

Increasing Well-Being with Self-Determination & Autonomy

What Is Autonomy?

Motivation is essential for student development. It activates, directs and sustains learning. What motivates you as a student? Are you someone who grudgingly does the minimum or someone who is curious and enjoys learning and sometimes does more than what is expected? Motivation differs not only in intensity but also in type. Being motivated to get a grade can be as intense as being motivated by curiosity. However, these two forms of motivation have different effects on your well-being. Autonomous sources of motivation are more enduring and enjoyable. When you make learning more interesting and engaging, it sticks with you and you have more fun.

To become sufficiently autonomous as a student, three conditions must be met. You must a) be competent, b) have adequate social support, and c) work within a context that encourages self-determination. Note that autonomy and individuality are related but not synonymous. Infants and woolly bear caterpillars have a lot of individuality but little autonomy. People with the highest levels of well-being are socially smart. They know how to achieve their own autonomy without compromising the autonomy of others and they have discovered ways to express their autonomy that deepen and strengthen interpersonal relationships, not weaken them. Their competence contributes to the welfare of others and, in turn, solicits social support and shared opportunities. Autonomy is not a license for individuality. It is a socially adaptive form of self-determination.

Why Become More Autonomous?

In general, intrinsic motivation is better than extrinsic motivation, and in most domains of life, it is better to be the rider than the horse, the batter than the ball. Autonomous, intrinsic motivation is associated with creativity, superb task performance and optimal well-being. With academic learning tasks, autonomous forms of motivation are positively correlated with engagement, enjoyment, persistence, and excellence. In addition, autonomous self-regulated students are more likely to avoid or reduce the negative consequences of external control such as anxiety, stress and diminished self-worth, and they are less likely to self-handicap, rationalize, and misattribute setbacks to instructors or others. Because the learning of autonomous students is self-integrated, they are naturally inclined to use mastery learning strategies, and therefore, are equally ready to benefit from failure as success. Without autonomy, your journey through college will be a forced march, but with it, it can be an enjoyable adventure in learning.

<p style="text-align: center;">Three Ways to Strengthen Autonomy</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Caveats & Comments</p>										
<p>1) Determining Your Self-Determination.</p> <p>Knowing when and how you are self-determined is the beginning of positive change and a healthier state of well-being. In at least four important areas of your life as a student assess the level of autonomy you have. Use the scale below, to judge the kind of motivation you have to a) do academic work, b) prepare for a career, c) participate in extracurricular activities, and d) do pastimes & hobbies. Think of specific current experiences in each of the areas above then assess your level of autonomy in each using the following scale:</p> <p>1 = The experience is unimportant and meaningless yet you are forced to comply by strong rewards and punishments. You feel resentful, disconnected and dejected.</p> <p>2 = The experience is important enough to affect your self-esteem. You feel pressure to do well to protect your pride and avoid guilt. Reward and punishment is external and beyond your control.</p> <p>3 = You highly value and endorse the experience. It has meaning for you because it is the right thing to do. No one has to spur you to get started or keep going, but the experience does not generate its own energy and it is more of a means to an end than an end itself.</p> <p>4 = The experience deeply engages you. It is very interesting. You feel in control. It is an end in itself; you do it for its own sake. Rather than sapping you of energy, it energizes you and makes you feel happy, free, and fully alive.</p> <table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;"><u>Area of Life</u></th> <th style="text-align: left;"><u>Motivation Rating</u></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>a) academic work</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>b) career preparation</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>c) extracurricular activity</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>d) pastimes & hobbies</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<u>Area of Life</u>	<u>Motivation Rating</u>	a) academic work	_____	b) career preparation	_____	c) extracurricular activity	_____	d) pastimes & hobbies	_____	<p><i>Remember that competence affects your experience of autonomy. The lack of skill and knowledge weakens control and undermines autonomy. For example, a person with low dancing skills will feel less autonomous on the dance floor. However, this person could increase his autonomy by taking dancing lessons and practicing with an enthusiastic partner.</i></p> <p><i>External control, while not always pleasant, may be necessary to acquire new knowledge and skill. For example, many people intrinsically enjoy playing the guitar but earlier in their lives they may have had to endure an unpleasant, externally controlled phase in learning.</i></p> <p><i>High levels of autonomy are desirable but may be impossible to attain in every venue in life. A more realistic goal is to acquire a “portfolio” of sufficient autonomy, that is, having higher levels of autonomy where it matters and lower levels where it does not. Use the autonomy scale to assess other areas of your life (e.g., relationships with others).</i></p>
<u>Area of Life</u>	<u>Motivation Rating</u>										
a) academic work	_____										
b) career preparation	_____										
c) extracurricular activity	_____										
d) pastimes & hobbies	_____										
<p>2) Becoming More Mindful.</p> <p>Mindfulness unleashes self-determination. Automatic perceptual processes and cognitive biases undermine autonomy and self-determination. There are at least three things you can do to become more mindful: a) meditation, b) yoga, and c) systematic observation. On campus or within the community of a college there</p>	<p><i>Please shop for forms of meditation that increase your awareness of self and establish a better balance between mind and body. Meditation alone has been shown to enhance feelings of well-being apart from the effects it has on mindfulness; this is particularly so for</i></p>										

are opportunities to learn how to meditate. Take a course on meditation and practice it daily for 6 weeks or longer. Courses on yoga are also frequently available. Find a yoga instructor who stresses reflection and movement awareness as well as the acquisition of strength and flexibility. Again, to reap the benefits of yoga, you must practice it for about 6 weeks or longer. Improvements in observational skills can be attained through courses in the arts curriculum such as courses in acting, drawing or photography. In the science curriculum, courses such as ecology, animal behavior, or astronomy promote the development of keen observational skills. In the social or behavioral sciences, lab courses employing participant observation or other ethnographic methods can provide powerful de-centering eye-opening experiences.

people in Western cultures. Be patient, it must be practiced for awhile to reap its positive benefits.

