

## Foreword

The title of this book is even more profound than it may appear at first. Our world is full of people who believe that their own existence is more important than that of others and this gives rise to friction, competition, control, conflict, suffering and even death. Joan's memory of the horrors of war give her a strong impetus towards replacing the type of psychology that fosters it. The alternative she offers is a psychology of personal freedom and happiness.

The message from Choice Theory Psychology is that we all matter, that no one person can control another, that any attempt to control others destroys the only way we can work together effectively and that is with a good relationship. As Joan points out, people who believe in controlling others and in being controlled create untold misery for themselves and those around them.

Joan sprinkles her text with real-life stories derived from her extensive counselling experience and these bring to life different aspects of Choice Theory psychology very well. She follows her brief outline of Choice Theory with a focus on specific aspects of relationships, on the qualities that are essential for relationships to survive in a healthy state.

A big attraction of this book, in my opinion, is that the author does not focus on any specific type of relationship. She herself writes that the ideas apply to all relationships between people, anything from romantic involvement to just sharing the same space. There is wonderful food for thought in these pages. The quality of our lives can be defined in terms of the quality of our relationships and this book succeeds in outlining ways to achieve this.

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## Introduction

“We are all the same important” is the title of a book I decided to write a long time ago. I wanted to base it on what I learned during the war years about people and the way they treated each other. My teaching years and studies in psychology added to my awareness of relationships and their importance. What I learned in those years influenced me strongly when I worked with people of all ages in my clinical counselling practice. A very high percentage of my clients, children as well as adults, were struggling getting along with the people they loved.

I have always been interested in relationships and how people manage them. This has something to do with the things I saw and experienced during World War 2. I was quite horrified and frightened as a child growing up in that period and I thought it was all wrong. To my mind there had to be another way. I decided that when I had grown up I would do something to “help people stop the fighting”. I wanted to know why they treated each other so badly. As I got older I realised that to gain that understanding I had to know more about human behaviour.

I studied psychology and counselling psychology. I was impressed with the work that Dr. William Glasser was doing. I based my work mainly on his ideas. In this book I have outlined

Dr. Glasser's theories. Dr. Glasser has written so many books and even in his earliest ones he mentioned the importance of good relationships. That is one of the reasons why I developed a deep respect for him.

It is with great sadness that I learned a few days ago that Dr. Glasser passed away late August 2013. He will be missed but his ideas live on.

In what you are about to read I mainly refer to his work and what I learned from my clients. I counselled people in all age groups.

My husband who is no longer alive and my children taught me a lot. I am always grateful for their support and their views on all kinds of matters. I love to talk with them. It would have been very useful if I had known about Dr. Glasser and his theories during my years as a young mother. I did my very best and bestowed all the love I could on them. I love my grandchildren just as much. I hope that my knowledge of Choice Theory was of benefit to them.

It was in fact a situation and a short talk I had with my grandson that led to the title of this book. The wording is grammatically not correct but he stated something so interesting that I asked him if I could use what he said. He gave me full permission as he is an adult now. He also told me that I could explain the event that resulted in the statement he made as a seven year old boy.

Our grandchildren came to South Australia to stay with us for a holiday and they were very excited to spend time with the family. Their uncles played games with the children. A few times I heard one of my sons ask my grandson to stop the fun



and games for a little while as he wanted to have a short rest with a coffee and something to eat. The child kept going and my son asked the same question patiently at least five times but he did not stop.

I heard what was happening. My son came to me and we discussed what might be the reason for the child's behaviour. At that point I decided to talk with my grandson. I asked him: "Would you mind if I ask you a question." He had no objections and I said: "Of all the people in this house and the ones who are staying here with us, who is important?". He replied: "We are all the same important". I thought that it was a great answer. My next question was: "So if people inform you that they want to stop the games for a while to have a coffee and a sandwich and you keep going, what are you telling them about their importance?" He answered: Well, I am only seven years old and I have not learned that yet."

Through some counselling I helped him to begin his learning that day. I never forgot his first answer though. It has become the title of my book. The first few chapters are about Choice Theory. I endeavoured to explain the concepts in such a way that people without prior knowledge would be able to understand them. At the same time I also tried to make the Choice Theory chapters interesting for people who trained in the ideas. My focus throughout the book including the beginning chapters was at all times on relationships including the relationship people have with themselves.

I hope that you like the book and that the ideas in it give you a better understanding of what I believe a needsatisfying relationship looks like.

Throughout the book you will find examples. Their purpose is to illustrate and clarify what I am writing about in a particular chapter. There is a list of examples in the beginning of the book. The list indicates in which chapter you will be able to find the ones you would like to read again.

