# **Motivation: Definitions and Perspectives**

Motivation is generally defined as the internal **driving force** behind goal-directed behavior verywellmind.com. It explains *why* people initiate, continue or terminate actions en.wikipedia.org. For example, Psychology Today notes that "motivation is the desire to act in service of a goal" and fuels effort and persistence psychologytoday.com. Researchers also emphasize that motivation is multi-faceted, involving biological needs, emotions, cognitions and social factors

Different psychological perspectives interpret motivation in distinct ways:

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- **Behavioral perspective:** Behaviorists see motivation as a product of conditioning and reinforcement. In this view, people repeat behaviors that have been rewarded and avoid those punished. Motivation is thus shaped by *external* rewards or punishers. For instance, Incentive Theory (a behavioral approach) argues that "behavior is primarily extrinsically motivated: people are more motivated to perform activities if they receive a reward afterward, rather than simply because they enjoy the activities themselves" socialsci.libretexts.org. In short, behavioral psychologists emphasize how stimuli and reinforcement contingencies drive motivated action.
- Cognitive perspective: Cognitive theories focus on internal processes like expectations, beliefs and goals. People are motivated by how they interpret tasks and outcomes. For example, Expectancy-Value Theory (a cognitive model) proposes that effort and persistence depend on one's expectations of success and the value placed on the outcome. Psychology Today summarizes Vroom's expectancy theory by noting that motivation requires three beliefs expectancy (effort leads to performance), instrumentality (performance leads to rewards), and valence (the reward is desirable)

  psychologytoday.com. Cognitive approaches highlight how goals, attributions and self-efficacy influence motivation (Bandura's self-efficacy is a key driver: confident people set higher goals and persist longer verywellmind.com).

**Humanistic perspective:** Humanistic psychologists (e.g. Maslow, Rogers) view motivation as growth-oriented. Maslow's famous hierarchy states that people are

motivated to satisfy needs in order of importance: starting with basic physiological needs, then safety, love/belonging, esteem, and finally **self-actualization** psychologytoday.com. In this view, the pinnacle of motivation is fulfilling one's potential. As Psychology Today explains, "humans are inherently motivated to better themselves and move toward expressing their full potential—self-actualization—by progressively encountering and satisfying" needs from food/safety up to belonging and esteem psychologytoday.com. Humanistic theorists emphasize intrinsic drives like creativity, meaning and personal growth.

• **Biological perspective:** The biological view links motivation to physiological states and brain processes. Innate drives (hunger, thirst, sex) and homeostatic needs create biological "pushes" that motivate behavior. For example, Drive Reduction Theory (a classic biological/behavioral model) holds that unmet needs create internal drives (e.g. hunger) which compel actions to reduce them enwikipedia.org. Modern neuroscience finds that brain chemicals also underlie motivation. For instance, dopamine pathways in the brain's reward circuits play a crucial role: dopamine signals help evaluate rewards and sustain effort. The biological perspective stresses nature and physiology – for example, dopamine's role in motivation has been widely documented verywellmind.com. From this view, motivation is rooted in genetic and neural mechanisms that evolved to promote survival.

Together, these perspectives show that motivation can be driven by external rewards and punishments (behavioral), by internal beliefs and goals (cognitive), by higher needs and growth (humanistic), and by biological drives and brain circuits (biological). No single view fully explains motivation, but each highlights important factors and mechanisms verywellmind.com

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## **Core Theories of Motivation**

Psychologists have proposed many theories to explain **why** we are motivated. Key theories include:

**Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:** A **content** theory proposing a pyramid of human needs. Lower needs (physiological, safety) must be at least partially satisfied before higher needs (love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization) can motivate. Maslow argued that

