

## **The Reality and Choice of the Difficult Questions in Dating**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Examples provided in this paper are based upon a real client. Names and facts have been changed to protect any potential identity discovery without changing the relevant discussion points.

At times, the art and science of life coaching can be viewed as the art of helping a person attain a goal in either the material or immaterial paradigms. Sometimes healthy and well functioning people need assistance. Providing that assistance may require that one have difficult conversations.

### **OPENING QUESTIONS FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

Judy Ringer provides a great starting point for having these conversations.<sup>1</sup> She advises one to ask the following questions before engaging:

1. What is your purpose for having the conversation? What do you hope to accomplish? What would be an ideal outcome? Watch for hidden purposes. You may think you have honorable goals, like educating an employee or increasing connection with your teen, only to notice that your language is excessively critical or condescending. You think you want to support, but you end up punishing. Some purposes are more useful than others. Work on yourself so that you enter the conversation with a supportive purpose.
2. What assumptions are you making about this person's intentions? You may feel intimidated, belittled, ignored, disrespected, or marginalized, but be cautious about assuming that this was the speaker's intention. Impact does not necessarily equal intent.
3. What "buttons" of yours are being pushed? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? Take a look at your "backstory," as they say in the movies. What personal history is being triggered? You may still have the conversation, but you'll go into it knowing that some of the heightened emotional state has to do with you.
4. How is your attitude toward the conversation influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horribly difficult, it probably will be. If you truly believe that whatever happens, some good will come of it, that will likely be the case. Try to adjust your attitude for maximum effectiveness.
5. Who is the opponent? What might he be thinking about this situation? Is he aware of the problem? If so, how do you think he perceives it? What are his needs and fears? What solution do you think he would suggest? Begin to reframe the opponent as partner.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.judyringer.com/resources/articles/we-have-to-talk-a-stepbystep-checklist-for-difficult-conversations.php>

6. What are your needs and fears? Are there any common concerns? Could there be?

7. How have you contributed to the problem? How has the other person?

Upon review of these questions, one may discover that the questions also provide a framework to help a client with their goals. Truly answering these questions asks for significant awareness by the client. In coordination with the guidance of Reality Therapy and Choice Theory one may find answering some or all of these questions the touchstone to a self-derived understanding how to attain those goals.

### **REALITY THERAPY AND CHOICE THEORY**

Briefly, reality therapy is an approach to psychotherapy and counseling. Developed by William Glasser in the 1960s, it focuses on what Glasser calls psychiatry's three Rs: realism, responsibility, and right-and-wrong, rather than symptoms of mental disorders.<sup>2</sup>

Reality therapy maintains that the individual is suffering from a socially universal human condition rather than a mental illness. It is in the unsuccessful attainment of basic needs that a person's behavior moves away from the norm. Since fulfilling essential needs is part of a person's present life, reality therapy does not concern itself with a client's past. Neither does this type of therapy deal with unconscious mental processes. In these ways reality therapy is very different from other forms of psychotherapy.<sup>3</sup>

The reality therapy approach to counseling and problem-solving focuses on the here-and-now actions of the client and the ability to create and choose a better future. Typically, clients seek to discover what they really want and how they are currently choosing to behave in order to achieve these goals.<sup>4</sup>

Reality therapy maintains that the core problem of psychological distress is that one or more essential needs are not being met thereby causing one to act irresponsibly. The client assumes responsibility for their behavior. Following which, one focuses on realistic goals in order to remedy the real life issues that are causing discomfort.

William Glasser's choice theory is composed of four aspects; thinking, acting, feeling, and physiology. We can directly choose our thoughts and our actions; we have great difficulty in directly choosing our feelings and our physiology (sweaty palms, headaches, nervous tics, racing pulse, etc.).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Glasser, William (1965). Reality therapy. A new approach to psychiatry. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>3</sup> Lane, Lara Lynn. "Reality therapy". *Encyclopedia of Psychology*. FindArticles.com. 24 October 2011. *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed. Gale Group, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Glasser, W. (1985). Take effective control of your life. New York: Harper & Row.

<sup>5</sup> Glasser, W. (1998). Choice theory: a new psychology of personal freedom. New York: HarperCollins.

## APPLICATION

By applying the theories briefly enumerated above, a rather intense but ideally fruitful process may unfold. The precursor questions are modified along with application to help clients. The below case helps demonstrate this assertion.

### Susan - Dating and the Community

One client, Susan, a woman above normal marrying age in the frum community, wanted to discuss dating challenges in her community. Susan was halachicly very knowledgeable but hashkafically uncentered. She kept kashrus in her apartment to the highest standard and knew the “why” for all decisions. She was meticulous in Shabbat observance. Susan however preferred to ignore all tzniut. Based upon conversations with mutual acquaintances, Susan did not dress in a manner fitting her goals even if she were living in a totally secular environment.<sup>6</sup> In an open modern orthodox community, Susan was still experiencing difficulties. As a second challenge beyond tzniut, Susan was also known as somebody who “had to be right”. She was seen as argumentative and difficult at times. Susan had empathy for others but often failed to demonstrate enough for connection.