The examples that relate to clients and counsellors are not about a particular person or counsellor. They involve a combination of many clients. Some I have put together based on life's situations and observations I have made. I also refer to my personal experiences. They are exactly as they occurred. My experiences motivated me to write this book.

It was my passion to share my views about better relationships. My views are based on what I learned about human behaviour in my study years and what I observed. However, the challenges I faced and had to cope with contributed to a very large degree to the contents of the book. It wasn't easy and that won't be any different for the readers of the book. Our experiences might be different but the struggles are the same. I hope that this book is a small contribution to help others move forward in their lives by making better choices. Some concepts I referred to a number of times because of their tremendous importance and the desire to highlight my reasoning.

There are many suggestions that you can incorporate into your every day life. The connecting habits offer a great starting point. I would like to encourage you to take a step at the time if you are willing to give it a go. I hope that the book will help you with all your relationships and that you will refresh your mind at times by reading various chapters for a second time.

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# 1. Choice Theory

**H**uman beings are social creatures. They love to talk, communicate, discuss, write, approach others and share experiences and opinions. Whatever they do to contact others, they have a desire to connect mostly because of their need to be loved, to give love and belong.

Yet, to relate to others, form and maintain needsatisfying relationships appears to be the most difficult thing to do in this world. It is one of the most challenging aspects of life. I believe that we are on this world to learn and progress towards higher levels of self-awareness and consciousness. We achieve this through our relationships with other people and also with ourselves. Relationships teach us how to love and be open to the love from others. In this book I am sharing what I have learned about what is helpful in building better relationships.

I enjoy watching a good film. There are ten films on my list of favourites. They are all about people and the way they treat themselves and others. A high number of films are about relationships. It shows that they matter!

I am not only thinking about relationships between two partners who share their lives. I am referring to all kinds of relationships for example those between parents and children, siblings, colleagues, nurses and doctors and their patients, older

people and society at large, teachers and their pupils, managers and their employees as well as relationships between very large groups of people.

There are groups of people from different racial backgrounds and/or different religious denominations. We may find these groups in many countries. This factor brings with it particular challenges. It is not hard to imagine how complicated matters are when we think about relationships between the nations of the world.

Over the ages progress has been made however there is still a great deal of violence, fighting, killing and torture. Nuclear and chemical weapons are being made at this very moment. It was believed by many people that the Second World War would be the end of all wars. At times there are hopeful signs as people's awareness and opinions are changing but the fighting and killing and all of the above relentlessly continue. There is intolerance. Empathy, understanding and compassion for the wellbeing of others are often hard to find.

What I believe is that Choice Theory explains why human beings behave the way they do. It was developed by Dr. William Glasser based on his ideas and concepts put forward by William T. Powers who wrote "Behavior: The Control of Perception." Choice Theory is a theory that underlines the importance of relationships but emphasises that the only person people can control is themselves. Attempts to control others on the whole do not succeed. They are likely to destroy the relationship. This is reinforced by Lao-Tzu who stated that

If I keep from meddling with people,  
they take care of themselves.

If I keep from commanding people,  
they behave themselves.

If I keep from preaching at people,  
they improve themselves.

If I keep from imposing on people,  
they become themselves.

It follows that when individuals want better relationships they need to focus on themselves and not on other people. Choice Theory therefore is an internal control psychology. We have to go inward and rely on our values to help us look for ways of handling the challenges.

Life is so much easier if we can focus on ourselves and learn to consider our own behaviour and look for options that are helpful. The behaviour choices we decide to resort to must fit our values. Choices that are useful and lead to feeling better help the relationship with ourselves and others.

The connecting habits as proposed by Dr Glasser provide us with important tools to do that. They are **listening, supporting, encouraging, respecting, accepting, trusting and negotiating differences**.

I have included some questions that might be helpful.

Do you practise the connecting habits in your self-talk? What would it be like to include the connecting habits in the manner you relate to yourself? How would things be different if you could do that? Are you willing to give it a go? If you are willing

to do that, please take one habit at the time and practise that for a while before choosing another one.

If we make the choice to use the connecting habits we might support the other party to make better choices as well, because we are acting as a model. It is not always a guarantee but it helps to a great degree. At least we are most likely coming closer to the person we want to be. That feels good. By using the connecting habits the underlying message is trust. It conveys to the other person or persons that you can work it out together.

Often people become very angry when values clash. Anger nearly always means: What about me? To make the choice to show anger in an aggressive manner, either verbally and/or physically hides fear (fear of not being heard or not being important) which is the opposite of trust. Loving is trusting.

There is nothing wrong with anger as such. It is a message to ourselves that at a particular moment we are not feeling very good about the situation we are facing. We can acknowledge our feelings and decide how we will respond. Difficulties begin when we make unhelpful choices.

