

# What Is Intrinsic Motivation?

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## Summary of the Article

Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity because the activity itself is interesting, satisfying, meaningful, or enjoyable. A person may read about astronomy because of curiosity, practice music because improvement feels rewarding, or solve a difficult problem because the challenge is absorbing. The reward is contained largely within the experience of doing the activity. Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, involves performing an activity to obtain a separable outcome such as money, a grade, praise, promotion, approval, or avoidance of punishment.

The original article correctly distinguishes internal satisfaction from external reward and identifies challenge, curiosity, control, cooperation, competition, and recognition as influences on motivation. These influences are not uniformly intrinsic or extrinsic. Their effect depends on how the person interprets them. Recognition can support intrinsic motivation when it communicates genuine competence without pressure, but it can feel controlling when approval is made conditional on obedience. Competition can energize one person and reduce another person's interest or confidence.

## Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory, developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, explains motivation through three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the experience of acting with meaningful choice rather than coercion. Competence is the sense that one can develop skill and meet an appropriate challenge. Relatedness is the feeling of connection, care, and belonging with others. (Deci et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2017)

Activities are more likely to become intrinsically motivating when they support these needs. A student may enjoy research when allowed to choose a topic, receives feedback that improves skill, and works with a supportive teacher. The same task can become less motivating when it is imposed without explanation, constantly compared with others, or controlled through threats.

## Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation Are Not Opposites in Every Situation

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can coexist. A nurse may value caring for patients and also need a salary. A student may enjoy a course and also seek a high grade. An employee may find a project meaningful while hoping for promotion. The presence of an external reward does not automatically

remove internal interest. (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Extrinsic motivation also varies in quality. A person can obey solely to avoid punishment, act to gain approval, identify personally with a goal, or integrate the goal into a wider sense of self. Studying because a parent threatens punishment feels different from studying because education supports a chosen profession, even though both involve an outcome beyond the immediate task.

## The Overjustification Effect

The overjustification effect describes situations in which an external reward reduces interest in an activity that was already intrinsically enjoyable. Classic research found that expected tangible rewards could lead some children to spend less voluntary time on an activity after the reward ended. The activity may begin to feel like something performed for payment rather than pleasure.

This effect should not be stated as a universal rule that every reward undermines performance. Rewards differ. Unexpected rewards, fair compensation, and informational feedback may not have the same effect as controlling rewards promised for compliance. Rewards can also increase participation in tasks that were never intrinsically interesting. The question is whether the reward supports competence and choice or makes the person feel manipulated.

## Challenge

An appropriate challenge can increase intrinsic motivation because it provides a chance to develop competence. A task that is too easy becomes boring, while a task far beyond current skill produces frustration. Motivation is often strongest when difficulty stretches ability but progress remains possible.

Goals can be divided into manageable stages so that effort produces visible improvement. Feedback should identify strategy and progress rather than label the person as naturally talented or incapable. A learner who believes skill can grow is more likely to persist through difficulty.

## Curiosity

Curiosity arises when a person notices a gap between what is known and what could be understood. A surprising question, unexplained result, mystery, contradiction, or novel experience can attract attention. Curiosity supports sustained learning because the person wants resolution.

Teachers and managers can stimulate curiosity by presenting meaningful problems before explaining every answer. However, artificial suspense without useful content can feel manipulative. Curiosity is strongest when the topic connects with the learner's interests and when exploration is permitted.

## Control and Choice

The original article correctly observes that people generally value control over their lives. Meaningful choice supports autonomy. A student may choose the research topic, an employee may choose the order of tasks, or a patient may participate in a treatment decision. Choice communicates trust and personal ownership.

Too many options can create confusion, and some tasks are constrained by safety, law, or curriculum. Autonomy does not mean absence of structure. It means that limits are explained, the person's perspective is considered, and choice is offered where it is real.

## Cooperation

Cooperation can support relatedness and competence. People may enjoy solving a problem with others, sharing skill, and contributing to a common result. A supportive team provides encouragement and allows members to learn from one another.

Group work becomes demotivating when effort is unequal, roles are unclear, one person dominates, or individual contributions disappear. Effective cooperation requires accountability, respect, and tasks that genuinely benefit from collaboration.

## Competition

Competition can increase energy, concentration, and immediate effort when participants view it as a voluntary challenge. It can also reduce intrinsic motivation when winning becomes the only valued outcome or when people feel constantly judged. Those who expect to lose may withdraw rather than improve.

My own response, described in the original reflection, is that competition reduces rather than increases motivation. This difference illustrates why motivational strategies cannot be applied identically to everyone. Self-comparison and mastery goals may be more effective for me than ranking against peers.

