

Tone and Reality Policing

Tone Policing: Telling someone how emotional they should be and making them feel like they need to change the tone of their expression.

Reality Policing: Telling someone what is and isn't true and correcting them about things they say which may not be true.

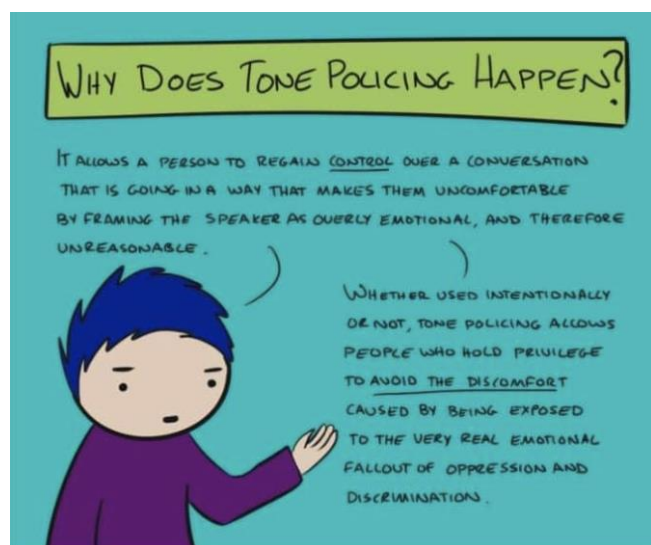
Gaslighting: To undermine a person's reality by denying the facts and saying things to manipulate their perceptions, by sowing seeds of doubt.

Tone and reality policing is generally not a helpful, nor appropriate thing to do when working with vulnerable people and can sometimes be argued to be similar to gaslighting. Tone policing includes telling people they should be calmer in their communication and not worry about certain things. Reality policing is where you find yourself constantly correcting people who might be confused, have mental illness or intellectual impairment, or just not understand something yet.

How do I know if I am Tone Policing?

You may already be guilty of tone policing (many of us are) in your personal or work life. If you have found yourself saying any of the following to people you work with, it might be time to stop and self-reflect.

- "It's not that big a deal."
- "Calm down."
- "You're worrying too much, it doesn't concern you."
- "Stop being so upset."
- "Don't talk to me with that tone."
- "You're being so worked up about this."



- "It's not that bad."
- "You need to relax."
- "Don't worry – it's not your issue."
- "You're overreacting."

Making comments such as the above is telling the person that their thoughts and feelings are incorrect and that they should not feel how they do. This can make people feel like they are doing something wrong and feel detached from their feelings.



We actually have NO right to tell people what they should or shouldn't be feeling. Instead of saying things like "don't be so upset", we could say "why do you think you feel so upset about that?". This change allows the person an opportunity to unpack and explore their feelings, rather than being made to feel that their feelings are wrong.

Further to this, tone-policing is both patronising and condescending. There isn't a supreme authority which exists to determine appropriate amounts of emotional expression, yet tone policing infers there is. This makes people feel devalued, disengaged, silenced, silly, wrong and juvenile.

Reality Policing

Reality policing is when people feel the need to correct people on the basis of 'what is actually true and correct' and what is not. It's not uncommon for a person with a mental illness or disability to have altered views of the world or believe things which may not exist. In



some situations, magical alternate worlds are developed by people with dialogues and narratives which suit them and provide comfort. Some people repeat sections of television shows or movies as if it's happening right in the present. This can be done due to how comforting the repetition is, or because they enjoyed the part of the show and are re-acting it out again. There are a variety of alternative realities for people and it's not our duty to walk around as the providers of truth and accuracy. In many situations, being part of the alternate reality provides significant comfort and can be a source of fun and enjoyment.

The only times that reality policing, or pushing the truth is acceptable is at times of risk, or due to some other source of specialist advice. As an example, if the person is very depressed and making comments that everyone hates them, then (even if this looked correct) you certainly wouldn't agree with it and go along with it. Further to this, if the person is getting super excited, saying that their mother is coming to visit and you know that this isn't true, then it's not helpful to go along with it. In this instance, it's better to ask questions such as *"What makes you think mum is coming over today, did she tell you?"* and help them to see that it's not happening.

Example of reality policing

Client *"When my money comes in later this week, I'll have more money than anyone in my bank."*

Worker *"No you won't Julie, it will be good that your money is in there, but lots of people have more money."*

Client *"No they don't, my money will make me richer than anyone."*

Worker *"Julie, that's not true. You're just lying now."*

Example of NOT reality policing

Client *"When my money comes in later this week, I'll have more money than anyone in my bank."*

Worker *"Goodness gracious, that's a lot of money then!"*

Client *"Yep. It's going to make me so rich, I'm so excited"*

Worker *"Well, I hope you've got some great ideas about how to save it, so you can stay being so rich."*

There's not benefit, nor need to tell Julie that she's not going to be the richest person in the world. It's ridiculous to think that workers feel the need to frequently do this. It doesn't hurt for people to be excited and have a loose grasp of reality. Reality can be very boring and it makes sense that so many of us need to dream a bit more than others.

Example of reality policing

Note: Jack is the therapist who provides speech therapy to the client and is in no way connected to the worker (e.g. Not in a relationship, the client is just confused)

Client *"Jack is your husband"*

Worker *"No, Jack is your Speech Therapist, not my husband, that's not true."*

Client *"Yes HE IS, Jack IS your husband."*

Worker *"Stop saying that, Jack is not my husband at all."*

Example of NOT reality policing

Client *"Jack is your husband."*

Worker *"What? *laughs* what makes you think he's my husband? Remember I don't have a husband, Jack is just your Speech Therapist."*

Client *"Yes HE IS, Jack IS your husband"*

Worker *"Well, ok then... that's what you keep telling me... *laughs* Goodness me, I can't keep up with all these people I'm marrying."*

The above scenario is not an uncommon one. Many clients form strong bonds with their therapists and support workers and can become confused in the difference between family, relationships, therapists, workers etc. Sometimes this can lead to clients calling people their husband, or mother, or expecting workers are family or partners. It's perfectly fine to correct the person casually, but if the client is being insistent and pushing the point, then it really doesn't matter – does it?

Workers sometimes get very hung up on the truth and have the attitude that 'if we don't correct the person, then they will believe this' – this is not the case. Sure, don't make it worse, but make it silly instead. In the above example the comment *"I can't keep up with all these people I'm marrying"* is a handy one to remind the person that it's a bit of fun.

Don't get hung up on reality, it can really be quite boring, much of the time 😊