

## Self-Determination Theory: Intrinsic Motivation and Behavioral Change

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Motivation is a central concept in behavioral change. This article reviews the self-determination theory with an emphasis on “intrinsic motivation,” which is facilitated when three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) are met. Intrinsic motivation is associated with improved well-being and sustained behavioral change.

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Motivation is essential in any aspect of behavioral change. For practicing nurses intervening with patients to promote specific behaviors, consideration of the theoretical underpinning for motivation to change or initiate behaviors is key in delivering effective nursing care. Similarly, nurse researchers whose study requires active engagement of individual participants need to consider motivation for adherence to study procedures and interventions. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of intrinsic motivation as presented in self-determination theory (SDT).

### Self-Determination Theory

The SDT of motivation was developed by psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan at the University of Rochester. Deci and Ryan identified their theoretical approach as organismic and dialectic (SDT, 2017). An organismic worldview understands individuals as active organisms with goals of mastering and integrating new experiences. This predisposition for growth is affected by interactions with the environment; the exchange, or dialectic, occurs between an individual and his or her social environment.

SDT includes six minitheories based on laboratory and field research. An international cadre of researchers and a dedicated website provide extensive resources

and information. Professionals in a wide range of disciplines, including healthcare, have used SDT. A meta-analysis of 184 health-related studies using SDT revealed favorable support for the SDT framework and constructs (Ng et al., 2012). Theoretically derived interventions based on SDT have been found to promote long-term sustained behavioral change in areas such as smoking cessation and increased physical activity (Williams et al., 2006).

SDT specifically addresses the type of motivation (i.e., intrinsic or extrinsic), not the amount of motivation (i.e., high or low). An SDT minitheory that directly relates to intrinsic motivation is the cognitive evaluation theory (CET). Central to SDT and CET is the concept of intrinsic motivation, which is “based on the satisfactions of behaving ‘for its own sake’” (SDT, 2017, p. 1). The reason to engage in behavior is the reward obtained from the behavior; play is a classic example. An underlying tenant of SDT is that psychological well-being is related to three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When the social context facilitates these three basic needs, a person is more likely to engage in intrinsically motivated behaviors. If the situational context promotes these three needs, then a person’s natural behavior is more likely to be self-motivated.

Autonomy is the need to be in charge of the course of our lives. The identification of this need