Personal Reality (Inner Reality) vs. Real Reality (Outer Reality): The Essence of All Relationships

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**Personal Reality – How we see the world**

Our personal concept of reality –who we are, how things work, what is actual – is based on three things:

1. biology and genetics: what we can perceive, how we process perceptions/sensations, how our brains and bodies are “wired”
2. what we’ve experienced
3. what we have accepted as true from outside sources (subject to how we have determined the trustworthiness of these sources)

Reality is larger than any or all of these; our personal reality is always going to be only a part of a larger “real” reality.

Because there are always individual variations in all three of the above components, OUR PERSONAL REALITY IS ALWAYS UNIQUE, no matter how many elements of it we share with others.

HOWEVER, since we ALL create our personal concept of reality in the same way, EACH PERSON’S PERSONAL REALITY IS EQUALLY VALID.

That said, we don’t exist in isolation. Because of that we also have a concept of reality that I call “shared outer reality.” This is generally what we use as the standard for measuring whether something is real or not.

**Shared Outer Reality vs. Real Reality**

Shared outer reality is ALSO not “real reality.” In different times and different cultures (and subcultures) the accepted concept of what is/was real has varied tremendously. EACH CULTURE HAS BELIEVED THAT ITS CONCEPT OF REALITY WAS THE “TRUE” REALITY. Each reality had explanations for how the world works and what our individual role/purpose was in it.

**Conclusions**

Two extremely helpful conclusions to take away from this are:

1. **although my concept of reality is firmly based on my biology, experiences, and trustworthy sources, it may in fact NOT be “real” reality – even if my culture also thinks it is; and**
2. **it is possible to have no defects of genetics, experiences, or sources and still come up with a different concept of reality than someone else**.

**Realities and Relationships**

Why is this so important? Because a great deal of relationship problems occur due to the belief that “MY REALITY IS THE ONLY REAL REALITY” and that other people must or should see things the same way I do.

How does this play out? Here are some typical kinds of statements:

* “Don’t be stupid – that’s not the way things work.”
* “What, are you crazy? Everyone knows that’s not right.”
* “How can you say/believe that? Can’t you think/see? (Your perceptions/feelings/thoughts are defective!) What’s wrong with you?”
* “My spouse is so dense/ignorant/silly/pathetic/emotional/overly rational – he/she seems unable to see how things really are.”

And similar…

If the existence of alternate but equally validly created concepts of reality is NOT accepted, the outcomes are usually one of the following:

1. BOTH PARTIES feel the other person has a defective view of reality, and stubbornly and obstinately refuses to “accept reality” the way it really is.
2. ONE PERSON decides that the other person “MUST BE RIGHT”, usually because the other person is so adamant that they’re right, and the first person isn’t so dogmatic, or has self-doubts. The person who “gives in” essentially comes to distrust their own ability to determine what is real. This creates or exacerbates self-esteem and dependency problems.
3. BOTH PEOPLE undercut or ignore the other person’s actions, most often secretly. Examples: “I know Dad cut off your allowance, but here, take this cash and don’t let him know.” or “I know you said we should buy the minivan, but since I knew you were being unrealistic I went ahead and found this terrific deal on a pickup truck. I saved us thousands of dollars!”

**My belief and observations over many years of providing therapy is that recognizing and respecting that we may have different but equally validly created realities is essential to having effective close relationships.**

A caveat: “Equally validly created” doesn’t mean equally appropriate or useful. It only acknowledges that other people’s beliefs about reality are almost certainly as appropriately come to as your own. Even if they appear to you to be limited, rigid, culturally inappropriate, or “crazy.” Even if they aren’t the beliefs most people hold. Acknowledging that allows the relationship to retain RESPECT for each other, and fosters the climate needed to create a relationship reality (discussed later) that works for both persons. After starting there THEN one can begin exploring what “makes most sense” for the relationship in the current situation.

I have found this to work even in cases where the other person was clearly having actual psychotic symptoms. And no, that probably does not describe your spouse, friend or partner.

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