

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

A Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) Handout

When we try to change a behavior, our motivation for doing so matters. In CBT, we examine the thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and consequences that influence our choices. One useful distinction is whether our motivation is primarily *intrinsic* or *extrinsic*.

Intrinsic Motivation: “I Choose This”

Intrinsic motivation comes from within. We make a change because it is consistent with our personal values, goals, beliefs, or the kind of person we want to be.

Examples:

- “I want to exercise because being healthy is important to me.”
- “I want to manage my anger because I want healthier relationships.”
- “I want to stop using substances because I want the life I am capable of having.”
- “I want to establish boundaries because I value my emotional well-being.”

Intrinsic motivation does not mean that the change will always feel good or be easy. It means that the reason for making the change is personally meaningful.

Extrinsic Motivation: “I Have To”

Extrinsic motivation comes primarily from outside ourselves. We change because of rewards, consequences, expectations, pressure, or the desire to gain approval or avoid disapproval.

Examples:

- “I am exercising because my doctor told me I have to.”
- “I am going to therapy because my partner said I need to.”
- “I am staying sober because I don't want to lose my job.”
- “I am changing my behavior because everyone is angry with me.”

Extrinsic motivation is not necessarily unhealthy. External consequences and encouragement can provide an important reason to begin making a change. However, relying exclusively on external pressure can make change more difficult to maintain when that pressure is removed.

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CBT: Examine the Thought Behind the Motivation

CBT encourages us to examine the thoughts that influence our behavior.

Example:

Situation: Someone criticizes my behavior.

1. *Automatic thought:* “I have to change because there is something wrong with me.”
2. *Emotion:* Shame
3. *Behavior:* I either become defensive or try to please the other person.

A CBT reframe might be:

Balanced thought: “There may be something about my behavior that I want to change, but that does not mean there is something fundamentally wrong with me. I can decide whether this change fits my values and the person I want to become.”

New motivation: “I choose to work on this because healthier behavior is important to me.”

The goal is to move from automatic compliance or resistance toward conscious, values-based choice.

From “Have To” to “Choose To”

When you hear yourself saying “I have to...” try asking, “What would make this something I choose to do?”

Example:

“I have to go to therapy.”

Reframe to:

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“I choose to participate in therapy because I want to understand myself better.”

“I have to control my anger.”

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“I choose to respond differently because I want healthier relationships.”

“I have to stop this behavior because people are upset with me.”

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“I choose to change this behavior because it is interfering with the life I want.”

The goal is not to convince yourself that you want something you genuinely do not want. Instead, the goal is to identify your own reasons for change and make deliberate choices based on your values.

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Motivation Worksheet

What behavior or situation am I considering changing?

What are the external reasons for making this change?

What rewards, consequences, expectations, or pressures are involved?

What are my internal reasons for making this change?

What would I personally gain? What values, goals, relationships, or qualities of life does this support?

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Complete the sentence:

"I have to change because..."

Now reframe it:

"I choose to consider this change because..."

What personal value does this change support?

- ☐ Health
- ☐ Relationships
- ☐ Independence
- ☐ Honesty
- ☐ Responsibility
- ☐ Self-respect
- ☐ Peace
- ☐ Personal growth
- ☐ Other: _____

One small action I am willing to take

Rather than trying to change everything at once, identify one specific behavior you can practice.

This week, I choose to:

Remember

Extrinsic motivation asks: "What will happen if I don't change?"

Intrinsic motivation asks: "What kind of life do I want, and why does this change matter to me?"

Both can motivate change. CBT helps us examine the thoughts behind our motivation and develop choices that are realistic, intentional, and consistent with our values.