



Self-Determination

The Key to Motivation also supports mental health!

Self-determination: the process by which a person controls their own life.
(Oxford Internet Dictionary)

The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states:

All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.

Self-determination refers to a person's ability to choose; to make decisions and feel in control. It is crucially important for citizens in a democratic society. So why don't we learn about it in school? It's never too late to learn, so in this short article we'll explore self-determination and Self-Determination Theory.

I've been an advocate for self-determination my entire life, but it wasn't until 2005 - when I attended college - that I discovered Self-Determination Theory.

I went back to school to gain skills and credentials to create Fair Shake. I was venturing into an area where I had no experience but strong ideas. Very few people around me believed that I could do it. My children were my main supporters; they believed I could make my vision a reality.

I had learned to expect this response in my life. From my earliest years, I remember being told what I must do, and that I was not capable of doing much of what I wanted to do. After getting kicked out of my parent's house at 13, I was determined to prove I had good ideas and I was capable of doing what I wanted to do. (I watched Billy Jean King beat Bobby Riggs!)

Being told that I am not capable has been a terrific motivator. Now that I'm 63, I realize that my no-burn-out fuel, that provides steady and sustainable power, is a mix of purpose, meaning, and care - with a splash of defiance.

The creators of Self-Determination Theory - Richard Ryan and Edward Deci - understood that my motivation was driven by my basic needs for autonomy and competence.

Humans are the only animals capable of reflection. We can wonder, imagine, and create new ways of doing things. Being able to choose is at the core of our being. Choice is also critical in a democracy and a fundamental component of mental health. Our sense of autonomy - our freedom to choose - has been vital to our development throughout our lives.

When we make poor decisions, especially those that cause us to feel that we are not capable of making good decisions, we can feel overwhelmed or defeated. Deci and Ryan discovered that building competence, a sense of skill and capability, "involves the feeling that one's actions are actually useful and lead to meaningful progress."

According to their theory, the final component to self-determination, and the motivation it provides, is the feeling of relatedness; the understanding that one is not isolated from others but is in tandem with others. Doing your own thing, while others do theirs, can create a world where we are independent yet connected and thriving; strong in mind and spirit.

Ryan and Deci's Theory of Self-Determination is based on three psychological needs: Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness.

When these needs are met, we will find that intrinsic motivation – the drive from inside of ourselves – can propel us through many challenges, toward our hopes and plans for the future. Their research has shown that extrinsic motivation - punishments or rewards - may move us to act in the moment, but will be far less likely to motivate us to continue to reach our goals.

In short: we are driven to do things when we choose to do them. Fear of punishment may work, but doesn't create lasting change. And rewards don't, either. (Volumes of research support this, yet prizes and threats continue to be used nearly everywhere.)

SDT encourages to trust ourselves; to be agents of our destiny and to feel confident that our behaviors and decisions will influence our lives in meaningful and satisfying ways.

According to Richard Ryan: "Self-determination theory suggests that when we strive toward wellness, self-efficacy and community, we will be motivated to act in ways that benefit ourselves and society. Self-determination theory assumes humans have an innate, fundamental trajectory toward vitality, integration, and health."

A few helpful definitions:

SELF-DETERMINATION: the process by which a person controls their own life.

NEED: an essential nutrient for thriving and wellness. Needs are universal; they remain constant across cultures, contexts and our entire life span. We have physical needs and we have psychological needs. Our psychological needs require nutrients that are essential for growth, integrity, and well-being. These needs are autonomy, relatedness and competence.

AUTONOMY: the sense of being in control of our own behaviors and goals. It includes steering our life course and making decisions

according to our values and interests. It does not mean we must be alone; it simply means that we get to decide how and when to connect with others. **"I am able to do things that I really value in life."**

RELATEDNESS: the experience of feeling connected. It is a sense of belonging that is not just about being cared for, but includes caring for others, which is where we build meaning in our lives. This does not mean we 'get along' with everyone; we just become more aware of our relationships, especially with the people we can listen to and care about, and the people who will listen to and care about us, too. **"I feel that I can connect with other people."**

COMPETENCE: to gain mastery of tasks, learn different skills, and understand ideas. When we feel we have the skills required for success, we are more likely to take actions toward our goals. **"I can do things, and learn things, and achieve my goals."**

(BENEFITS of meeting psychological needs: Interdependence, good quality of life, healthy boundaries, more intentional and effective.)

