Responsivity

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Abstract

Responsivity is a process that involves thinking about feelings and acting responsibly to meet one's own needs and to respond to the needs of others. This article describes an internal responsive process and the seven responsive initiators that are used to involve others in one's own caretaking and in responding to others. In addition, a responsivity contract is presented.

Responsivity, an internal and external process for meeting one's own needs and for responding to others, was originally termed *reactivity* (Garcia, 1982). However, reactivity often connotes passivity, acting only in response to another person's stimulus. Responsivity, on the other hand, reflects the way in which the process actively involves feeling, thinking, and acting appropriately and effectively in meeting one's own needs and in responding to others.

Internal responsivity is an intrapsychic process that involves being aware of discomfort and acting to experience relief. External responsivity is a communication process involving others in meeting one's own needs and in responding to others.

Internal Responsivity

Internal responsivity is based on the understanding that a mentally healthy person is one who feels, thinks, and acts responsibly and effectively most of the time (Garcia, 1982). The internal responsivity process involves sensing, thinking, acting, and experiencing relief (Figure 1).

These four steps are used in solving personal discomforts to one degree or another of effectiveness and/or appropriateness, depending on a person's internal permission to feel, to think, to act, and to experience relief. The process of responding to discomfort is often spontaneous and requires little thinking. For example, a person sitting outside will usually, without much thinking, shake off a mosquito that lands on his or her arm. The process involves awareness of the mosquito landing on the arm (Step 1: sensing discomfort), the response of shaking the arm to remove the mosquito (Steps 2 and 3: thinking and acting), and the experiencing of relief (Step 4). More extensive thinking is activated as discomfort persists or escalates. If another, maybe even several mosquitoes, land on the person's arms, the process is recycled, involving additional thinking. This time, more options may need consideration: going indoors, spraying insect repellant on oneself, or entering another level of consciousness in hopes that the mosquitoes will fly off on their own. Recycling through the internal responsivity process continues until the problem is solved and relief is reexperienced.

If one decides to go indoors or spray oneself with insect repellent one already has handy, the internal process is completed without involving another. If a person decides to spray himself or herself with insect repellent and does not have any, he or she may ask someone else for some: "May I use your repellent?," or "I want to buy some insect repellent. Do you have some in stock?" This moves the process into external responsivity, asking for wants.

External Responsivity

When people transact with one another they are involved in one of seven operations. They are asking for what they want, verbalizing feelings, setting limits and boundaries, checking out reality (Steiner, 1974), sharing information, stroking, or apologizing (Figure 2).

Effective communication occurs when these external responsivity operations are initiated and
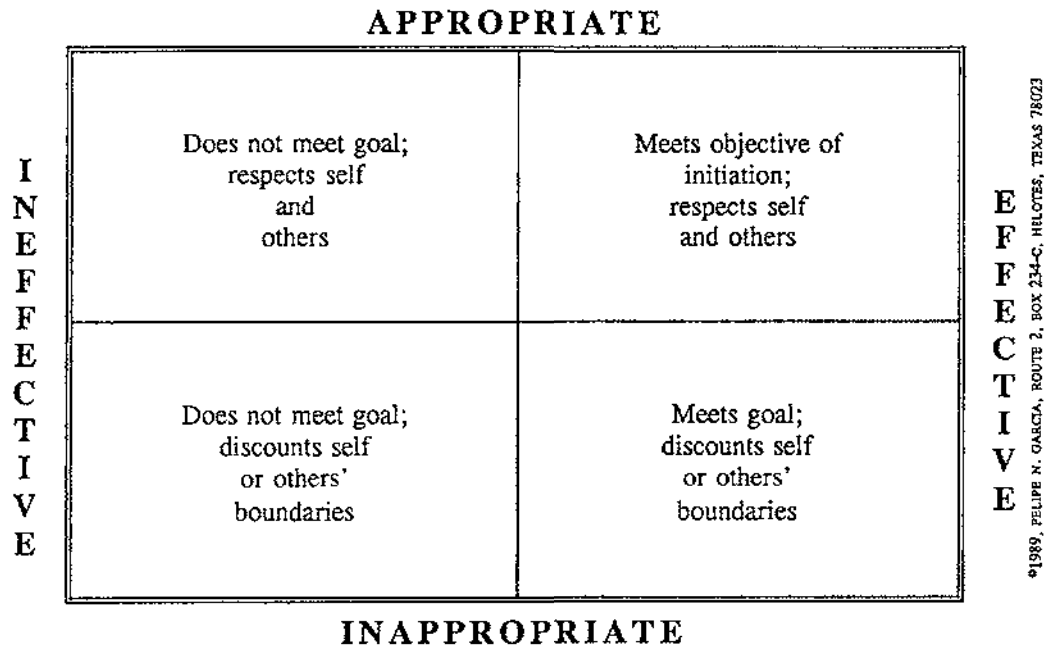
INTERNAL RESPONSIVITY

