

THE BIG IDEAS

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic

Choose your motivation wisely.

Authenticity

Coherence and integrity.

Narcissism & Alienation

vs. The true self.

Being Authentic

AND responsible.

True Self-Esteem

vs. Contingent self-esteem.

Positive Regard

Make it noncontingent.

Integration vs. Introjection

Digest don't just swallow it whole!

Allow Yourself to Fail

Learn to fail, or fail to learn.

Techniques

+ Deep personal desire.

Why We Do What We Do

Understanding Self-Motivation

BY EDWARD L. DECI · PENGUIN © 1995 · 230 PAGES

“The aims of this book are simply stated: They are to use a comprehensive body of motivational research to examine the relationship between autonomy and responsibility and to reflect on the issue of promoting responsibility in an alienating world. The book is full of hope, for it speaks to what we can do for our children, our employees, our patients, our students, and our athletes—indeed, what we can do for our society. The prescriptions it offers are not panaceas, and they are not easy. But they are relevant to each of us in managing ourselves, and they apply to the roles of teacher, manager, parent, doctor, and coach. Indeed, they are relevant and important for everyone in policy-making positions. The prescriptions begin with an understanding of people’s motivation—of the extent to which it is autonomous—and they involve using that understanding to manage ourselves more effectively, to related differently to others, and to make more meaningful social policy.”

~ Edward L. Deci from *Why We Do What We Do*

Edward L. Deci is one of the world’s leading researchers on human motivation and this book is *packed* with scientific wisdom—exploring what we know about the power of intrinsic motivation (vs. extrinsic motivation), the importance of autonomy (vs. being controlled) and the need for authenticity (vs. alienation).

I’m excited to share a handful of my favorite Big Ideas we can immediately apply to our lives.

Hope you enjoy. Let’s dig in!

INTRINSIC VS. EXTRINSIC GOALS

“The researchers found that if any of the three extrinsic aspirations—for money, fame, or beauty—was very high for an individual relative to the three intrinsic aspirations, the individual was also more likely to display poorer mental health. For example, having an unusually strong aspiration for material success was associated with narcissism, anxiety, depression, and poorer social functioning as rated by a trained clinical psychologist...

In contrast, strong aspirations for any of the intrinsic goals—meaningful relationships, personal growth, and community contributions—were positively associated with well-being. People who strongly desired to contribute to their community, for example, had more vitality and higher self-esteem. When people organize their behavior in terms of intrinsic strivings (relative to extrinsic strivings) they seem more content—they feel better about who they are and display more evidence of psychological health.”

That’s worth a re-read.

The re-cap: Focusing on intrinsic goals (striving for stuff like meaningful relationships, personal growth, and community contributions) tends to lead to a deeper sense of well-being.

“When individuals are strongly extrinsically oriented, they lack a firm foundation for well-being.”

~ Edward L. Deci

"Sure, money motivates, but that's not the point. The point is that while money is motivating people, it is also undermining their intrinsic motivation and, as we would later discover, having a variety of other negative effects as well."

~ Edward L. Deci

Chasing extrinsic goals like money, fame, or beauty? Not so much.

Deci continues with some more powerful insights: "Recall that the first finding indicated that if people held extrinsic goals very dear, they had tenuous mental health. The second important finding was that, even if the respondents thought the chances of achieving the dearly held extrinsic goals were excellent, they still displayed poor mental health. Holding extrinsic aspirations and believing they won't be able to achieve them will surely leave people dyspeptic, but the less obvious and more penetrating finding from this research is that holding very strong extrinsic aspirations and believing strongly that they will be able to achieve them was also associated with poorer psychological health. It is more the type of aspirations people hold very strongly than the expectations they have about achieving them that is the critical predictor of well-being."

More Deci: "Whereas earlier studies had focused on issues like the quality of one's performance and experience, these studies drew direct linkages between the types of motivation and individual's mental health. It seems that people who are the healthiest focus on developing satisfying personal relationships, growing as individuals, and contributing to their community. Surely, they also aspire to sufficient financial success to live comfortably. But wealth, fame, and beauty do not disproportionately occupy the consciousness of these people the way they dominate the experiences of individuals who are less psychologically stable."

