

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a theory of human motivation, personality, and behavior. It is a meta-theory comprising five other theories including, Cognitive Evaluation Theory, Organismic Integration Theory, Causality Orientations Theory, Basic Psychological Needs Theory, and Goal Contents Theory. The theory examines how biological, social, and cultural, conditions either enhance or undermine the inherent human capacities for psychological growth, engagement, and wellness.

More specifically, the theory examines how social contexts and individual differences influence different types of motivation that impact the quality and dynamics of behavior. The theory differentiates between intrinsic motivation (i.e. motivation due to inherent interest or enjoyment) and extrinsic motivation (i.e. motivation due to external factors or controls) and proposes that intrinsic motivations are associated with greater well-being, effective functioning, performance, and engagement.

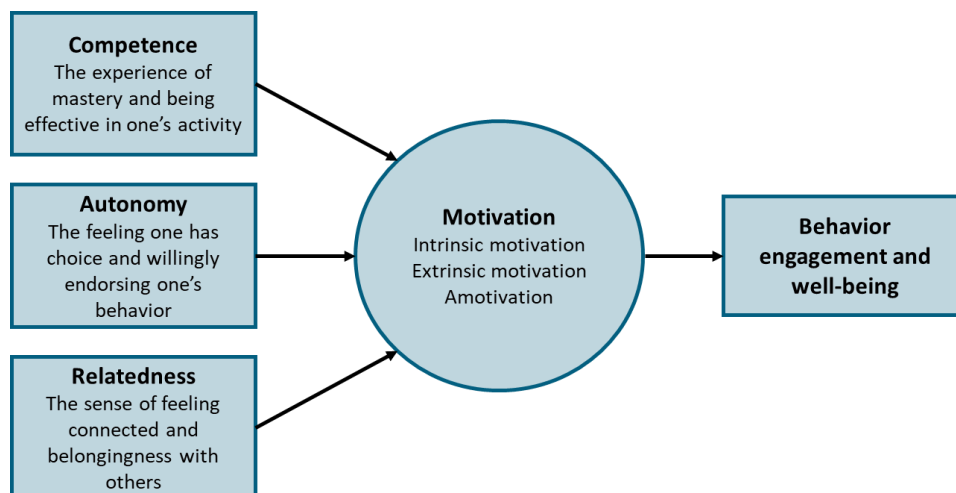
Central to SDT is the idea that there are three basic universal psychological needs that human beings require including competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Social contexts that satisfy these needs promote intrinsic motivation to engage in behavior, as well as support people's developmental, psychological, and behavioral well-being and health. Social contexts that undermine the satisfaction of these needs have a negative effect on well-being and lead to other forms of motivation that may be less desirable, such as extrinsic motivation or amotivation. The type of motivation that drives a person's behavior is more important than the amount of motivation a person possesses. The more autonomous a person's motivation, the more likely they are to initiate and maintain the behavior.

Developer

Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, 1985

Graphical Representation of Theory and Constructs

(Adapted from Ryan & Deci, 2017)



Basic Psychological Needs – Basic universal psychological needs required for optimal motivation.

- **Competence** – The need to feel a sense of mastery or effectiveness.
- **Autonomy** – The need to self-regulate one's experiences and actions.

- **Relatedness** – The need to feel socially connected and belongingness with others.

Types of Motivation – Critical to predicting the quality and maintenance of behaviors. These include:

- **Intrinsic motivation** – Motivation that is regulated by autonomous factors within a person such as interests and values.
- **Extrinsic motivation** – Motivation that is driven by external factors or controls.
- **Amotivation** – Lack of intention to engage in a behavior.

Application to the Precision Paradigm: Alignment of Theory Constructs with Mechanisms of Action Taxonomy

Mechanisms of Action (MoA), derived from theories of behavior, are the processes through which specific intervention techniques are expected to affect behavior. Interventions grounded in Self-Determination Theory might include techniques to achieve specific changes in behavior by acting through any of these MoAs.

Aspects of constructs in **Self-Determination Theory** correspond to the [Mechanisms of Action taxonomy](#) as follows:

Theory Construct	Corresponding Mechanism(s) of Action
Motivation	Motivation
	Intention

NOTE: Aspects of the graphical representation of this theory also correspond to other components of the [Precision Paradigm](#):

- *Competence, Autonomy, and Relatedness* are part of the context and can act as moderators
- *Behavior engagement and well-being* are outcomes

Examples of Use of Theory in Intervention Development/Research

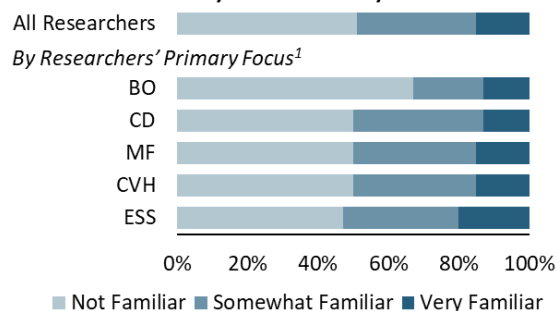
Grolnick, W. S., Levitt, M. R., Caruso, A. J., & Lerner, R. E. (2021). Effectiveness of a brief preventive parenting intervention based in self-determination theory. *Journal of Child and Fam Studies*, 30, 905–920.

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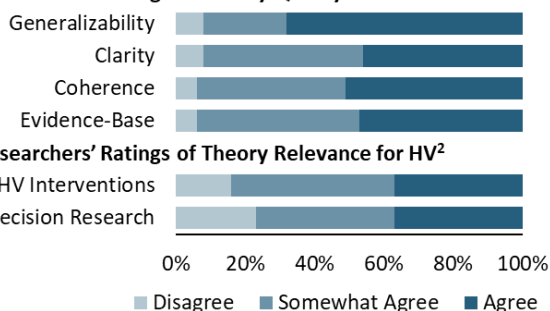
Osterman, R. L., Carle, A. C., Ammerman, R. T., & Gates, D. (2014). A randomized clinical trial of a single-session motivational intervention to decrease alcohol use during pregnancy. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 47(1), 10-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsat.2014.01.009>

Key Results from Intervention Researcher Survey

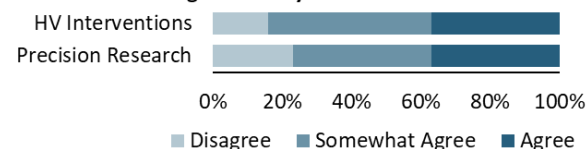
Researchers' Familiarity with the Theory



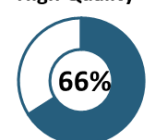
Researchers' Ratings of Theory Quality²



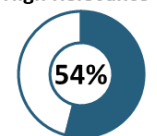
Researchers' Ratings of Theory Relevance for HV²



High Quality³



High Relevance⁴



¹Intervention researchers' primary or secondary area of research; BO=Birth Outcomes; CD=Child Development; MF=Maternal Psychosocial Functioning; CVH=Cardiovascular Health; ESS=Family Economic Self-Sufficiency

²Of those who indicated they were familiar with the theory. Those answering 'Not Sure' to the quality and relevance items were excluded from the denominator.

³Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to all four quality items.

⁴Percent of researchers answering agree/somewhat agree to both relevance items.

Methods for the intervention researcher survey can be found [here](#).

Theory Citations

Center for Self-Determination Theory (n.d.). *Theory*. Retrieved June 6, 2022, from <https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/theory/>

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