I. Sensing: Being aware of body sensations; enjoying pleasures and peace and being aware of discomfort. The internal responsive process begins as one becomes aware of a discomfort.

II. Thinking: Respond to discomfort by thinking to identify feeling, need, and consider options.

        A. Identifying the feeling: Am I feeling physical discomfort, like hunger or pain, or am I sad, mad, scared, lonely, etc.

        B. Identifying the need: Is my discomfort a result of my need for food, water, air, rest, elimination, body integrity, exercise, stimulation, strokes, protection, space, productivity, structure, spirituality, or forgiveness?

        C. Considering responsible and effective options for satisfying need: Where and how can I satisfy the need? If the need is for food, for example, what kind of food is appropriate for me at this time? Where can I get it? If scare is the feeling and reassurance the stroke need, who is healthy and available to ask?

III. Acting on an Option: Decide on and act on an option. Eat an apple or ask a friend to tell you she loves you.

IV. Experiencing Relief: When relief is experienced and the person feels comfort and pleasure, the responsive process is completed. If discomfort persists, recycle the process.

Figure 1
Internal Responsivity

EXTERNAL RESPONSIVITY

Operations	Initiations	Responses
1 Asking for Wants	• May I borrow your insect repellent? • Will you give me a ride home? • Will you give me a ride home?	• Certainly. • Yes, I'd love to, OR No, I don't want to. • No, not now.
2 Verbalizing Feelings	• I'm angry at you because ... • When you do that I feel scared. • When you do that I feel scared.	• I hear you. • I'll take your feelings into account. • What would you want me to do instead?
3 Setting Limits	• My room is off limits to you. • Stop hitting me. • You are not to talk to me like that.	• I hear you. • I'll respect you and your boundaries. • I'll respect you and your boundaries.
4 Checking out Reality	• Do you sell insect repellent? • Is there public transportation to town from here? • I believe you don't like me. Is that true?	• Yes, we do. • Yes there is. The bus stop is at the corner. • No. I do like you.
5 Sharing Information	• The boss is looking for you. • The bus leaves every hour on the hour. • I passed my exam. • I'm going to have a baby. • I'm grieving the death of my brother.	• Thank you. • Thank you. • How wonderful! [Mirror the feeling of joy, excitement, sadness, fear.] • How wonderful! • Let me know how I can support you.
6 Stroking	• I love you. • You mean a lot to me. • Thank you for bringing me home.	• I like hearing that. • Thank you. • You are welcome. My pleasure.
7 Apologizing	• I'm sorry I forgot to call you. • I'm sorry I called you names.	• I accept your apology. • I'll accept your apology when I experience your stopping that behavior.

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Figure 2
External Responsivity

APPROPRIATE

I N E F F E C T I V E		E F F E C T I V E
	Does not meet goal; respects self and others	Meets objective of initiation; respects self and others
	Does not meet goal; discounts self or others' boundaries	Meets goal; discounts self or others' boundaries

INAPPROPRIATE

Figure 3
Evaluating Responsivity Transactions

responded to appropriately. Game cons (Berne, 1964), racketeering (English, 1976), and passive behaviors (Schiff & Schiff, 1971) are inappropriate and ineffective ways of initiating and/or responding to these operations. Initiations and responses to the seven operations can be appropriate and effective, inappropriate and ineffective, or any other combination of these four possibilities (Figure 3).