That's a REALLY REALLY REALLY Big Idea.

It's one of the reasons why things like *The Secret* annoy me so much.

Here's the deal: If you're disproportionately focused on your vision board featuring the island you're going to own, the fact that you're going to be more powerful and famous than Oprah and Obama combined and look *stunning* in your bathing suit, EVEN IF you're uber-confident you're gonna achieve those (extrinsic) goals, you're STILL likely to be less psychologically stable than those who are focused on great relationships, personal growth and making a contribution.

So, where's YOUR focus?

Here's to shifting from the extrinsic Bling goals to the intrinsic Being goals!!

AUTHENTICITY, COHERENCE & INTEGRITY

"Authenticity necessitates behaving autonomously, for it means being the author of one's actions—acting in accord with one's true inner self. The key to understanding autonomy, authenticity, and self is the psychological process called integration. Various aspects of a person's psyche differ in the degree to which they have been integrated or brought into harmony with the person's innate, core self. Only when the processes that initiate and regulate an action are integrated aspects of one's self would the behavior be autonomous and the person, authentic. It is in this sense that to be authentic is to be true to one's self."

That's AMAZING.

What an incredible description of what it truly means to be authentic, eh?!

Dan Millman first introduced me to the idea that *authenticity* and *author* have the same root word and the fact that, to be authentic is to literally be the author of our own lives.

And this Idea reminds me of some wisdom from Jonathan Haidt and Nathaniel Branden.

First, some Haidt mojo from *The Happiness Hypothesis* ([see Notes](#)) where he tells us: "*The psychologists Ken Sheldon and Tim Kasser have found that people who are mentally healthy and happy have a higher degree of "vertical coherence" among their goals—that is, higher-level (long term) goals and lower-level (immediate) goals all fit together well so that pursuing one's short-term goals advances the pursuit of long-term goals.*"

"The starting place for change is accepting oneself and taking interest in one's inner world."

~ Edward L. Deci

And authenticity and integrated selves makes me think of Nathaniel Branden's perspective in *The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* ([see Notes](#)): "Integrity is the integration of ideals, convictions, standards, beliefs—and behavior. When our behavior is congruent with our professed values, when ideals and practice match up, we have integrity."

Observe that before the issue of integrity can even be raised we need principles of behavior—moral convictions about what is and is not appropriate—judgments about right and wrong action. If we do not yet hold standards, we are on too low a developmental rung even to be accused of hypocrisy. In such a case, our problems are too severe to be described merely as lack of integrity."

He adds: "Integrity means congruence. Words and behavior match."

So, how's YOUR authenticity, coherence and integrity?!

NARCISSISM AND ALIENATION

"Lasch, for example, describes American culture as having a narcissistic preoccupation with the self. He might be right about a narcissistic preoccupation in this culture, but it is not a preoccupation with the self. On the contrary, narcissism involves desperately seeking affirmation from others. It entails an outward focus—a concern with what others think—and that focus takes people away from their true self. The narcissistic preoccupation results not from people's being aligned with the self but from their having lost contact with it. They adopt narcissistic values in a controlling society because they have not had the type of psychological nourishment they need to develop an integrated and healthy self. Narcissism is not the result of authenticity or self-determination, it is their antithesis."

Reminds me of this classic line from Wayne Dyer's *Erroneous Zones* ([see Notes](#)): "Self-worth cannot be verified by others. You are worthy because you say it is so. If you depend on others for your value it is other-worth."

Here's to developing true self-worth!

BEING AUTHENTIC *AND* RESPONSIBLE

"Ryan and I put stock in the humanistic belief that it is important to be authentic, to be oneself, to march to own's one drummer. But just as obviously, we put stock in the importance of being responsible. To advocate autonomy does not mean to call for self-indulgence, because *being truly oneself* involves accepting responsibility for the well-being of others..."

Let's pause for a moment and reflect on this wisdom: "To advocate autonomy does not mean to call for self-indulgence, because *being truly oneself* involves accepting responsibility for the well-being of others."