## Praise and Recognition

Praise can support competence when it is specific, sincere, and focused on effective effort or strategy. "Your analysis connected the evidence clearly" provides more useful information than "You are the smartest person here." Recognition can show that work matters and strengthen belonging.

Praise can also become controlling. If a person works only to maintain approval, anxiety and dependence may increase. Excessive praise for easy tasks can communicate low expectations.

Recognition should therefore provide information and appreciation without making personal worth conditional on performance.

## Reflection on the Article

The article is useful because it shows that motivation does not come only from prizes, grades, or punishment. People often work intensely on activities that offer no immediate material reward because those activities satisfy curiosity, express identity, build competence, or connect them with others. Understanding this helps explain why the same incentive can motivate one person and discourage another.

The article's list of factors should be interpreted through context. Challenge is motivating only when it is achievable. Control is useful when choices are meaningful. Cooperation works when the group is fair. Competition depends on personality and climate. Recognition can be supportive or controlling. Motivation is therefore a relationship among the individual, task, environment, and social meaning.

## What the Article Explains Well

The most valuable insight is that external reward can sometimes change the reason a person performs an activity. When learning becomes only a route to grades, the student may stop exploring after the examination. When an employee receives payment for every small voluntary contribution, helping may begin to feel transactional. This explains why incentive systems can produce compliance without durable commitment.

The article also recognizes the importance of situational differences. A person may feel intrinsically motivated in one environment and not another. Supportive leadership, clear goals, adequate resources, and respect can turn a difficult task into meaningful work. Constant surveillance and criticism can make an interesting task exhausting.

## What Requires Clarification

The original discussion implies that recognition is intrinsic because it feels encouraging. Recognition comes from an external social source, so it is technically an external consequence. It may nevertheless support intrinsic motivation by affirming competence and relatedness. This distinction helps explain my own experience more accurately.

The statement that external rewards undermine performance should also be qualified. Pay is necessary and ethically important. Poor compensation can destroy motivation because it communicates unfairness and creates financial stress. The goal is not to eliminate rewards but to avoid using them in a manner that controls every action or replaces meaning.

## Personal Experience of Intrinsic Motivation

From my personal experience, praise and recognition have a strong effect on my willingness to continue studying or working. When a teacher identifies something I have done well, I feel that the effort has been noticed and that improvement is possible. At work, acknowledgment from a team leader can make a difficult assignment feel worthwhile. This response is not merely a desire for public attention. It reflects my need for evidence that I am contributing effectively.

At the same time, I now recognize that praise is not intrinsic motivation by itself. It is external feedback that can strengthen my internal interest when it confirms competence. If the praise disappeared completely, the test of intrinsic motivation would be whether I still valued the work, wanted to improve, or found satisfaction in completing it. In many cases, recognition starts or strengthens motivation, while the activity's meaning sustains it.

## My Response to Competition

Competition does not motivate me consistently. When a task is framed as a contest against classmates or colleagues, I become less focused on learning and more aware of judgment. Comparing rank can reduce my confidence and make the activity feel externally controlled. I perform better when I compare my current work with my previous performance.

This preference suggests that mastery goals suit me better than performance goals. A mastery goal asks whether I understand more, write more clearly, or complete a task with greater skill. A performance goal asks whether I appear better than others. Both can produce effort, but mastery creates more stable motivation for me.

## Money, Bonuses, and Meaning

The original reflection states that bonuses do not encourage me as much as recognition. This does not mean money has no importance. Salary provides security, independence, and fairness. A bonus may be appreciated but may not increase interest in the task itself. If compensation is unfair, motivation can fall even when the work is meaningful.

My preferred environment combines fair external conditions with supportive internal conditions. I need reasonable pay and clear expectations, but I become most engaged when work is respected, useful, and connected with growth. Managers should not use praise as a cheap substitute for compensation, nor assume that higher payment automatically creates commitment.

## Teacher Encouragement

Encouraging statements from teachers have influenced my education more than promised prizes. Effective encouragement directs attention to progress and strategy. It tells me that the teacher sees potential and expects continued effort. A prize may create a temporary goal, while constructive feedback helps me understand how to improve.

Encouragement is least useful when it is vague or automatic. If every piece of work receives identical praise, the feedback loses meaning. Honest recognition should include guidance about the next step.

## Motivation and the Biopsychosocial Model

The original essay combines the biopsychosocial model with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. They are related only in a broad sense and should not be treated as the same theory. The biopsychosocial model explains behavior and health through interaction among biological, psychological, and social factors. Maslow proposed a hierarchy involving physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs. Human motivation does not always follow a fixed sequence in which one level must be completely satisfied before the next begins.

