

## **The Broken Window Theory**

The “Broken Window Theory” is a sociology theory originally created in 1982 by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelly. It became a popular theory in the 1990s, when it was used as a means to understand crime and disorder in America.

In essence the theory states that when we see things that are broken down, this can give us permission to further violate them as no one is looking after them and therefore no one is going to care if there is further damage. For example, if you are in a derelict block of flats where many of the windows are smashed, the thought of smashing another may be more attractive. After all, no one has bothered to clean up the mess from the other broken windows, so you may feel that you can do it without any consequences. This demonstrates that your environment can influence you and it can change what is your ‘norm’.

There is the stereotypical belief that all council estates are like this, in the sense that they are all run down with homes requiring repair. Unlike perhaps housing repairs required in a more affluent area where the environment is modern, clean and well looked after. Applying this theory to crime in general, it is said that there tends to be more crime in areas where there is less care, cleanliness and orderliness in the environment, and where residents may feel there is no need to try to maintain a good image as too much damage already exists.

This theory can also be applied to people. When somebody is seen as broken down, when it is seen that nobody cares about them, they can be violated without consequence. The sexual abuse of children in care homes is an example, dealers robbing other dealers, and the physical attack or rape of sex workers, are others.

## **Broken Window Theory and Substance Use**

This theory makes a lot of sense when it is used to help us to understand some of the functions of society and it can also help us to understand why some people have internalized beliefs about what they do and what their potential is. I recall many years ago working in a rehab and often hearing staff say to residents, “the law of averages says that only three of you will make it, the rest of you will relapse and some will die. Look around you, who’s going to make it?” I used to watch the residents looking around and sensed that they were thinking, “what chance have I got?!”

Many of those in treatment say that their loved ones believe they are going to make it, but is it likely that everyone will? If someone has been telling their loved ones for years that they are going to stop using, and they still haven’t, why should their loved ones believe them on this occasion? This is a great example of confusing ‘belief’ with ‘hope’. From another perspective, how many parents would be happy with their son or daughter dating someone who has a history of drug use or mental health problems? The parent may want to believe the person has changed, but the doubt they have may be as much related to the environment that the person has come from as it is to their personal achievements to date.

In a professional as well as a personal capacity, it is not unusual to have an expectation that a client is going to lapse, and to perceive environment as being key to the relapse. If someone spends most of their time in a crack-house, they are unlikely to see examples of recovery, as it is not the environment for recovery. Equally the expectation is that if you enter a crack-house you will use crack. If that same person engages with treatment and others in recovery, that new environment may influence them towards a different outcome. This shows us that environment is a crucial part of behavior change especially recovery, and that the only expectation that matters is your own.

So, to challenge to the old rehab saying that 'only a few of you will make it', perhaps we should be saying that if you create a new expectation for yourself, and change your environment thereby creating a new 'norm', you **can** make it. If you do what you need to do, and not what you want to do you can get to where you want to be. In other words, 'don't study others, study yourself'. Be prepared to challenge your longstanding expectations of yourself and create new ones, then put yourself in an environment that will support you to meet these expectations. Change your focus from what you can't do to what you can do and others will see your change, you won't have to prove yourself or convince them, they will simply see it.

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