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- people are "motivated to better themselves" by moving through these levels, ultimately striving for self-actualization psychologytoday.com. Although critics point out the hierarchy is not rigid, it captures the idea that both basic survival needs and psychological needs (belonging, esteem) drive motivation.
- Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan): A needs-based theory emphasizing autonomy and intrinsic motivation. SDT holds that people have three basic psychological needs autonomy (control over one's actions), competence (mastery of tasks), and relatedness (connections with others) and fulfilling these needs fosters selfmotivated behavior. When these needs are satisfied, individuals show greater intrinsic motivation and wellbeing verywellmind.com. For example, Deci and Ryan note that offering choice and positive feedback (supporting autonomy and competence) enhances intrinsic motivation verywellmind.com. Research also shows that both intrinsic motives and autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation (values internalized into identity) predict success and persistence selfdeterminationtheory.org. A corollary is the overjustification effect: excessive external rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation by reducing feelings of autonomy verywellmind.com.
- **Expectancy Theory (Vroom):** A **process** theory primarily applied to workplace motivation. It proposes that motivation is a product of how strongly a person expects that effort will lead to performance (expectancy), that performance will lead to a reward (instrumentality), and how much the person values the reward (valence) psychologytoday.com. If any of these is low, motivation declines. For example, if an employee doubts that hard work will bring a raise (low expectancy) or does not value the potential bonus (low valence), they will be less motivated to put in extra effort psychologytoday.com.
- Moal-Setting Theory (Locke & Latham): This process theory emphasizes the motivational power of clear, challenging goals. Locke and Latham found that *specific*, difficult goals consistently lead to higher performance than easy or vague goals, especially when coupled with feedback and commitment positivepsychology.com. Thus, setting a clear target (e.g. "increase sales by 15% this quarter") and receiving progress feedback can sharply boost motivation and focus positivepsychology.com. The theory also notes that goals aligned with personal values enhance persistence.
  - **Drive Reduction Theory (Hull):** A classic **biological/behavioral** theory. Hull proposed that unmet physiological needs create internal drives (states of tension) which motivate actions to reduce them. For example, a physiological need (like hunger) creates a drive, and behaviors that reduce that drive (eating) are reinforced. "Drive" is defined as the

- motivation arising from a need en.wikipedia.org. Thus, drive reduction theory explains many homeostatic behaviors (eating, drinking, seeking warmth) as efforts to return to equilibrium. One limitation is that it cannot easily explain behaviors not tied to basic drives (such as thrill-seeking).
- motivators. It holds that people are pulled into action by incentives (rewards or punishments) in the environment. In other words, behavior is motivated by the anticipation of desired external outcomes. As noted earlier, Incentive Theory argues that "behavior is primarily extrinsically motivated" and people work hard when rewards follow their actions socialsci.libretexts.org. For example, offering a bonus or praise increases the likelihood of repeated behavior. Incentive Theory underlies many reward-based approaches in education and management.
- Achievement Motivation (McClelland & Atkinson): This theory focuses on the need to achieve success and avoid failure. It describes how a person's "motive to achieve" interacts with the motive to avoid failure in situations of evaluation. McClelland and Atkinson characterized achievement motivation as the drive to meet a standard of excellence: "Achievement-oriented activity is activity undertaken ... with the expectation that performance will be evaluated in terms of some standard of excellence"

  principlesoflearning.wordpress.com. People high in achievement motivation set challenging yet attainable goals, take calculated risks, and show persistence in the face of obstacles. This theory highlights individual differences in how strongly people are driven by success versus fear of failure principlesoflearning.wordpress.com.

Each of these theories offers a different lens on motivation. For instance, Maslow and SDT focus on needs and growth, while Vroom and Locke emphasize cognitive processes and goals. Together they cover internal drives (biological), psychological needs, and external incentives. No single theory fully explains all motivated behavior, but each contributes key insights into what motivates us and how.

## Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

A core distinction in motivation research is between **intrinsic** and **extrinsic** motivation:

**Intrinsic motivation** refers to engaging in an activity for its *own sake*, because it is interesting or enjoyable. The motivation comes from within the person. For example, someone who **runs because they love the feeling of running itself** is intrinsically motivated psychologytoday.com. Intrinsic motivation is often associated with long-term persistence and satisfaction: "Intrinsic motivation tends to push people more forcefully, and the accomplishments are more fulfilling" psychologytoday.com. People who are intrinsically motivated on tasks usually experience higher creativity and engagement.

• Extrinsic motivation refers to doing an activity to earn a reward or avoid punishment. The motivation comes from outside the individual. For example, a student may study hard to get good grades, praise from parents, or a scholarship, rather than for the joy of learning. Psychology Today defines extrinsic motivation as performing work "other than the joy of doing the work itself", and notes that external rewards or punishments drive the behavior psychologytoday.com. Research (SDT) shows that simple external rewards can sometimes undermine intrinsic interest (overjustification effect), so modern theory stresses aligning external incentives with personal values to avoid this pitfall

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**Example:** Consider two students assigned a science project. One student (A) works diligently because she finds the subject fascinating and wants to master it (intrinsic). Another student (B) works hard to avoid disappointing her parents and earn a good grade (extrinsic). Both are motivated, but A's motivation comes from internal interest, while B's comes from external factors. Importantly, as The Education Hub notes, extrinsic motivators can vary: a student might be driven by fear of failure or by seeing value in the task. For instance, one student may study to avoid punishment, while another studies because he values the career opportunity the subject provides theeducationhub.org.nz. Even in extrinsic cases, the more that rewards align with personal meaning, the more sustainable the motivation.

## Role of Motivation in Education, Work, and Personal Development

**Education:** Motivation is critical for student learning and achievement. Research shows that motivated students engage more deeply and achieve higher grades. For example, studies find that "achievement motivation energizes and directs behavior toward achievement and therefore is known to be an important determinant of academic success" frontiersin.org. Motivated students are more likely to adopt effective study strategies, persist through difficulties, and be curious. Theories like Expectancy-Value are often applied in education: a student will work harder on a subject if she expects to do well and values the learning theeducationhub.org.nz. Mastery-oriented goals (desire to learn) also boost learning: students with a mastery focus continue refining work out of pride and interest, rather than stopping at minimal requirements theeducationhub.org.nz. In practice, teachers can boost motivation by relating material to students' interests, giving autonomy (choices in projects), and providing meaningful feedback verywellmind.com

Workplace: In organizations, motivation drives productivity, creativity and job satisfaction. Motivated employees tend to be more engaged, meet performance goals, and show greater commitment to their work. Management theories draw directly on motivation research. For instance, setting clear, challenging goals (Goal-Setting Theory) and linking them to rewards can improve employee performance positivepsychology.com. Frederick Herzberg's two-factor theory (noted here for context) emphasizes intrinsic motivators (achievement, recognition) as key to job satisfaction. Self-Determination Theory is also influential in work settings: employees perform best when their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness are met (e.g., being given meaningful tasks and support) selfdeterminationtheory.org. Conversely, purely controlling management practices (overbearing rewards/punishments) may boost short-term output but can hurt long-term engagement verywellmind.com. Overall, leading organizations focus on aligning individual goals with company mission (adding a sense of purpose) and on creating an autonomy-supportive climate.

**Personal Development:** On the personal level, motivation underlies all goal pursuit and selfimprovement. Whether learning a new skill, adopting healthy habits, or pursuing a personal project, motivation determines persistence. Individuals with strong intrinsic interests (e.g. a passion for music) find it easier to practice and improve. Self-motivation strategies (as discussed below) help sustain effort over time. For example, someone trying to get fit might stay motivated by setting personally meaningful goals (like hiking a favorite trail) and by celebrating small wins. In life-long learning or career development, motivation to learn new things or overcome obstacles is often tied to identity and values. Positive psychology research emphasizes "growth mindset" – the belief that abilities can be

developed – as a driver that keeps personal goals alive even after setbacks (though formal citation of Dweck is not given here). In sum, personal growth depends on cultivating motivation through goal-

setting, self-efficacy, and aligning actions with personal purpose verywellmind.com verywellmind.com.

