

Make Every Session Count: How Does Therapy Help?

From Illusion to Reality



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From Illusion to Reality

REALITY FOR EACH of us is influenced by what other people tell us: "Your father is a good man." "You know, your mother really does love you." "I really want to spend more time with you, honey, but I have a lot of work to do." "I'm doing this for your own good." "Of course I love you. I don't have to *tell* you...you should *know* it!"

Views of reality are also shaped by injunctions: "Don't rock the boat," "Don't be so sensitive," "I should like my job; it pays well," "I shouldn't complain; others have it a lot worse than I do."

Some mental health professionals believe that this kind of thinking occurs in the conscious and logical part of the mind. This external view of reality (beliefs told to you by others) tends to dominate conscious awareness and constitutes what we will call "Version One" of reality. Sometimes Version One may be accurate; sometimes not.

On another level, we may perceive, think about, and respond to the world in a very different way. This level is based more on direct personal experience, intuitions, sensations and feelings—a more immediate, gut-level response to what's happening in the moment. These perceptions and responses have little to do with what we have been told by others to think or believe. Rather they come naturally from within the self—a type of inner truth. We refer to this internal view as "Version Two."

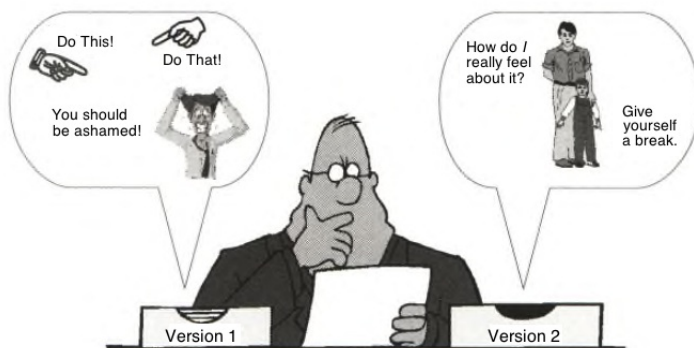
"Version One" of reality (beliefs told to you by others) tends to dominate conscious awareness... "Version Two" is based on direct personal experiences, intuitions, feelings.

Versions One and Two may differ. Years ago, during her first menstrual period, Beth complained to her mother of painful cramping. Her mother responded, "You're too young

to have a period!" The young girl was now confronted with conflicting views of reality: Mom's view ("You are not having a period") and her own view ("I hurt"). A self-confident child might say, "Mom, you're wrong!" but many children will accept their mother's version of truth, and ignore the reality of their own experience.

The internal reality of physical pain, emotions and needs can be ignored by thinking things like: "I'm making a big deal out of nothing," or "It's not that bad," or "Mom must know what's really happening." Or you can deny your feelings by blocking them from awareness—either partially or completely—leaving you out of touch with your inner reality.

Recall Shawna's story from the previous chapter. At first she didn't even notice her anger toward Tim. She just felt upset, afraid and tearful. For her, Version One meant, "Tim is a good man. He says he loves me. It could be worse." In therapy she began to listen more carefully to her inner experience, and gradually became aware of her Version Two: "He's rarely at home. There is little intimacy. I feel empty, unhappy, and angry. He says 'I love you,' but his behavior tells a different story."



Discovering the truth about her relationship with Tim brought Shawna closer to objective reality. Though she knew Version One was fashioned on empty promises, words, and her own strong hopes, she wanted desperately to believe it. But it wasn't true. As she talked and explored her feelings since beginning therapy sessions, Version One faded and gave way to her real feelings. Tim may have had good intentions and sincerely believed that his words and promises of love were genuine. However, the bottom-line reality for Shawna was Version Two. She didn't like it, and it hurt, but it was real.

Check It Out!

Here are a couple of "reality checks" you can do to promote your own growth and emotional healing:

- *Question your own personal Version Ones views of important others* (parents, spouses, relatives, friends), *world views* ("The world is fair," "Bad things don't happen to good people"), and *guidelines for living* ("Don't be emotional," "Don't be so sensitive," "Don't get angry").

- *Pay attention to your direct experience*—inner reactions, sensation, longings, and emotions. Don't deny what you know is true.

Facing the truth often means pain...

But doing so allows you to heal and grow!

"The Truth Shall Make You Free"

The Biblical saying is proven every day by patients in therapy. Your truth cannot be defined or dictated from without, but must be discovered from within. Brief therapy can help.

When you make time to really talk about your thoughts, feelings, and other inner experiences, one outcome is often an increased awareness of inner truths. "My childhood was not happy." "My father didn't truly show me love." "My job isn't gratifying." "My mother hurt me." "I feel a lack of closeness in my marriage." Such discoveries both hurt and help. You must face and grieve the loss of illusions (for example, the illusion of a happy childhood or a meaningful marriage).

Ultimately, Version Two may be okay. You may start to see your partner for who they really are. Maybe that's all right, maybe not. Accurate awareness may ignite open conflict or promote problem solving in a relationship; it can lead to marital counseling or even to divorce. But increased awareness of inner truths may result in less confusion and a stronger sense of self.

Within each person there are many "truths," so the approach is not aimed at finding "one truth," but the discovery of all your beliefs, needs, and emotions. It's a lifelong process. As you begin to clarify these aspects of yourself, you can sort out who you are, figure out what problems you want to tackle, and feel more solid about the actions you choose to take.

Brief therapy may be your most valuable resource as you find your way.