

Intrinsic Motivation vs. Extrinsic Motivation: What's the Difference?

By Kendra Cherry, MEd Updated on December 13, 2023

Reviewed by Steven Gans, MD

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation refer to the forces that drive behavior. Internal motivation arises from within, while external motivation comes from outside forces.

That means that if you are intrinsically motivated, you'll engage in a behavior because you enjoy doing it. If you are extrinsically motivated, you'll do it to get a reward.

Mental Health in the Workplace Webinar

On May 19, 2022, Verywell Mind hosted a virtual Mental Health in the Workplace webinar, hosted by Amy Morin, LCSW. If you missed it, check out this recap to learn ways to foster supportive work environments and helpful strategies to improve your well-being on the job.

Researchers have found that each type has a different effect on a person's behavior and pursuit of goals. To better understand the influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on human behavior, it will help to learn how each type works.

At a Glance

Why do we do the things we do? What drives our behavior? Psychologists have proposed different ways of thinking about motivation, including looking at whether motivation arises from outside (extrinsic) or inside (intrinsic) an individual. Intrinsic motivation comes from within, and extrinsic motivation from without.

Sometimes you're better off doing things for enjoyment, but in other cases, you might need a little extra outside motivation. However, it pays to be careful since excessive external rewards can sometimes dampen intrinsic motivation.

What Are Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation?

Intrinsic motivation is when you engage in a behavior because you find it rewarding. You are performing an activity for its own sake rather than from the desire for some external reward. The behavior itself is its own reward.

Extrinsic motivation is when we are motivated to perform a behavior or engage in an activity because we want to earn a reward or avoid punishment. You will engage in behavior not because you enjoy it or because you find it satisfying, but because you expect to get something in return or avoid something unpleasant.

Extrinsic Motivation

- Participating in a sport to win awards
- Cleaning your room to avoid being reprimanded by your parents
- Competing in a contest to win a scholarship
- Studying because you want to get a good grade

Intrinsic Motivation

- Participating in a sport because you find the activity enjoyable
- Cleaning your room because you like tidying up
- Solving a word puzzle because you find the challenge fun and exciting
- Studying a subject you find fascinating

Press Play for Advice On Staying Motivated

Hosted by therapist Amy Morin, LCSW, this episode of The Verywell Mind Podcast shares how to stay motivated and focused even when you don't want to. Click below to listen now.

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Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic Motivation: Which Is Best?

Extrinsic motivation arises from outside of the individual, while intrinsic motivation comes from within. Research has shown that each type has a different effect on human behavior.

Studies have demonstrated that offering excessive external rewards for an already internally rewarding behavior can reduce intrinsic motivation—a phenomenon known as the overjustification effect.

For example, in a 2008 study, children who were rewarded for playing with a toy they had already expressed interest in playing with became less interested in the item after being externally rewarded.

This is not to suggest that extrinsic motivation is a bad thing—it can be beneficial in some situations. For example, extrinsic motivation can be particularly helpful when a person needs to complete a task that they find unpleasant.

Additionally, external rewards can:

- Be a source of feedback to let people know when their performance has achieved a standard that is deserving of reinforcement
- Induce interest and participation in an activity an individual was not initially interested in
- Motivate people to acquire new skills or knowledge (once these early skills have been learned, people might become more intrinsically motivated to pursue an activity)

Extrinsic motivators should be avoided in situations where:

- An individual already finds the activity intrinsically rewarding
- Offering a reward might make a "play" activity seem more like "work"

When to Use External Rewards

- Motivate a person to learn something new
- Make a person more interested in an activity that they are not interested in
- Provide feedback to people to let them know their performance is worthy of recognition

When Not to Use External Rewards

- A person is already interested in the topic, task, or activity
- Offering a reward would make the activity feel like "work" instead of "play"

When to Use Extrinsic Motivation

Most people assume that intrinsic motivation is best, but it is not always possible in every situation. Sometimes a person simply has no internal desire to engage in an activity. Offering excessive rewards can be problematic as well.

However, when they are used appropriately, extrinsic motivators can be a useful tool. For example, extrinsic motivation can get people to complete a work task or school assignment that they are not interested in.

Researchers have arrived at three primary conclusions regarding extrinsic rewards and their influence on intrinsic motivation:

Rewarding Minimal Effort Reduces Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation will decrease when external rewards are given for completing a particular task or only doing minimal work. In other words, if you get rewarded for doing very little, you aren't likely to find the activity intrinsically rewarding.

If parents heap lavish praise on their child every time they complete a simple task, the child will become less intrinsically motivated to perform that task.

Praise Can Increase Internal Motivation

Researchers have found that offering positive praise and feedback when people do something better than others can improve intrinsic motivation.

Unexpected Rewards Don't Hurt Intrinsic Motivation

Unexpected external rewards do not decrease intrinsic motivation. If you get a good grade on a test because you enjoy learning about a subject and the teacher decides to reward you with a gift card to your favorite pizza place, your underlying motivation for learning about the subject will not be affected.

However, rewarding in this situation must be done with caution because people will sometimes come to *expect* rewards.

How Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Impact Learning

Both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation play a significant role in learning. Experts have argued that education's traditional emphasis on external rewards (such as grades, report cards, and gold stars) undermines any existing intrinsic motivation that students might have.

Others have suggested that extrinsic motivators help students feel more competent in the classroom, which in turn enhances their intrinsic motivation.

Experts suggest that rewards don't imperil intrinsic motivation when they are used to indicate that a person has performed well. In such cases, extrinsic rewards can help people feel proud and competent, which increases how much they enjoy the task.

When used appropriately, such rewards can help boost motivation, creativity, and performance. Consider how extrinsic rewards like promotions, scholarships, and bonuses can help students and employees feel more encouraged to perform well.

Takeaway

Both extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation drive human behavior. There are several key differences between motivation that comes from external rewards and the kind that is driven by an individual's genuine interest, including the influence of each type on a person's behavior and the situations in which each type will be most effective.

Understanding how each type of motivation works and when it is likely to be useful can help people perform tasks (even when they do not want to) and improve their learning.

9 Sources