"When people are truly interested in why they do something, and personally committed to making a change, blame is irrelevant."

~ Edward L. Deci

Deci continues by saying: "Because being true to oneself has often been equated with the egoistic doing of one's own thing, authenticity has often been perversely interpreted as justification for irresponsibility and then attacked by the critics who so interpret it. The selfish, egoistic doing of one's own thing is in fact irresponsible and may have demonstrably negative consequences. But those behaviors are not authentic; they are not expressions of human autonomy; they are not instances of being one's true self."

So, the TRUE SELF integrates a sense of autonomy/authenticity with an equally profound sense of relatedness/responsibility.

Very important point.

Reminds me of Joseph Campbell's similar point in his *Pathways to Bliss* ([see Notes](#)) where he tells us that the hero's journey is not complete until we BRING BACK what we've learned as a

"Underlying a strong emphasis on extrinsic strivings is a tenuous hold on one's self. Those extrinsic goals bring attention to what one has rather than who one is."

~ Edward L. Deci

contribution to our community. In his words: *"The whole idea is that you've got to bring out again that which you went to recover, the unrealized, unutilized potential in yourself. The whole point of this journey is the reintroduction of this potential into the world; that is to say, to you living in the world. You are to bring this treasure of understanding back and integrate it in a rational life. It goes without saying, this is very difficult. Bringing the boon back can be even more difficult than going down into your own depths in the first place."*

TRUE SELF-ESTEEM VS. CONTINGENT SELF-ESTEEM

"We refer to them as true self-esteem and contingent self-esteem. True self-esteem represents a sound, stable sense of oneself, built on a solid foundation of believing in one's worth as a human being. It accompanies a well-developed true self in which intrinsic motivation has been maintained, extrinsic limits and regulations have been well integrated, and the processes necessary for regulating one's emotions have been developed. True self-esteem thus accompanies freedom and responsibility.

True self-esteem is not, however, the same thing as thinking you can do no wrong. People with true self-esteem have a sense of whether behaviors are right or wrong because true self-esteem is accompanied by integrated values and regulations. Such individuals evaluate their behaviors, but their feelings of worth are not riding on those behaviors."

True self-esteem vs. contingent self-esteem.

Powerful stuff.

Check out the Note on Nathaniel Branden's great book [The Six Pillars of Self-Esteem](#) for more goodness on the subject.

NONCONTINGENT POSITIVE REGARD

"Carl Rogers advocated what he called noncontingent positive regard. In essence, he was suggesting that regard from others (and, most importantly, from ourselves) is our inalienable right. We are worthy by virtue of the fact that we are alive. Praise is usually different. It is typically made contingent on getting an A on an exam, eating all those vegetables, or cleaning your room. Its hidden message is that you would not be worthy if you had not hit the target.

Praise runs the risk of bolstering contingent self-esteem rather than true self-esteem, and in the process it strengthens a controlling dynamic in which people become dependent on the praise. They then behave to get more praise so they will feel worthy—even if only for a moment. And in so doing, they further erode their autonomy."

Noncontingent positive regard—for others AND for ourselves.

I'll be working on a Note on Carl Rogers soon where we'll talk about this Idea in a lot more detail. For now, the idea reminds me of the Big Idea to "Give yourself an A" from *The Art of Possibility* ([see Notes](#)) where Rosamund and Benjamin Zander tell us: *"Michelangelo is often quoted as having said that inside every block of stone or marble dwells a beautiful statue; one need only remove the excess material to reveal the work of art within. If we were to apply this visionary concept to education, it would be pointless to compare one child to another. Instead, all the energy would be focused on chipping away at the stone, getting rid of whatever is in the way of each child's developing skills, mastery, and self-expression."*

We call this practice giving an A. It is an enlivening way of approaching people that promises to transform you as well as them. It is a shift in attitude that makes it possible for you to speak freely about your own thoughts and feelings while, at the same time, you support others to be all they dream of being. The practice of giving an A transports your relationships from the world of measurement into the universe of possibility."

