictures detail how we meet those needs. The Basic Human Needs are universal; our Quality Worlds are unique.

The pictures in our Quality World:

1. Meet one or more of our Basic Human Needs
2. Are changing and changeable
3. Are unique
4. Often conflict with each other
5. Vary in levels of intensity
6. Vary in levels of attainability

To gain a clearer understanding of your personal Quality World, discuss with a partner or small group a few of the following:

1. Who are the most important people in your life?
2. What are your most deeply held values?
3. If you become the person you would ideally like to be, what traits or characteristics would you have?
4. What is an accomplishment that you are really proud of?
5. If you could have the perfect job, what would that be?

If you were independently wealthy, what would you do with your time?

6. Describe a time in your life you would call a peak experience.
7. What does it mean to be a friend?
8. What brings a significant amount of meaning to your life?
9. What, for you, makes a house a home?

What have you learned about your Quality World? About Quality World pictures in general?

Perceived World

Dr. Glasser explains that the only way we experience the real world is through our perceptual system. Information about the real world comes to us first through our sensory system: our eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin. Next, these sensations pass through our perceptual system, beginning with what Glasser calls our total knowledge filter, which represents everything we know or have experienced.

When information passes through our knowledge filter, one of three things happens:

1. We decide that the information is not meaningful to us and the perception stops there,
2. We do not immediately recognize the information, but believe it may be meaningful to us so we have some incentive to gain more information
3. The information is meaningful to us and therefore passes through the next filter, the valuing filter.

When information passes through the valuing filter, we place one of three values on it. If it is something we have learned and is needs-satisfying, we place a positive value on it. If it is something we have learned and hinders our ability to meet our needs, we place a negative value on it. If it neither helps us nor hinders us in meeting our needs, we may place little or no value on it; it remains neutral.

Because we all come to every situation with different knowledge and experience, and therefore different values, our perceptions of the real world are different. Thus, we don't all live in the same "real world." We live our lives in our Perceived Worlds.

By "values" **Dr. Glasser** means that which is important to us, not necessarily being limited to moral or ethical values.

Our Perceived Worlds are, for each of us, our reality. Because they are made up of perceptions, our Perceived Worlds are:

- Highly subjective: based on one's culture, education, experience, gender, age, etc.
- Unique
- Subject to constant change (new information, new experiences = new perceptions)
- Frequently inaccurate

Often our perceptions are chosen. We can frequently choose to perceive people, places, and situations in a number of ways. For example, in driving to work, I might choose to think of the person who just pulled out in front of me as an inconsiderate jerk who is intentionally ruining my morning and feel all the stress that that perception carries with it. Or I could think of the person as someone like myself who just made a mistake in judgement because he/she is in such a hurry. Then I could try to relax so as not to do the same. In choosing our perceptions, it might be a good idea to ask ourselves which perception is better for to us hold.

Comparing Place

The Comparing Place describes a process that happens continuously in the brain. It is happening as you this. What you just experienced as you read the last sentence will help you understand the concept of The Comparing Place.

As we experience life, we are constantly comparing what we want (our Quality World pictures) with what we've got (our Perceived World). When the two match fairly well, we feel good. When there is a mismatch, as there probably was when you read the sentence above, you feel a degree of frustration, depending on how important the Quality World picture is to you. That frustration signal, as Glasser terms it, is felt as an urge to behave in a way that will help us get more of what we want.

As you read the sentence above, you probably felt a slight frustration signal when you read "It is happening as you this." What you probably want (your Quality World picture) when you read something is for it to make sense. Since the word "read" is missing from the sentence, you may have experience a frustration signal which may have urged you to go back and reread the sentence. Once you did that, you probably realized a word was missing and your brain supplied a word that would make sense in that sentence. Once you did that, the frustration signal disappeared.

Glasser likens the Comparing Place to a set of scales. When your scales are in balance, when what you want is what you have, you continue to do what you've been doing. When your scales get out of balance, you feel the frustration signal, the urge to behave.

Total Behavior

One of Dr. Glasser's major premises is that "**All behavior is purposeful.**" That is, ALL of our behavior is our best attempt at the time, given the resources at our disposal (knowledge, skills, etc.) to meet our needs. Another way of putting it is all of our behavior is an attempt at making the real world conform to the pictures in our Quality World.

Most of the time we choose behaviors that Glasser terms organized behaviors*. These are behaviors that we are familiar with, that we have used before. For example, when I want to meet my need for fun, one of my organized behaviors is to go out to dinner with my wife and another couple. That is a behavior that has worked for me in the past.

If we do not have an organized behavior immediately available, or organized behaviors that have worked in the past are not working in the current situation, we are capable of figuring out new behaviors. Glasser terms this process reorganizing*; this is our creativity, which is always going on, whether we decide to use it or not.

According to Dr. Glasser all behavior is Total Behavior, made up of four components:

1. Acting
2. Thinking
3. Feeling
4. Physiology

All four components are present all the time, and we name our current behavior by the most obvious component. Like the wheels of a car, if one wheel changes direction or speed, the others follow.

For example, if I am jogging, the most obvious component is the acting component. But while I am jogging, I may be thinking a number of things: "What a beautiful day!" Or, "I love these new running shoes." Or, "I wonder if I can make it up this hill." I also am feeling something: exhilaration, possibly, or gladness, or maybe even a little fear at times. Simultaneously, my physiology is pumped up. My heart rate is up, my muscles are working, and I'm sweating. This would be my total jogging behavior. All four components are present, but we name the behavior after the most salient component, acting.

In contrast, a behavior named after the feeling component might be being angry. But while I am angry, I may be thinking, "How dare this person treat me this way!" I may be doing something like yelling or pacing. And my physiology would most likely include muscle tension and shallow breathing, among other things.

A behavior named after the thinking component is meditating. While I am meditating, my acting behavior would probably be sitting. My feeling component would be contentment, and my physiology would be slowed down.

Finally, a behavior named after the physiological component is shivering. While I'm shivering, I might be feeling frustrated. I might be thinking, "Why didn't I wear a coat?" And I might be doing anything I could

think of to get warmer, running in place, cuddling up to my wife, etc.

All four of these components are occurring all the time, and when we change one of the components, the other three change accordingly.

According to Glasser, we choose all of our behaviors. The component we have the most control over is our acting. The next most easily controlled component is our thinking. Therefore, if we want to change the way we are feeling emotionally or physically, the most effective thing to do is to change what we are doing. If, because of the situation, we can't change what we are doing, we can change what we are thinking.

For example, if I have experienced frustration most of the day, I may be feeling angry, my body may be tense, I may be thinking "I hate my job!" and I may be complaining about it to a coworker. The acting component of my behavior, complaining, may not be helping me feel better physically or emotionally. So if I change that component and, say, take a brisk walk, I will most likely change what I'm thinking, which will in turn help me feel better both emotionally and physically.

