Chapter 5

The Mind: Psychological Needs as a Motivator

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# Learning Objectives

* Describe the different types of psychological needs.
* Explain the role psychological needs play in motivation.
* Define Self-Determination Theory.

# Introduction

Motivation is a universal experience that is the driving force for human behavior. However, not everyone understands how motivation works and what factors play a part in actions. What factors affect your engagement and well-being? In this chapter, we will explore the types of psychological needs as well as how to apply them to your lives and goals.

# Understanding Psychological Needs

**Psychological needs** are basic needs that motivate human behavior. Satisfaction of these needs can lead to emotional well-being, satisfaction in life, and success.

Psychological needs are often confused with **basic/physiological needs**. Basic needs are needs that a human cannot live without. They are universal to everyone, and without them, it can lead to physical illness or death. This includes food, water, shelter, air, and sleep. Psychological needs are not vital for human survival but are vital for emotional wellness. These needs are subjective and depends on the person. Basic needs are essential to physical health, and psychological needs are essential to emotional health. Psychological needs can be either **extrinsic** or **intrinsic**. Extrinsic motivation is driven by external factors. An example of extrinsic motivation would be picking up trash for community service because it looks good on your resume. Intrinsic motivation is driven by internal factors. Picking up trash for community service because you care about your community being clean would be an example of intrinsic motivation.

Psychological needs are important for several reasons. They provide a framework for understanding human behavior. This allows people to create environments that promote a better well-being. Having a good well-being motivates people to achieve their goals. By understanding which needs you have a sense of, individuals know how to use those needs to motivate themselves and learn which needs their need to work on developing.

# Types of Psychological Needs

There are three psychological needs: **autonomy**, **competence**, and **relatedness**.

Autonomy is the need for self-control and freedom to make your own decisions. When a person is autonomous, they feel engaged and satisfied with their tasks because they feel in control and have responsibility over their actions. People usually gain more autonomy as they get older because most children’s autonomy is taken away by their parents or teachers. Some people never fully gain autonomy because they often do things to try to please other people. A major way to fulfill your autonomy is to make yourself your main priority instead of other people. For instance, rather than pursuing a major that you don’t want, pick a major that you’re interesting in. This will give you more motivation to go to class and do well while studying the major you don’t want will make you frustrated, stressed, or even depressed.

Competence is the need to achieve a sense of mastery in order to work independently. It is seen as essential to wellness. Competence can make an individual feel confident in their own abilities because they are improving and successful in their tasks. If someone is given tasks that are challenging and too difficult, they might become frustrated and demotivated, and if the task is too easy, they might become bored. If the task is both challenging and not too difficult, they will feel competent and capable to successfully perform the task.

Relatedness is the need for social belonging and feeling connected to others around you.It makes people value their connections with other people and feel safe with a group of people that they get along with. People with a sense of relatedness work better in groups and get more done than if they were alone. They tend to value teamwork and communication. When an individual’s relatedness is satisfied, they feel a sense of encouragement and support rather than feeling isolated and unsupported.

# Psychological Needs in Motivation

Psychological needs play a crucial role in motivation. By understanding psychological needs, people can create environments that promote motivation and a positive well-being. By not understanding psychological needs, people create negative, unhealthy environments that are unsupportive.

When a person’s psychological needs are satisfied, they experience greater motivation and better well-being. When their autonomy is satisfied, they feel in control driven. When a person’s competence is satisfied, they want to learn more and face new challenges. When a person’s relatedness is satisfied, they feel safe and like they belong. However, when a person’s psychological needs are not satisfied, they are met with demotivation. If they lack autonomy, it can lead to disengagement and feeling disconnected. If they lack competence, it can lead to frustration and a lower self-A person sitting on a couch

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceconcept. If they lack relatedness, they can feel alone and dejected.

# Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory states that “we do what we do because we’re motivated by three basic needs that drive our behavior more than anything else” (Sprouts, 2022). Motivation ranges on a spectrum called the Self-Determination Continuum. The spectrum ranges from non-self-determined to self-determined. On the left side, there is **amotivation**. Amotivation causes a person to act apathetic and without any interest or concern in what they are doing, leading them to behave on autopilot. On the right side, there is intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation allows a person to motivate themselves without any outside sources. When a person is intrinsically motivated, they find enjoyment in what they are doing and will learn more about it for fun rather than for work or school.

In the center of the spectrum, there is extrinsic motivation, and it is broken into four sections: external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation. External regulation comes from motivation strictly from outside sources. An example of external regulation would be a child studying more because their parents give them money for each A on their report card. Introjected regulation is when an action is performed out of obligation rather than for an internal purpose. An example would be continuing to play a sport in order to not disappoint your coach or teammates. Identified regulation is when the motivation comes from upholding a personal standard. An example would be performing a skin care routine because you want to look younger as you age. Lastly, integrated regulation is when a person’s motivation becomes integrated into their self-concept. An example would be practicing Diagram

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# Applying Psychological Needs

Psychological needs can be applied in many different environments, such as work, education, and relationships. While every human has psychological needs, it affects each person differently and on a different scale. Some jobs might require more relatedness, like customer service jobs. This allows the workers to create connections with both their customers and their coworkers. Other jobs require more competence, such as in factories. This allows the workers to be good at jobs that are usually repetitive, meticulous, and leave little room for error.

Autonomy and relatedness go hand-in-hand when it comes to social needs and belonging. Green (2014) states “Our social needs have to be balanced with our autonomy… so we feel both connected and independent.” For instance, both are essential for a healthy relationship. Having autonomy in a relationship allows both people to have control of themselves and their desires. When relationships lack autonomy, a person in the relationship might be controlling over their partner. This could be in what they wear, where they can go, or even what food they eat for dinner. Relatedness in relationships allows both partners to share a connection and feel comfortable around each other. Lacking relatedness can lead to one or both partners feeling alone and disconnected in their relationship.

# Conclusion

Psychological needs motivate human behavior and promote engagement and a better well-being. The three types of psychological needs are autonomy, the need for self-control; competence, the need to develop a sense of mastery in skills; and relatedness, the need for connections and belonging. While psychological needs are universal, each individual person experiences them differently and may value one of the others.

# Key Take-Aways

* The three types of psychological needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness.
* When a person’s psychological needs are satisfied, they experience greater motivation.
* When a person’s psychological needs are not satisfied, they are met with demotivation.
* Understanding psychological needs can create environments that promote motivation and a positive well-being.
* Self-Determination Theory states that the three psychological needs are essential for a person’s motivation.

# Discussion

1. What is the difference between psychological and physiological needs?
2. Which of the three psychological needs for you feel like you prioritize the most?
3. What is the Self-Determination Continuum?
4. What is a time when one of your psychological needs were unmet, and how did you overcome that?
5. Why do psychological needs affect each person differently?
6. What is the difference between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation?

# Key Terms

1. **Psychological needs** – Basic needs that motivate human behavior.
2. **Basic needs** – Also known as physiological needs; Needs that a human cannot live without.
3. **Extrinsic** – Motivation that is driven by external factors.
4. **Intrinsic** – Motivation that is driven by internal factors.
5. **Autonomy** – The need for self-control and freedom to make your own decisions.
6. **Competence** – The need to develop new skills to achieve a sense of mastery.
7. **Relatedness** – The need for social belonging and feeling connected to others around you.
8. **Amotivation** – Causes a person to act apathetic and without any interest or concern in what they are doing, leading them to behave on autopilot.

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