

CONFESSIONS OF A RECOVERING EXTERNAL CONTROL FREAK

A few years ago, I participated in the William Glasser Institute Choice Theory training. The trainers and participants were engaging and thought-provoking. The excitement of learning something new that could have such a powerful impact on the lives of my students was deeply satisfying. In addition, I felt thrilled by the concepts I discovered. I especially appreciated that Choice Theory recognizes we are all internally motivated and that the only person I can control is myself. In its philosophy, I perceived the issues of the Great Controversy—God guarding our freedom of choice and Satan using any means to externally control and rob us of our freedom to choose.

As with most people, I have experienced relationships that went awry. As tension and distrust build, friends and even loved ones can push us out of their quality world. In retaliation, we are tempted to remove them from our quality world as well. When this recently happened to me, to use an ocean analogy, it was as if my relationship with an important person in my life was battered and storm-tossed and about to be jettisoned. As this occurred, I must admit that I began to revert to my external control mode of thinking, resorting to criticizing, blaming, nagging, threatening, and punishing.

The difficult situation to which I refer has been resolved, yet it feels as if I am just coming out of the tempest. I still feel drained by the struggle and so beaten down that it's difficult to recall the happiness that accompanied the first part of my journey with the William Glasser Institute. Nevertheless, something within demands that I revisit what I experienced and learned in the Choice Theory training sessions and let it become a part of my restoration.

Picture Removed

BY KAREN NICOLA

Confession

And so I write this article as one who is keenly aware of the need to internalize Choice Theory in order to ensure that it will produce an authentic change in our lives, and thus positively affect those closest to us, including our students. What I am sharing with you is something I wish someone had shared with me when I began my journey. I realize now that, before I could apply an internal control philosophy to my classroom, I first had to embrace it personally and apply it in my own life.

A Professional or a Person?

Before being professionals, teachers are people. And for us to practice Choice Theory effectively, we must first integrate its concepts into our personal experience. We can “use” Choice Theory only when we “are” Choice Theory. Attempting to be on the outside what we are not on the inside is a frustrating and ultimately hopeless task. Adding to our frustration is the fact that others, including our students, see through this inconsistency.

Authenticity is a quality for which we should all strive. Therefore, I want to invite you to imagine yourself in a comfortable place. Let the demands of your profession melt away like ice on a summer day. Lock up the “shoulds,” the “oughts,” and the “musts.” Stop worrying about the piles of

uncorrected papers and the lesson plans you have to create. They will all be there later. Relax.

Choice Theory and Reality Therapy From the Inside Out

Now, think about the kind of person you want to be by asking yourself a few questions: Do I ride a different ethical or relational horse by day than by night? Would I be more satisfied if what I do in my personal life extended to my classroom? Do I more readily practice the Seven Deadly Habits or the Seven Caring Habits? When did I last acknowledge my own freedom and power of choice? How often do I criticize, blame, reward, or punish myself? How do I get Choice Theory to be as natural as breathing?

I have at times struggled over the “use” of Choice Theory. Some years ago, my children would say accusingly, “You’re using Choice Theory on me, Mom!” I hated that, because my actions, which were supposed to eliminate coercion and manipulation, were being perceived as coercive and manipulative! They were right; sometimes I used Choice Theory to get them to do something I wanted them to do, or be somebody I wanted them to be. But that’s not Choice Theory’s fault. External control habits are hard to break. Recently, I have begun to recognize that Choice Theory is a way of understanding and strengthening human relation-



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ships. I realize now that before I could practice on others, I had to first practice on myself.

When you come across a classroom management idea, are you willing to test it on yourself first? When you hear of a new teaching strategy, are you eager to see how it works in your own life? To be honest, I would have to answer, No! Most of the time I want to jump in and “use” this new tool on my students because *I’m* convinced it will help *them* achieve what *I* have in mind for *them*. And this is exactly why Choice Theory must be internalized and practiced first on ourselves, because at its core, the theory says that you can only control yourself. And our Christian faith reminds us that even self-control is most successful through the influence of the Holy Spirit. So, with God’s help, why not start with yourself, right now?