### Biological Factors

Biological factors include energy, sleep, nutrition, illness, stress physiology, temperament, brain reward systems, hormones, and genetic influences. A person who is exhausted, in pain, or severely anxious may struggle to concentrate even when the task is interesting. Adequate rest and health support the capacity for motivation.

Biology does not determine motivation mechanically. Brain processes change through experience, and the same biological state can be interpreted differently. The model emphasizes interaction rather than reduction of every goal to chemistry.

### Psychological Factors

Psychological factors include values, goals, curiosity, self-efficacy, expectations, emotions, identity, habits, and interpretation of reward. Intrinsic motivation is strongly related to whether the person believes the activity is meaningful and manageable.

Self-efficacy is the belief that one can perform the required actions. A person may value a task but avoid it after repeated failure. Skill-building and realistic feedback can restore motivation. Perfectionism can reduce action because anything short of ideal performance feels unacceptable.

## Social Factors

Social factors include family, teachers, managers, peers, culture, income, discrimination, role expectations, and opportunity. A supportive group can strengthen relatedness and persistence. A hostile environment can make a personally meaningful activity feel unsafe.

Recognition is located especially within the social dimension. The reaction of others tells a person whether effort is valued. Social feedback can become internalized, contributing to identity and future self-motivation.

## Basic Needs and Motivation

Hunger, thirst, shelter, and safety are not best described as requiring intrinsic motivation. They are biological and practical needs that generate drives and goals. A person may seek employment partly for external outcomes such as food, housing, and financial security. This is not less valid than intrinsic interest.

Once basic stability exists, people often have greater freedom to pursue curiosity, mastery, connection, and purpose. Yet artists, activists, caregivers, and learners may remain intrinsically motivated even under hardship. Needs influence motivation without operating as a rigid staircase.

## Intrinsic Motivation in Education

Teachers can support autonomy by offering meaningful choices, explaining relevance, and inviting questions. They support competence through clear instruction, appropriate challenge, and feedback. They support relatedness by treating students with respect and building a classroom where mistakes are part of learning.

Grades are external rewards but are difficult to remove from formal education. They can be used more responsibly by combining them with formative feedback, opportunities for revision, and tasks that have authentic purpose. A student should understand more than how to maximize points.

## Intrinsic Motivation at Work

Employees are more likely to experience intrinsic motivation when they understand the purpose of work, possess some control over method, can develop skill, receive useful feedback, and feel connected with colleagues or customers. Job design matters. Repetitive work may become more meaningful when employees can see its contribution and improve the process.

Managers should avoid excessive surveillance and micromanagement. Monitoring may be necessary

for safety or quality, but constant control communicates distrust. Clear goals with discretion in execution can support both accountability and autonomy.

## When Tasks Are Not Intrinsically Interesting

Not every necessary task becomes enjoyable. Filing records, cleaning equipment, completing compliance forms, or studying foundational material may be performed mainly for external or identified reasons. Motivation can improve when the person understands why the task matters and can connect it to a chosen goal.

Habits, schedules, checklists, and small rewards can help with uninteresting tasks. Using external structure is not a failure. The aim is to avoid making all behavior dependent on escalating incentives.

## Practical Strategies

A person can increase intrinsic motivation by selecting meaningful goals, reducing distractions, matching challenge with current skill, tracking personal progress, seeking informational feedback, and working with supportive people. Large goals should be divided into tasks that produce visible accomplishment.

Reflection can identify whether motivation is being controlled by fear, comparison, or approval. Asking “Would I still value this if no one praised me?” helps distinguish internal interest from social reward. The answer can change over time.

## Conclusion

Intrinsic motivation means engaging in an activity because it is inherently satisfying, interesting, or meaningful. Extrinsic motivation involves separable outcomes such as pay, grades, praise, or avoidance of punishment. The two can coexist, and external rewards do not always destroy internal interest.

Challenge, curiosity, autonomy, competence, relatedness, cooperation, competition, and recognition influence motivation according to context. My own experience shows that specific praise and acknowledgment support effort, while competition and promised prizes are less effective. Recognition is externally provided, but it can strengthen intrinsic motivation by confirming competence and belonging.

The biopsychosocial model explains motivation through biological capacity, psychological meaning, and social environment. It should not be confused with a rigid hierarchy of needs. Sustainable motivation grows when people have fair external conditions and opportunities for choice, mastery,



connection, and purpose.

## References

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