## **Strategies to Boost Motivation**

Psychologists offer many practical tips to increase motivation in various contexts. Common strategies include:

- **Set meaningful, specific goals.** Tailor goals to personal values and break them into manageable steps verywellmind.com. For example, instead of "get in shape," define "jog 3 times a week" and "lose 2 pounds per month." Research suggests goals that matter to you yield higher motivation verywellmind.com.
- Enhance self-efficacy and confidence. Build skills gradually and acknowledge past successes. Positive feedback and skill mastery bolster the competence need in SDT, thereby increasing motivation verywellmind.com verywellmind.com. As one guide notes, "gaining more confidence in yourself and your skills can impact your ability to achieve your goals" verywellmind.com.
- Provide feedback and celebrate progress. Regular, constructive feedback keeps
  people on track and reinforces competence verywellmind.com. Acknowledging small
  achievements can sustain momentum (incremental goal-setting). For instance, teachers
  can praise effort and improvement, and managers can recognize milestones.
- Encourage autonomy and mastery orientation. Allowing choices and emphasizing learning-for-its-own-sake fosters intrinsic motivation verywellmind.com theeducationhub.org.nz. In education, focusing on mastery goals (improving skills) rather than performance goals (outdoing others) helps students stay motivated even after formal assessment theeducationhub.org.nz. In the workplace, giving employees a say in how to achieve targets and explaining the purpose behind tasks satisfies the autonomy need selfdeterminationtheory.org.
- Make tasks engaging and relevant. Connect activities to personal interests or real-world benefits. If a task seems irrelevant, try to reframe it: ask "how will this help me achieve something I care about?" or find creative ways to make it enjoyable (e.g. gamify study). The Education Hub notes that extrinsic incentives can backfire unless the activity itself has perceived value theeducationhub.org.nz.

Use appropriate incentives. When using rewards, ensure they support rather than undermine intrinsic interest. According to Self-Determination Theory, controlling rewards (e.g. paying only for performance) may reduce autonomy, but giving unexpected positive encouragement can boost motivation verywellmind.com. In other words, reward progress in a way that feels genuine and not controlling, and combine rewards with opportunities for personal choice.

**Leverage social support and accountability.** Working with peers, mentors, or groups can increase relatedness and commitment to goals. For example, study groups, workout buddies, or accountability partners can provide encouragement and mild social pressure to stick to commitments. This taps into SDT's relatedness need and often raises motivation.

Manage obstacles and mindset. Recognize that setbacks are normal. Avoid "allornothing" thinking: if one lapse occurs, it doesn't mean total failure verywellmind.com. Instead,
focus on gradual progress. Cultivating a growth mindset (belief that effort leads to
improvement) helps maintain motivation after failures (a point emphasized by Dweck,
though not cited here).

Implementing these strategies depends on context. In education, teachers can make learning choices available, set clear expectations, and link material to students' interests verywellmind.com theeducationhub.org.nz. In the workplace, managers can involve employees in goal-setting and design jobs to build skills positivepsychology.com selfdeterminationtheory.org. Individuals can boost their own motivation by tracking progress (journals, apps), setting personally relevant goals, and reminding themselves of past successes verywellmind.com verywellmind.com. These approaches are supported by research on goal setting, self-efficacy, and basic needs (autonomy, competence) verywellmind.com verywellmind.com, and they tend to produce more **sustained** motivation than sporadic rewards alone.

## **Leading Psychologists and Current Research**

Motivation has been studied by many eminent psychologists and remains a vibrant research area. Key contributions and current insights include:

• **Abraham Maslow** (Humanistic psychology) underscored the role of hierarchical needs, highlighting self-actualization as the highest motivational goal psychologytoday.com. His work

reminds us that motivation often aligns with growth and personal meaning once basic needs are met.