MOTIVATION: moved into action

EXTRINSIC MOTIVATION (external): forces outside of us such as rewards, punishments and internalized pressure from others; which includes coercion: 'everybody is doing it', guilt: "they will be sad if you don't show up", and 'should'ing: "you should get that car."

INTRINSIC MOTIVATION (internal): inherent incentive to engage in challenges and tasks of our own volition (direction), regardless of any rewards or recognition. Intrinsic motivation is fueled by deeply held values, interest and enjoyment of the behavior itself.

INTROJECTION: when we internalize and act to satisfy cultural norms and expectations do things just because 'it's the way things are.'

Intrinsic motivation does not always begin with our desire. We may start something new through external motivation, and continue with it once it becomes internalized. For example, if you are training to compete in a marathon, you might be extrinsically motivated by a desire to join or to win, but once you start training, you may find that you simply enjoy high-energy, solo sports, like a run in the park each day.

We are not innately selfish, aggressive, or money-driven (aka “rational”). This view is not only wrong, it puts our thinking at odds with our needs, which doesn’t make any sense.

Deci and Ryan believe “we are normatively cooperative, social creatures, with robust capacities for kindness and benevolence. In societies across the globe, whether in cities or rural areas, whether among rich or poor, people are typically not only tolerant of others but even considerate and helpful.”

They found that when we help others without rewards (payment or recognition), we meet all three needs at once: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. This is why helping and volunteering feels so good.

A few more of their quotes:

On Autonomy:

“The primary agentic aspect of human beings is their intrinsic motivation. Being authentic involves effort and entails taking responsibility for oneself. Doing so is not always easy, and in fact, requires everyday acts of courage. Engaging our capacities for autonomy often means resisting or redirecting temptations, cultural pressures, and strong controlling forces, both external and internal.”

On Relatedness:

“We have the capacity to connect with and learn from others. It is through communication that people come to appreciate what behaviors have more value and meaning than others and why. Relatedness is what brings people into dispositions of caring. Education and learning

enhance our capabilities for growth, integration, and autonomous functioning.”

On Competence

“When people are competent, they are more likely to be creative, flexible, and able to deal with the complexities and ambiguities of life.”

Mind Your Needs

It's important that we remember to attend to all three psychological needs every day (or as often as we can).

Ryan tells us: “People cannot psychologically thrive by satisfying one need alone, any more than people can live healthily with water but not food, or plants can thrive on soil without sunlight.”

It's up to us to check to see if our basic psychological needs are being met.

When and how do you feel your sense of agency or autonomy?

When and how do you feel your sense of relatedness?

When and how do you feel competent?

Our basic needs - both physiological and psychological - drive us. Understanding our needs and addressing them in healthy, holistic ways will give us a better quality of life. We can help others achieve a better quality of life, too.

Our capacity for learning is present through our entire lives. It's never too late to learn!

With or without the theory:

Self-determination is how I'm still here.

Self-determination is how Fair Shake exists.

This does not imply that I built Fair Shake, or my life, by myself. I didn't. I needed others! But I built them of my own volition and through my beliefs and vision – and supported by many people...including my children!

Words related to...

Autonomy (not independent of others, but being one's authentic self among others.)

Volition	Solo	Choice
Agency	Liberty	Decision
Intention	Will	Endorsing own behavior

Relatedness

Connected	Caring	Belong
Group	Social	Interact

Competence

Control	Effective	Engaged
Mastery	Persistent	Determine
Capable	Achieve goals	

Self-Determination Theory of Motivation

Developed by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci

PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Nutrient Requirements:

Autonomy + **Relatedness** + **Competence**

Supports **INTRINSIC MOTIVATION!**

Autonomy: You have the freedom to choose.

Relatedness: You are connected to others.

Competence: You have skills and knowledge.
You are effective.

