

Using Reality Testing in Everyday Situations

Objective

Use a three-step process to reality test in everyday situations.

What to Know

Reality testing refers to distinguishing your thoughts, feelings, and ideas from external events, which are reality-based. In other words, you see a situation for what it is, rather than what you hope or fear it might be. Here are some examples.

Thought: I just said good morning to my boss, and she ignored me. She must be upset with me. Is she going to fire me?!

Reality: There are many explanations for her lack of response – she didn't see me, she has a lot on her mind, or she is simply in a bad mood. There is no reason for her to fire me.

Thought: I just embarrassed myself during a presentation. Everyone must think I'm stupid. I'll never be a good public speaker.

Reality: Just because I didn't do a great job presenting this time doesn't mean that I can't improve my public speaking skills and do better in the future. A poor presentation isn't a reflection on my intelligence.

Sometimes your thoughts or feelings might be upsetting or overwhelming, making it easy to imagine worst-case scenarios and believe your thoughts are the “truth.” When you experience this, it might be hard to pull yourself out of a negative loop and place yourself firmly back into reality. So, reality testing is important in everyday life. It allows you to:

- identify what is real.
- judge situations appropriately.
- gain a new way of understanding your thought processes.
- notice your feelings and identify what they mean.
- compare your inner world (thoughts, feelings, beliefs) with the external world (reality).
- improve how you react to situations.

Follow these steps to learn how to reality test in everyday situations.

1. Be objective.

- Practice seeing situations from as many angles as possible.
- Avoid rushing to judgment.
- Remember that others have their own thoughts and feelings, and perhaps you have misread the situation.
- Always try to pause, think, and then react.

- Consider how you tend to react – too much or not enough?
- Notice themes and patterns in your life, and if necessary, adjust.

2. Seek other perspectives.

- If you are unsure whether you are seeing a situation realistically, ask a friend, family member, or co-worker for their perspectives.
- Consider all possible outcomes or meanings before coming to a conclusion.
- Sometimes silence or taking time to reflect is helpful.
- Fact-check your beliefs.

3. Pay attention to your reactions. Being mindful of your thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and reactions can help you determine how much time or energy you should give to a situation. These are some of the benefits of paying attention to your reactions. You will:

- gain a deeper awareness of your thoughts and experiences.
- be less likely to become overwhelmed and think negatively about situations.
- better navigate situations you know cause irritation or distress.
- see a greater range of possibilities.
- remove yourself from unhelpful situations.
- notice what you are focusing on and refocus if necessary.

What happens if you *don't* take the time to reality test? You might:

- experience an increase in negative beliefs about yourself or others.
- become overwhelmed.
- convince yourself you are to blame for another person's actions or choices.
- become over-involved in others' problems.
- lack authenticity due to how you perceive others' reactions.
- assume that one negative occurrence will lead to more negative occurrences.
- engage in all-or-nothing thinking or believe something is completely positive or entirely negative.
- compare yourself to others or belittle your own achievements when they do not seem to match up.
- blame or attribute your failures to others.

This worksheet will help you consider your reactions to place your thoughts and feelings firmly in reality – allowing you to distinguish your internal thoughts from the real world.

What to Do

First, answer the following questions.

Describe a situation when you failed to take the time to reality test.

How did you react?

How could you have viewed this situation from a different angle, or from other perspectives?

Over the next month, practice reality testing in your everyday life. Follow the three-step process outlined above. Use the following chart to record your experiences. Note the date, describe the situation, and who was involved. Describe the ways you were objective, and whether you sought other perspectives (fact-check, ask a loved one or co-worker, etc.). Describe your thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and reactions. Finally, describe what you could have done differently.

Date	Situation	Who was involved?	In what ways were you objective?	Did you seek other perspectives? Y / N Who?	Your thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and reactions	What could you have done differently?

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What did you find difficult about this exercise?

Did this activity help you more easily reality test in everyday situations? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

What else can you do to remind yourself to reality test?

On a 1 to 10 scale, how successful were you at reality testing, where 1 = not at all successfully, and 10 = completely successful: _____

Do you feel differently about yourself or your life now that you have completed this exercise?

How helpful was this exercise? _____

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn in this exercise that was helpful?