• **Clark Hull** (Behaviorism) proposed Drive Reduction Theory in the 1940s en.wikipedia.org, illustrating how basic physiological needs (drives) push behavior. His model laid groundwork for later theories by linking motivation to internal states.

**Edward Deci & Richard Ryan** (SDT) have been leading voices in recent decades. They emphasize the importance of supporting autonomy, competence and relatedness for enduring motivation. Current research from their group shows that *both* intrinsic motives and "well-internalized" extrinsic motives (autonomous motivation) lead to positive outcomes in education and work selfdeterminationtheory.org. They warn against controlling incentives: controlling policies that neglect these psychological needs can undermine motivation verywellmind.com

- Victor Vroom (Expectancy Theory) introduced a cognitive approach to work motivation, identifying the critical roles of expectancy, instrumentality and valence psychologytoday.com. His framework remains influential in organizational psychology for designing reward systems.
- Edwin A. Locke & Gary P. Latham (Goal-Setting Theory) demonstrated through extensive research that *specific, challenging goals* significantly boost motivation and performance positive psychology.com. They showed the power of goal commitment and feedback principles widely applied in management and self-improvement.
- David McClelland & John Atkinson developed Achievement Motivation Theory,
  focusing on the need to achieve success versus avoid failure principlesoflearning.wordpress.com. They
  helped explain why some individuals are intensely driven to excel. Modern educational
  psychology often builds on their idea by examining students' achievement goals and
  motives.
- **Albert Bandura** (Social Cognitive Theory) highlighted **self-efficacy** belief in one's own capabilities as a central determinant of motivation. High self-efficacy leads people to set higher goals and persist longer. As reflected in recent advice, increasing confidence in one's skills can significantly improve motivation verywellmind.com. Bandura's work reminds us that cognitive appraisals of ability are powerful motivational drivers.
- **Carol Dweck** (Mindset Theory) showed that people who believe abilities can grow (a "growth mindset") are more motivated to learn from failure than those with a fixed mindset. While not detailed here, this research is highly relevant: it suggests that attributing failure to lack of effort (not lack of ability) can sustain motivation over time.
- Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Flow Theory) described how people become deeply
  motivated when fully absorbed in challenging tasks. Flow the state of intense focus
  and enjoyment occurs when skill and challenge are balanced. This work highlights that
  intrinsically engaging tasks can generate their own reward, fueling motivation.

**Contemporary research trends:** Current studies often integrate these ideas. For example, **Expectancy-Value Theory** (Eccles & Wigfield) refines expectancy theory in education, emphasizing how beliefs about competence and task value predict achievement motivation. Neuroscience research continues to unravel biological underpinnings: for instance, researchers study how dopamine encodes reward expectations and drives "wanting" of goals verywellmind.com. There is also growing emphasis on long-term motivation: Deci & Ryan (2020) note that motivation must be *sustained* by supporting psychological needs, and that policies should shift from controlling models to need-supportive ones selfdeterminationtheory.org. In sum, leading psychologists agree that motivation is multi-determined: durable motivation often comes from internalized goals, personal meaning, and supportive environments, rather than from external pressure

alone verywellmind.com selfdeterminationtheory.org.

**Summary:** Motivation is a complex phenomenon studied from many angles. Theories from Maslow's needs to modern self-determination highlight different drivers – from basic physiological states to the quest for autonomy and purpose. Researchers now emphasize that satisfying people's internal needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and aligning tasks with personal values are key to powerful, lasting motivation verywellmind.com selfdeterminationtheory.org. Understanding motivation thus requires integrating insights across behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, and biological domains.

**Sources:** Authoritative reviews and textbooks of motivation verywellmind.com selfdeterminationtheory.org, contemporary psychology articles psychologytoday.com verywellmind.com, and current research findings verywellmind.com have been used to provide this overview.

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