First, consider the *seven deadly habits*: criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and bribing or rewarding to control. Ask yourself a few honest questions. Which of the deadly habits do you use against yourself? In what setting? Do these habits bring about the changes you are seeking in your life? If the deadly habits don’t work in your own experience, then why do you use them on others? How much do you want to be in control over others rather than over your own self?

Because external control is foundational to most people’s upbringing and culture, we naturally use the seven deadly habits in our thinking and behavior. Force, coercion, and manipulation are all natural methods of motivating ourselves, as well as others. So what do we do when we really want to stop criticizing, blaming, nagging, and threatening? Honestly facing the damage these behaviors cause to our self-image, as well as in our relationships with others, is a good place to start. This honest self-appraisal can then lead us to adopt a better plan.

Getting Started

According to Choice Theory, the better plan works like this—when we are willing to first work on personal self-control, we are better able to work with others, and thus enlarge our sphere of influence. I have found that beginning with a “do” instead of a “don’t” statement brings better results. Here are a few examples:

- I will respect myself by admitting my mistake and

making a plan for improvement.

- I will listen to myself to learn what I really need.
- I will support myself by choosing a fun or other need-satisfying activity each day.
- I will practice acceptance without blaming myself, and make wrongs right.
- I will respect myself because I am made in the image of God.
- I will encourage myself by being thankful for the skills God has entrusted to me.



- I will believe that I am capable of being all that God calls me to become.

Emphasizing the Positive

State what you want instead of what you don’t want, such as, “I want to stop criticizing,” rather than “I *don’t* want to criticize.” Another way to describe the thinking shift: Exchange a deadly habit with a caring one, such as, “I want to become more supportive of myself rather than criticizing myself.” Make a plan for incorporating self-support along with the other seven caring habits. Sharing the plan with someone you trust will help hold you accountable. Remember, you are doing this to internalize these concepts, not to manipulate others. I found this shift in thinking to be very liberating.

I like the way Ellen White puts it: “As the leaven, when mingled with the meal, works from within outward, so it is by the renewing of the heart that the grace of God works to transform the life. No mere external change is sufficient to

bring us into harmony with God. There are many who try to reform by correcting this or that bad habit, and they hope in this way to become Christians, but they are beginning in the wrong place. Our first work is with the heart."¹

This heart work helps us achieve the powerful effects of practicing the *seven caring habits*: supporting, encouraging, listening, accepting, trusting, respecting, and negotiating differences. These habits outline what God designed for us to experience in healthy and healing relationships. Ideas found in Choice Theory have helped me understand more clearly how God designed and protects my freedom of choice. He is eager for me to act on my freedom in positive ways so that I am more inclined to extend this attitude to my family, my friends, and my students. As a result, my behavior comes from an internal value, rather than the hope of using ideas as a professional tool. As we gain personal self-management and self-control skills by applying caring habits toward ourselves, we can more genuinely adopt them in our relationships with others. It might be said that we are loving others as we love ourselves.²

We experience deeper satisfaction and happiness when our relationships are healthy and positive. With this understanding in place, I can begin to ask myself questions that enable me to change the way I treat those close to me.

- Is what I'm about to say going to help build my relationship with _____? (fill in the name)
- Do I respect this person's freedom of choice and accept that he or she is responsible for the consequences?
 - Am I really listening to understand?
 - How open am I to negotiating differences in order to build the relationship?
 - How do I demonstrate support to _____?
- What kind of encouragement would be most helpful for _____?
- How can I negotiate our differences in such a way that _____ knows he or she is supported and accepted?