There are certainly many other ways to increase your observational skills or what might be called “perceptual intelligence.” Any experiences that help you objectify the self so you can more easily attend to and more clearly discern what is happening outside the self will enhance mindfulness (e.g., foreign travel). When you acquire acute observational skills the complexity and beauty of the world will be revealed to you. Simple things that are part of your everyday life will increasingly become sources of curiosity, joy, sorrow, and other rich emotions.

3) Increasing the Intrinsic Value of Learning.

Students have a lot of control of their lives. Use your control to prepare for, select, and participate in learning environments that are more intrinsically rewarding.

Preparation. Many “good students” are admitted to college who do not have the skill, knowledge or readiness to survive, let alone, flourish in college. Are you a student who is not sufficiently prepared for college? Do an honest assessment of your “academic efficacy.” Go to the learning enhancement or academic support center on your campus to discover your overall strengths and weaknesses in learning. Then plan ways to use your strengths more effectively and do what you must to remediate your weaknesses. Prepare for specific courses by doing work before the course begins. Prepare for specific class days by doing assignments or other work before class. Prepare with others when possible by working collaboratively with peers, staff and faculty.

Selection. Select a career area and academic major that optimizes your strengths. Obtain insight into your strengths of character and strengths of talent by

Competence is highly associated with well-being. It is difficult to enjoy being a student when you do not have the skills and knowledge to easily dispatch challenges in learning. Competence is not destiny, you can always improve it.

The preparation of students and instructors is reciprocal. Instructors will be more responsive to you the more you prepare. In turn, they will prepare more. Mutual preparation creates an upward spiral of engagement in a class. Your preparation, or the lack of it, will facilitate or frustrate engagement in the classroom.

A few instructors become popular on campus because they are easy. While

completing online inventories such as *Signature Strengths* (<http://www.viacharacter.org/>) or *Strengths Quest* (<https://www.strengthsquest.com/>). Select instructors and courses based on their “intrinsic reinforcement potential.” Such courses invite students to a menu of learning opportunities, forecast a warm collaborative classroom climate and emphasize improvement and growth in their grading systems. Avoid pessimistic instructors who seem to design their courses around the worst students they have taught. The syllabi of these instructors read like a legal brief with numerous clauses designed to prevent and punish noncompliant behavior. Even good instructors can spend more energy warning you than welcoming you and they may inadvertently presume you are just another insincere student to be managed, not to be led or inspired.

Participation. If a required course is not initially intrinsically rewarding, or if an elective course suddenly becomes less interesting, there are things you can do to make learning more intrinsically rewarding. First, outside of class, strengthen the relationship you have with your instructor. Meet with your instructor during office hours or take other steps to get to know him or her as a person. In class, force yourself to participate. Class participation is like swimming; sometimes it is uncomfortable to jump in the water, but once there, you’ll want to stay. Class participation expresses your autonomy and, because of the control you gain, you will naturally seek what is more interesting. Participate more in the design of class assignments. Negotiate with the instructor to modify an assignment to make it more interesting for you. Steer the assignment toward your strengths. Remember, course assignments are ways to learn, they are not ends in themselves. Pick valid alternative ways to learn that are intrinsically rewarding and autonomy building.

you may obtain a good grade from these instructors, you may not be challenged enough by them. Select courses that entertain as well as challenge you.

Also pick courses that share control of learning with you. These courses give you choices in the what’s, how’s and when’s of learning.

Optimistic instructors create optimistic learning environments. Even if you are a pessimist, you will have a better learning experience under the wing of an optimist.

The single best predictor of the quality of a learning experience is the quality of the relationship between the instructor and the student. Learning is interpersonal. Get to know your instructor and reveal yourself to him or her. Encourage the same in other students.

Sometimes attitudes follow behavior. Forcing yourself to do something is a reliable way to arouse motivation. Soon you will find yourself attracted to work that once pushed you away (e.g., learning a new language).

Instructors respect students who sincerely want to learn, however most are wary of students who just want a low-effort deal. Do not be intimidated if your first attempt at renegotiating an assignment is misperceived as insincere. Be persistent.

References

- Baer, R. A. (2003). Mindfulness training as a clinical intervention: A conceptual and empirical review. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 10*, 125-143.
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. ((1995). Human autonomy: The basis of true self-esteem. In M. Kernis (Ed), *Efficacy, Agency and Self-Esteem*. New York, Plenum Press.
- Brown, K. W. & Ryan, R. M. (2004). Fostering Healthy Self-Regulation Within and Without: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective. In P. A. Linley, & S. Joseph (Eds.). *Positive Psychology in Practice*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Ryan, R. M., Stiller, J., & Lynch, J. H. (1994). Representations of relationships to teachers, parents, and friends as predictors of academic motivation and self-esteem. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 14*, 226-249.
- Walker, C. J., Rohan, K., & Scott, F. (1993). *Instructor optimism and syllabus content: Associations with teaching effectiveness*. Research presented at the national convention of the Association for Psychological Science held in Chicago.