The new questions for our discussion became:

1. What do you hope to accomplish with our work? What would be an ideal outcome? What is your purpose for the outcome?

Susan asserted that she wanted to find a husband, a life partner. Her ideal outcome would be healthy dating options with men desirable to her. This initial sharing was our beginning. The coaching methodology was to focus forward. Susan was lonely and felt it also right to be married.

2. What assumptions are you making about this person’s intentions when you are asked on a date? How do you feel when asked out? How do you feel when a second date does not appear?

Susan shared that she often could not tell if she was being asked out for serious intentions or just “for fun”. She did not want to be “that girl” anymore and often was in doubt. Susan explained that she was guarded and could not be herself due to men’s expectations and had to wait and see to be more natural, even if a “good girl”.

3. What “buttons” of yours are being pushed in the dating world? Are you more emotional than the situation warrants? Take a look at your “backstory,” as it impacts the way others interact with you. What personal history is being triggered?

Susan realized that prospectively she was changing who she was and what she wanted but that others would not intuitively know this fact. Susan had to acknowledge that progress was a process and not necessarily solved on a communal level in one day. Just saying this seemed to lighten Susan’s mood during one discussion. She removed

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<sup>6</sup> This paper will neither criticize nor validate any hashkafic stance. Any discussion is brought solely due its relationship with a client goal.

the quick fix expectation and engaged in a more realistic expectation. She decided to be less angry when encountering people who treated her as the “old Susan” and act in a manner fitting with her new goal.

4. How is your attitude toward dating influencing your perception of it? If you think this is going to be horrible, how much more likely will it be so?

Susan agreed that perhaps entering into meeting people, whether for dating or not, with anger present would most likely be picked up by others. She also realized that she was looking for the negative instead of the positive and perhaps viewing others out of balance of who they really were. Thus she was sabotaging meetings prior to them fully unfolding. Susan also also acknowledged that

5. Who is your ideal date? What are his needs and fears? What solution do you think he would suggest to become your partner?

Susan expressed the desire for an ideal date pretty clearly. He was to be younger than she, good looking, observant but open minded and not criticize her. He was to be bright but she unconsciously was also saying “not challenge her”. She described him as wanting a wife as full equal. When we discussed what she saw as his fears/needs she acknowledged that perhaps he may worry that she would lose her looks and that perhaps he might want somebody who was supportive and not always wanting to be right. Perhaps this man had many obligations and that a relationship needed to be with somebody who understood that. Susan acknowledged that a good relationship involved a man who wanted to communicate and that she would also have to communicate and that perhaps both of them would search for compromise and balance.

6. What are your needs and fears? Could others have these same challenges?

Please see question 5.

7. How do we resolve to move forward?

Susan started very angry and uncomfortable with having to change for somebody else. Nobody would tell her what to do or how to behave. Through discussing her approach to meeting people in general Susan began to identify that she engaged with “a chip on her shoulder” and was sabotaging her own goals.

We assigned homework based upon awareness and openness. Susan tried to pay attention as much as possible to her interactions with people and whether she was non-verbally communicating they way she wanted to communicate. She also worked on trying to pay attention to how other people were reacting non-verbally. After about three weeks Susan advised that when she could “turn down the intensity dial” when meeting with people, they visibly appeared to relax as well. This resulted in more invites and dating “suggestions”.

Susan also began to work on identifying how she could maintain her freedom of expression in dress but also change her outward message to others in a way consistent with her goals. This is ongoing, but Susan has been observing those she views as

successful but like minded and taken hints from all. Susan is still fighting the view that she should be able to do whatever she wants and that the community should accept that. We have made the most inroad to this issue with acknowledging how Susan might view some characteristics of others negatively and not want to associate with them for that reason. At the time of this paper, this is an ongoing process.

On a positive note, Susan has acknowledged and continues working on the goal of being more positive company. She realizes that being “right” all of the time does not necessarily result in a happier life. Susan appears to be more thoughtful before engaging in dialogue that could result in an argument. At the time of this paper, this is still an ongoing process but Susan advises that her small achievements definitely have had a positive impact.

Susan is also working on trying to identify the qualities of a mate that

## **CONCLUSION**

By engaging Susan with what was originally a set of questions to undertake before engaging in difficult conversation, I was able to help her actively engage in her goal attainment. Modifying the questions to fit the goals, using reality therapy approach, we were able to discuss the goals in light of solution focused approach. Susan is an ongoing client, but by staying focused on her interactions, she is making progress toward her goals.