

Self-Determination Theory, As I See It

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Self-determination: the process by which a person controls their own life. (Oxford Internet Dictionary)

Self-determination refers to a person's ability to choose; to make decisions and feel in control.

The United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states: "All peoples have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."

Self-determination is of the utmost importance to a democratic society, so why don't we learn about it in school?

I came across Self-Determination Theory (SDT), formulated by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, when I attended college in 2007. (I was 42) I went back to school to gain skills and credentials to create Fair Shake. Despite my earnestness, only my children took me seriously. No one else believed that I could build a national reentry resource center. But I've learned to expect this response to pretty much everything I do; no-one thought much of my capabilities when I was a kid, either. For me, disbelief is a great motivator. Another thing the nay-sayers would not consider is the strong and sustainable power that forms when I mix purpose, meaning, care, and defiance.

When I learned about SDT, I felt understood. I think you might, too.

Richard Ryan shared this overview: "SDT is centrally concerned with the social conditions that facilitate or hinder human flourishing. We think it is in our nature to flourish. To flourish is to develop in a healthy way. In the same way that an acorn has within it the properties that will allow it to grow into an oak tree, we have within us the seeds of flourishing. But it's not automatic. Just like that acorn, humans need nutrients in order to actualize flourishing. In our research we ask: 'What do people need in order to flourish?' and 'What gets in the way of flourishing?' SDT posits that when we strive toward wellness, self-efficacy and community, we will be motivated to act in ways that benefit ourselves and society. SDT assumes humans have an innate, fundamental trajectory toward vitality, integration, and health." 1

"What is unique and critically important about humans, and what makes our capability for autonomy all the more powerful, is our capacity for reflective awareness, through which we have the possibility of making choices that allow us to better satisfy basic needs, to care for others, and to have fuller and more meaningful lives." (647)

"People's choices are not limited to what has been reinforced in the past, to what others are demanding, or to incentivized behaviors; nor are they inevitably driven by emotional reactions or by nonconscious processes. Although all of these influences can control behavior, people's possibilities remain prolific. Under average expectable conditions, humans have capacities to effectively regulate their own behaviors, including those associated with inherited temperaments, drives, emotions, and biological vulnerabilities. They can be guided by their natural propensities to detect inner conflict and to produce integrative solutions to regulatory challenges." (647)

We all need guidance at times but, ultimately, you are the only expert (and director!) of you.

People who solve problems in non-traditional ways are called 'divergent thinkers'. Divergent thinkers are either lauded for being creative, unpredictable, and out-of-the-box thinkers; or spurned – for being unconventional, unpredictable, and 'difficult'. I believe every Fair Shake newsletter subscriber is a divergent thinker. We are here to learn and grow. We're not afraid to be curious, to learn new things, or think in new ways to increase our opportunities, efficacy and success.

Divergent thinking is desperately needed throughout society today to resist the powerful grip of the media with their messages that try to convince us we are incapable, limited, or unwilling to make good decisions on our own. We can resist; we can say 'no'.

I discuss divergent thinking because SDT encourages us to think in ways that are not accepted by many medical professionals and service providers. SDT encourages to trust ourselves; to feel confident that our behaviors will have an influence on our lives; to be agents of our destiny, while medical professionals and service

providers are dependent upon our dependence on them. ("It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it." - Upton Sinclair)

I recently met with a former 'lifer' who was unexpectedly released from prison in 2016. He said that people expected him to be the same person that he was when he left the community, and that most of them hadn't changed. He had to assert, repeatedly, that the person they were expecting no longer exists. They could accept the new version of him, or not, but he was not going back to who he was. He had to trust his determination to stay true to himself.

Before we continue, here are a few definitions:

NEED: a need is an essential nutrient for thriving and wellness. Needs are universal; they remain constant across cultures, contexts and our entire life span. We have physical needs and we have psychological needs: nutrients that are essential for growth, integrity, and well-being. SDT identifies our three basic psychological needs as: autonomy, relatedness and competence.

AUTONOMY: the sense of being in control of our own behaviors and goals. It includes steering our life course and making decisions according to our values and interests. It does not mean we must be alone; it simply means that we get to decide how and when to connect with others.

"I" STATEMENT: I am able to do things that I really value in life.

RELATEDNESS: the experience of feeling connected. It is a sense of belonging that is not just about being cared for, but includes caring for others, which is where we build meaning in our lives. This does not mean we 'get along' with everyone; we just become more aware of our relationships with the people we can listen to and care about, and the people who will listen to and care about us, too.

"I" STATEMENT: I feel that I can connect with other people.

COMPETENCE: to gain mastery of tasks, learn different skills, and understand ideas. When we feel we have the skills required for success, we are more likely to take actions toward our goals.

"I" STATEMENT: I can do things, and learn things, and achieve my goals

MOTIVATION: moved into action

EXTRINSIC (or external) MOTIVATION: forces outside of us such as: reward or punishment; including marketing coercion: 'Use this coupon today or miss out!'