An operation is effective or ineffective to the extent that it meets the goal, for example, to get physical, spiritual, or emotional needs met, to verbalize feelings, set limits, check out reality, stroke others, share information, or apologize. If I need a ride home, for instance, and I ask someone to give me a ride who does, the process was effective because it satisfied my goal. If I ask a person without a car and ask no one else, the process was ineffective because I did not reach my goal.

The extent to which one's own and other's physical and psychological boundaries are respected determines the appropriateness of these operations. Stealing a car to get a ride home is effective but inappropriate. Slapping someone's face to let him or her know one is

angry and to set limits is sometimes effective but not appropriate unless one is being physically attacked.

Effective responses to someone else's responsive initiations are those which address or mirror the initiation. "I hear that you are angry with me for being late, and I'm sorry for having kept you waiting" is an effective and appropriate response to a verbalization of feelings. "I'm angry at you, too" is an inappropriate and ineffective response because it redefines (Schiff et al., 1975) the subject from one person's feelings to the other's. For effective communication, it is important that an initiation be responded to before another initiation is presented. An initiation following another without a response is competitive and usually escalates into conflict (Garcia, 1984; Wise, 1990). An exception to this rule is when a person needs information before responding, in which case the response to another's initiation is postponed until such information is obtained. Such is the case in the following example.

A romantic relationship ends quite painfully for both persons because of a long series of ineffective and inappropriate transactions, a

Responsivity Contract

I will think about my feelings and act in order to get my needs met by:

- ►   asking for what I want

- ►   checking out reality

- ►   verbalizing feelings

- ►   stroking self and others positively

- ►   setting boundaries and limits

- ►   sharing information

- ►   apologizing and forgiving

I will respond to you whenever you initiate any of the above operations and ask that you respond to me when I do.

_____

_____

Figure 4
Responsivity Contract

series of "Kick Me" and "Now I Got You" games. Months later, one person calls the other and says, "Hi, I'm back in town. Let's get together" (asking for wants). The respondent then must go through an internal process: How do I feel about this? What do I want? Is this the beginning of another series of painful transactions? Maybe the respondent realizes that he or she would like to see the other and, in fact, would like the relationship to proceed on a healthier course with the desired outcome of mutual satisfaction for both. What is the appropriate and effective response? Often, in such situations, the respondent may need to postpone the response until he or she checks out reality: "What is your purpose for meeting?," thus beginning an investigative process using a variety of these operations and seeking appropriate responses before a decision and a response to the initiation can be made.

Applications

By practicing responsivity and paying attention to each transaction, relationships can be improved and negative payoffs avoided. Communication is complex. Tracking who the initiator is and who the respondent is helps in working through and avoiding impasses in communication. Responsivity is not something one masters easily. It is, however, an important process to practice and a tool for identifying personal and communication problems. Responsivity works to the extent that one is free from the unhealthy and limiting aspects of script. Persons operating from Don't Think, Don't Feel, Don't, or Don't Enjoy injunctions (Goulding & Goulding, 1979) find it difficult to feel, think, and act on their own behalf. In such cases, the responsivity process is useful as a diagnostic tool for clinicians.

Responsivity contracts are effective for minimizing games in relationships. Garcia (1982) described two examples of responsivity contracts, one for primary relationships and one for other relationships. Figure 4 describes a simplified version of those contracts, one useful in most relationships.

Operating from a responsivity contract in the clinical setting can be quite useful. The therapist

can investigate nonresponsivity, either at the initiation level (e.g., not asking for wants, not verbalizing resentments, or operating out of unchecked fantasies) or at the response level. Noticing how or whether a client responds when being stroked, confronted, or provided with information or requests becomes significant material for doing transactional analysis proper. By using Bernian therapeutic operations, especially interrogation, specification, confrontation, and explanation (Berne, 1966), the therapist can help the client focus on injunctions and decisions (Goulding & Goulding, 1979) which are the bases for the discounting process, passive behaviors, and games. Treatment plans may be designed to facilitate new decisions.

Finally, in educational and organizational work, both the internal and the external responsivity processes may be taught to facilitate more effective communication.

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