



What Is Intrinsic Motivation?

Doing Something for Pure Enjoyment

By [Kendra Cherry](#)

Updated August 05, 2017

Share

Pin

Email

Blend Images - Moxie Productions/Brand X Pictures/Getty Images

Intrinsic motivation refers to behavior that is driven by internal rewards. In other words, the motivation to engage in a behavior arises from within the individual because it is naturally satisfying to you. This [contrasts with extrinsic motivation](#), which involves engaging in a behavior in order to earn external rewards or avoid punishment.

Understanding Intrinsic Motivation

In psychology, intrinsic motivation distinguishes between internal and external rewards. In "Introduction to Psychology: Gateways to Mind and Behavior With Concept Maps," the authors offer this definition:

"Intrinsic motivation occurs when we act without any obvious external rewards. We simply enjoy an activity or see it as an opportunity to explore, learn, and actualize our potentials."

Consider for a moment your motivation for reading this article. If you are reading it because you have an interest in psychology and simply want to know more about the topic of motivation, then you are acting based upon intrinsic motivation. If, however, you are reading this because you have to learn the information for a class and avoid getting a bad grade, then you are acting based upon [extrinsic motivation](#).

When was the last time you did something simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself? There are a number of activities that fall into this category. For instance, you may plant a garden, paint a picture, play a game, write a story, or read a book. These may or may not produce something or be rewarded in any way.

Instead, we do them because we like to, they make us happy.

The Internal Satisfaction

When you pursue an activity for the pure enjoyment of it, you are doing so because you are intrinsically motivated. Your motivations for engaging in the behavior arise entirely from within rather than out of a desire to gain some type of external rewards such as prizes, money, or acclaim.

Advertisement

Of course, that isn't to say that intrinsically motivated behaviors do not come with their own rewards. These rewards involve creating positive emotions within the individual.

Activities can generate such feelings when they give people a sense of meaning like participating in volunteer or church events. They may also give you a sense of progress when you see that your work is accomplishing something positive or competence when you learn something new or become more skilled at a task.

Intrinsic Rewards and Motivation

Researchers have discovered that offering external rewards or [reinforcements](#) for an already internally rewarding activity can actually make the activity less intrinsically rewarding. This phenomenon is known as the [overjustification effect](#).

"A person's intrinsic enjoyment of an activity provides sufficient justification for their behavior," explains author Richard A. Griggs in his book "Psychology: A Concise Introduction." "With the addition of extrinsic reinforcement, the person may perceive the task as overjustified and then attempt to understand their true motivation (extrinsic versus intrinsic) for engaging in the activity."

It is also suggested that people are more creative when they are intrinsically motivated.

Advertisement

Advertisement

In work settings, for instance, productivity can be increased by using extrinsic rewards such as a bonus. However, the actual quality of the work performed is influenced by intrinsic factors. If you are doing something that you find rewarding, interesting, and challenging, you are more likely to come up with novel ideas and creative solutions.

Motivation to Learn

Intrinsic motivation is an important topic in education. Teachers and instructional designers strive to develop learning environments that are intrinsically rewarding. Unfortunately, many traditional paradigms suggest that most students find learning boring so they must be extrinsically goaded into educational activities.

In "[Making Learning Fun: A Taxonomy of Intrinsic Motivations for Learning](#)," authors Thomas Malone and Mark Leeper suggest that this does not need to be the case. They identify several different ways to make learning environments that are intrinsically rewarding.

The authors define activities as intrinsically motivating if "people engage in it for its own sake, rather than in order to receive some external reward or avoid some external punishment. We use the words fun, interesting, captivating, enjoyable, and intrinsically motivating all more or less interchangeably to describe such activities."

The factors they identify as increasing intrinsic motivation include:

Challenge: People are more motivated when they pursue goals with personal meaning and when attaining the goal is possible but not necessarily certain. These goals may also relate to their self-esteem when performance feedback is available.

Curiosity: Internal motivation is increased when something in the physical environment

grabs the individual's attention (sensory curiosity). It also occurs when something about the activity stimulates the person to want to learn more (cognitive curiosity).

Control: People want control over themselves and their environments and want to determine what they pursue.

Cooperation and competition: Intrinsic motivation can be increased in situations where people gain satisfaction from helping others. It also applies to cases where they are able to compare their own performance favorably to that of others.

Recognition: People enjoy having their accomplishment recognized by others, which can increase internal motivation.

Our Perspective on Rewards Differs

Experts have noted that offering unnecessary rewards can have unexpected costs. While we like to think that offering a reward will improve a [person's motivation](#), interest, and performance, this isn't always the case.

For example, when children are rewarded for playing with toys that they already enjoy playing with, their motivation and enjoyment of those toys actually decreases.

It is important to note, however, that a number of factors can influence whether the intrinsic motivation is increased or decreased by external rewards. Salience or the significance of the event itself often plays a critical role.

An athlete competing in a sporting event might view the winner's prize as confirmation of the winner's competence and exceptionalism. On the other hand, some athletes might view the same prize as a sort of bribe or coercion. The way in which the individual views the importance of different characteristics of the event impacts whether the reward will affect a person's intrinsic motivation for participating in that activity.

A Word From Verywell

The concept of intrinsic motivation is fascinating. In your own life, there are probably many things you do which fall into this category and these are important elements for a well-balanced life. For instance, if we spend all of our time working to make money, we may miss out on the simple pleasures of life. Realizing your own intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and balancing them can be quite rewarding.

Source

Coon D, Mitterer JO. Introduction to Psychology: Gateways to Mind and Behavior With Concept Maps. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth; 2010.

Griggs RA. Psychology: A Concise Introduction. 3rd ed. New York: Worth Publishers; 2010.

Malone TW, Lepper MR. Making Learning Fun: A Taxonomy of Intrinsic Motivations for Learning. In: Snow RE, Farr MJ, ed. Aptitude, Learning, and Instruction: Iii. Conative and Affective Process Analysis. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum; 1987.