INTROJECTION: we internalize and act to satisfy cultural norms and expectations and do things just because 'it's the way things are.'

INTRINSIC (or internal) MOTIVATION: inherent human incentive to engage in challenges and tasks of our own volition (or willingness), regardless of the potential for rewards or recognition.

Intrinsic motivation does not always happen on its own. We may start something new through external motivation, and continue with it once it becomes internalized. For example, if you are training to compete in a marathon, you might be extrinsically motivated by a desire to join or to win, but once you start training, you may find that you simply enjoy high-energy, solo sports.

Deci and Ryan found that when we help others without rewards (aka 'transactions': payment, reciprocity, recognition), we meet all three basic needs at once: autonomy, relatedness, and competence. This is why it feels so good.

It's important that we remember to attend to all three psychological needs every day (or as often as we can).

"People cannot psychologically thrive by satisfying one need alone, any more than people can live healthily with water but not food, or plants can thrive on soil without sunlight. Social environments that afford for example opportunities to experience competence but failed to nurture relatedness are ones conducive to an impoverished human condition. For example, career development that requires so much time that one is unlikely to satisfy relational needs (a condition of epidemic proportions in many societies) will extract a high cost on well-being, regardless of how effective in and valuing of a career one is." (92)

Although our capacity for learning is present through our entire lives, much of the focus for adult learning or development is focused exclusively on changing behaviors or thinking 'habits'. Many of these exercises are motivated with a reward if we're successful or a 'consequence' if we fail. We may excel in the classroom, and we may understand the value of a program, but if we fail to internalize

goals, assumptions and expectations of any training, we will likely lose interest in the topic shortly after the program ends.

Scholars and experts encourage us to believe that we are innately selfish, aggressive, and instrumentally-oriented (\$, stuff and status). Although it's completely wrong, this view is continuously repeated through the media. According to Deci and Ryan, "we are normatively cooperative, social creatures, with robust capacities for kindness and benevolence. In societies across the globe, whether in cities or rural areas, whether among rich or poor, people are typically not only tolerant of others but even considerate and helpful." (616)

When we reflect on our assumptions, many of which were developed when we were very young, we start to see where we might be limiting our possibilities and thwarting our needs. Questioning our beliefs (including: I'm not smart enough, I'm not ready, Old/young people can't do that, etc.) will help us see things more clearly. 'Nature versus nurture' arguments often exclude intention. We can surmount challenges in our nature, and insufficient nurturing, by reflecting on our needs and purposefully directing our growth.

"Building capacity begins with awareness. Open and receptive attention to what is occurring, as in mindfulness, allows people to better contact both the internal and external stimuli that are influencing them. Awareness allows people to take stock of events and interpret the events as being informational rather than controlling. Taking interest in experience allows people to more closely and curiously inspect and reflectively deliberate upon their motives and reactions. Exercising such reflective capacities allows people choice - the placing of value and effort on some possibilities over others." (648)

"We also have the capacity to connect with, and learn from, others. It is through communication that people come to appreciate what behaviors have more value and meaning than others and why. Relatedness is what brings people into dispositions of caring. Education and learning enhance our capabilities for growth, integration, and autonomous

functioning." (648)

"Awareness and knowledge do indeed matter, and choices do exist. Being authentic involves effort and entails taking responsibility for oneself. Doing so is not always easy, and in fact, requires everyday acts of courage. Engaging our capacities for autonomy often means resisting or redirecting temptations, cultural seductions and pressures, and strong controlling forces, both external and internal. Yet such courage can be mustered. (650)

Possible questions to ask yourself each day:

When and how do you feel your sense of agency or autonomy? When you decide to be patient and understanding? Write a few reflections in a journal? Declare a boundary to say 'no'?

When and how do you feel your sense of relatedness? By helping someone? Listening carefully when someone is speaking? Reflecting on a perspective other than your own?

When and how do you feel competent? Finishing a letter you've been meaning to get into the mail? Reaching your goal of elevating your heart rate for 10 minutes or more each day? By reflecting on the day?

Our basic needs drive us. Understanding our needs and addressing them in healthy, holistic ways will give us a better quality of life. We can then help others achieve a better quality of life, too. We are denied this important information in school, but it's never too late to learn!

I hope you'll feel free to share your thoughts and reflections. Ubuntu! ~ sue

1 Richard Ryan's quote can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=LHQv7FU8Atw>

(#) numbers in parenthesis at the end of the paragraph indicate the page from which the quote was found in "Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Need in Motivation, Development and Wellness", written by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci. 2017 Gulliford Press; New York.

Self-Determination Theory of Motivation

Richard Ryan and Edward Deci



Autonomy: You have the freedom to choose.

Competence: You feel you have skills and knowledge, and that you are effective.

Relatedness: You feel you are connected to others; that you are a part of a group.