Helping Others Self-Evaluate

Our 20-year-old daughter was headed to Australia as a student missionary. How-

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ever, between the time she accepted her assignment and her departure date, several other important events occurred. She felt deeply torn about going away for 10 months. She had many close relationships that seemed to depend on her being in the States. However, she felt she couldn't say No to her student missionary agreement. She was at the point of feeling physically ill. One afternoon, I shared with her that no one was forcing her to go.

"But you already bought my ticket," she blurted, sounding desperate.



“Even a ticket is not controlling your staying or leaving,” I reminded her.

As we explored her freedom of choice, she decided to get more information. And over the next few days, nearly all of her needs were met by some means of negotiation. When she finally got on the plane, despite the tears, she knew she was going because she had decided to, and for no other reason. She felt empowered by her choice.

The WDEP³ acronym stands for a method of thinking in Choice Theory terms. It is a helpful tool as we think through what we want to do or help others clarify their thinking. The WDEP method can guide people to make better choices. As I practice this myself, I find I feel more confident. The acronym stands for the following:

- What do you **Want**? (Think about what you really want or need.)
- What are you **Doing**? (Make an honest, detailed assessment of your behavior.)
- Evaluate possible changes and where each choice might lead. (Is your present behavior working? Is it getting you closer to what you want or need?)
- Plan a new way of behaving that gets you closer to what you want.

Admittedly, there were times when I have “used” the WDEP method on my children or my husband, who resented it. I thought I had the solution to their situation and would be their guide by “using” these steps. Looking back now, my behavior seems quite manipulative, critical, and controlling. I understand that I need to be sensitive to other people’s problems by choosing to listen and to understand their needs. My “solutions” may or may not be sought after. They might not want me to be their guide.

As I practice the steps during self-evaluation, I cease “using” the method, and it actually becomes a part of my internal paradigm. When guided by the Holy Spirit, my self-evaluation brings results, changes, repentance, and an openness to a new way of thinking. As I apply this approach to my classroom setting, my students gain confidence. They want to take ownership for their successes. Thinking this way about problems and solutions provides a wonderful opportunity for students to discover personal success strategies. I am simply the facilitator.

A New Start

Our family, friends, colleagues, and students can benefit as we share our discoveries about Choice Theory. At the same time, it’s all right to say we don’t get it 100 percent of the time yet. I wish I had done much more practicing on myself before attempting to “use” Choice Theory on my family and students. The good news is that I can, at any time, choose to think and act differently. When I choose relationship-building options, everyone wins.

I’m ready to set sail again and rebuild the damaged relationship. I have regained strength by practicing the principles of Choice Theory, which states that “we choose everything we do, including the misery we feel. Other people can

neither make us miserable nor make us happy. All we can get from them or give to them is information. We choose all our actions and thoughts and, indirectly, almost all our feelings and much of our physiology.”⁴ These principles have given me the insight and inspiration to take responsibility for my own choices and to set others free to live within the confines or the freedom of their choices.

Mrs. White once wrote, “Let it never be forgotten that the teacher must be what he desires his pupils to *become*.”⁵ As a choice theorist instead of an external control freak, I want my students to be happy and free to reach their potential. I want to be authentic in living my potential as well. I want to treat others with respect, trusting they will exercise their freedom of choice to the best of their ability. I want to be an encouraging listener as I support others in their efforts to learn, keeping in mind that I control only my own thoughts and actions. Therefore, all I can offer is information with a caring attitude if I want to build relationships.

I’d want to be like Fred Rogers in the children’s TV show *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* by being the same person in my personal life as I want to be in my professional life. Taking off his shoes and putting on his sweater didn’t make him kind and wonderful—he was that way already. May the threshold of our hearts be the place where we become authentic and able to internalize Choice Theory.

Here are a few ideas that may help:

- Read often from Choice Theory authors.
- Regularly write your own WDEP.
- Meet with others who are practicing Choice Theory.
- Put up charts or other visual reminders where you can see them often.
- Practice role-playing.
- Allow Scripture to clarify and expand your personal application of Choice Theory. ☞



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