Particularly if the choices we make involve the disconnecting habits. They are:

**Criticising, blaming, complaining, nagging, punishing, threatening and rewarding to control.**

If we are upset with someone or more than one person we can approach them and work it out together without using the disconnecting habits. I will discuss them in detail in other chapters of this book.

In addition to not relying on the unhelpful habits when you want to discuss a problem you are having with someone, you could begin your wording with “I”. I have observed that most people begin with “You”. By beginning with “You” the other person might feel attacked and get very angry, particularly if the person or the concerned parties are inclined to be verbally aggressive.

When you are starting with “You” you are probably saying things like - You never acknowledge me - You said something very insulting to me - You are condescending towards me, how dare you - You don’t care - You are slamming doors again – You are criticising me. The language people use might be far more colourful than what I have written.

By beginning with “You” you are indicating a dependency. This conveys the message that in order to feel better about the situation, other(s) need to change otherwise it is just too difficult. It means giving other people the control over your wellbeing.

By starting with “I” you are focussing on yourself. After all if you are having difficulties with somebody else’s behaviour, you will have to work out what your approach is going to be. The other person(s) might not be aware of what is happening. In their eyes there is no problem. They might also believe that there is nothing wrong with shouting, criticising or slamming doors.

I strongly suggest that you give them information about how you perceive the story from your point of view, hence the importance of starting with “I”. This entails that you emphasise that the only thing you can do is share what is happening



for you and that you want to come to a satisfactory resolution of the struggles you are having with this person (or persons).

To start with “I” means saying things like - I want to let you know that I have a real problem with your criticism of me all the time – It would be great if you could show some respect – I don’t like it when you are shouting at me - I don’t think that slamming doors is very helpful.

People who make these kind of statements are not aggressive. They are assertive. Being assertive indicates that you are informing the other person(s) how you see it without resorting to any type of aggression. The opposite of aggression is submission. Being aggressive is not helpful when relating to other people. Neither is being submissive.

When people use submission to relate to others they are firstly harming the relationship they have with themselves. They are reducing their own importance. Secondly the hidden message behind their behaviour is that they are teaching the other person that he or she is absolutely dominant. It could destroy the relationship in the long run.

Anne Kotzman wrote a book a long time ago. It was published in 1989. Its title was “Listen to Me – Listen to You”. I remember very well that she referred at length to what we communicate to others by being submissive, aggressive and assertive. The underlying message that individuals communicate when they are submissive is that they are totally unimportant compared to the person they are addressing. If submissive people change their behaviour into aggression when they are engaged in a conversation with another person, they are communicating that they are higher on the ladder of importance. None of these choices enhance the quality of relationships.

Far more helpful is to use an assertive approach. It signals to others that as people “We are all the same important”.

In relation to the above it is also wise to realise that when another person becomes very angry with you or is very irritable and says hurtful comments that it might have little to do with you but that it relates to them. In that case it is entirely their problem. If you become angry in return, their problem becomes yours as well. What I have observed is that the way others behave mostly relates to their issues.

People might also become verbally aggressive because they are dealing with a totally different event that does not involve you at all which could be something that happened at work or e.g. at their basket ball club. So when this person comes home you might become the target of their anger and perhaps their insults while in fact you had nothing to do with the situation.

Based on my experience it is not helpful to let the matter affect you. The way to do that is to keep strong boundaries. It is possible to ask the person to clarify what is happening. Another option is to explain to that person that you are willing to talk about things but that you would like to wait until the other person has calmed down. You could say that you have a problem with insults.

Always finish with - How can we work this out? - So what do you think about my suggestion? - What can we do? - What is your story? - How do you see it? - How can we prevent this from happening again?

By saying something that is respectful and understanding and by asking the above mentioned questions, you are suggesting looking at the future. To approach a problem according to the

way I described it, is far more needsatisfying than disagreements, arguing and making unhelpful statements.

### Summary

1. Choice theory is based on internal control psychology.
2. It entails that people are internally motivated to respond to situations. They are driven by the basic needs. The next chapter discusses the needs in detail.
3. Choice theory teaches that the only person people can control is themselves.
4. To attempt to control other individuals might eventually lead to the destruction of the relationships.
5. Dr. Glasser suggests in many of his books that through the use of the connecting habits people can work on their relationships. He proposes that they are a tool to help them create better and peaceful choices for the future.
6. The connecting habits are listening, supporting, encouraging, trusting, accepting, respecting and always negotiating differences.
7. The disconnecting habits are criticising, blaming, complaining, nagging, punishing, threatening and rewarding in order to control.