INTROJECTION VS. INTEGRATION

“The two forms of internalization are: introjection, which Fritz Perls likens to swallowing a rule whole rather than digesting it; and integration, which involves “digestion” and is the optimal form of internalization... Autonomous functioning requires that an internalized regulation be accepted as your own; the regulation must become part of who you are. It must be integrated with your self...”

People often take in the values and rules of groups to which they belong, and they subsequently act accordingly. When this process occurs only incompletely, it results in introjects—that is, in internalizations that take the form of “shoulds” and “oughts.” Introjects are voices in one’s head, so to speak, that come from the outside and issue orders—sometimes like mean-spirited drill sergeants and sometimes like loving and well-meaning (but nonetheless intrusive) aunts. When internalizations become integrated, when they become true aspects of who one is, they allow more authentic actions and interactions.”

That. Is. Awesome.

We talk about the fact that we want to stop “shoulding on ourselves” (see Notes on Tony Robbins) while we “turn the shoulds into coulds” (see Notes on [You Can Heal Your Life](#)) and the need to “quit musterbating” (see Notes on [Your Erroneous Zones](#)) but I love this look at WHY we have so many shoulds and oughts and musterbating tendencies in the first place!

It’s indigestion, yo! :)

If we swallow a rule whole without chewing it and digesting it and making it part of our own authentic way of seeing the world, we’re going to burp up the shoulds and oughts.

The key is to realize we always have the CHOICE about how we show up. Taking that responsibility allows us to chew a little better (and spit out the stuff that’s unpalatable :) as we truly integrate the Ideas that resonate with us!

Reminds me of Seneca (see Notes on [Letters from a Stoic](#)) who tells us: “*There is nothing the wise man does reluctantly.*”

So, here’s to chewing well. :)

ALLOW YOURSELF TO FAIL

“Allow yourself to fail and you will be more likely to succeed.”

Love that.

We talk about the importance of embracing failure throughout these Notes. Tal Ben-Shahar describes the importance of it in his great book *The Pursuit of Perfect* ([see Notes](#)), where he tells us: “*One of the wishes that I always have for my students is that they should fail more often (although they are understandably not thrilled to hear me tell them so). If they fail frequently, it means that they try frequently, that they put themselves on the line and challenge themselves. It is only from the experience of challenging ourselves that we learn and grow, and we often develop and mature much more from our failures than from our successes. Moreover, when we put ourselves on the line, when we fall down and get up again, we become stronger and more resilient.*”

And he adds: “*Those who understand that failure is inextricably linked with achievement are the ones who learn, grow, and ultimately do well. Learn to fail, or fail to learn.*”

Are you all up in your stuff and paranoid of failing? As Deci (along with all the great teachers!) advises: “*Allow yourself to fail and you will be more likely to succeed.*”

“Rather than waiting for the world to give them what they want, people can become more proactive in making things happen for themselves.”

~ Edward L. Deci

How can you integrate that wisdom into your life a little more today? Is there a creative project you need to explore? A relationship? Know that growth occurs as we explore our edges and celebrate the strength gained as we risk a little failure! :)

TECHNIQUES AND DEEP PERSONAL DESIRE

“When it comes to issues of motivation, people always seem to want techniques for motivating or managing themselves. Screaming from the front cover of most self-help books are statements about “The newest techniques for motivating yourself,” or “Techniques that have proven effective.” The truth is that there are no techniques that will motivate people or make them more autonomous. Motivation must come from within, not from techniques. It comes from their deciding they are ready to take responsibility for managing themselves.

When people are really ready to change for their own personal reasons, and when they are willing to face and cope with the myriad feelings—anxiety, inadequacy, rage, terror, or loneliness—that underlie the motivation for change. Once that has happened, various techniques may be useful for them, but without a true resolve, without reasons for change that are personally important, techniques will not help. When people put stock in techniques as something that will change them, they are expressing an external locus of causality rather than an internal one; they are holding the misguided belief that being controlled rather than autonomous is the means for bringing about meaningful, personal change.

A deep personal desire to change must come first. Then perhaps, a technique can give people a little help.”

Here’s to the deep personal desire to rock it and the Big Ideas that can help us along the way!

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He’s spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.

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