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## The Need for Autonomy

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### Synonyms

[Agency](#); [Freedom](#); [Perceived choice](#); [Personal causation](#); [Volition](#)

### Definition

Autonomy is a critical psychological need. It denotes the experience of volition and self-direction in thought, feeling, and action. It refers to the perception of being self-governed rather than controlled by external forces.

### Introduction

Human beings want to make their own decisions, pursue their own goals, and come up with their own ideas. In other words, they want to feel autonomous. According to self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci 2000), which is a broad theory of human motivation and personality, autonomy is one of the three basic psychological needs (along with *competence* and *relatedness*) which are necessary for optimal growth and well-being. When people feel autonomous, they

perceive their needs, motivations, preferences, and behaviors to be aligned and congruent with one another. In other words, they feel like the directors of their own lives and live according to their own interests and values. When autonomous, people endorse their own feelings and actions at the *highest order of reflection* (Ryan and Deci 2004). This desire to feel self-directed and self-endorsed is innate. All individuals will naturally strive to have this need fulfilled, as long as their environment facilitates and supports this striving. This implies that the individual is continually involved in an interaction with his or her environment, and while the need for autonomy is present in all individuals regardless of background or culture (Chen et al. 2015; Chirkov et al. 2010), it requires nutrients from the environment in order to flourish.

### Autonomy Is Both a Personal Trait and a Motivational State

People may strive toward feeling self-directed and self-determined in their lives, that is, they may embody an overall disposition toward feeling autonomous that is relatively enduring – such that they generally experience a sense of personal endorsement of their goals and actions. This reflects autonomy as a personal *trait* or *disposition*. However, autonomy is also *motivational* in nature; it pertains to the specific domain or task at hand. Thus, while an individual may feel an

overall sense of volition and self-concordance in his or her life (trait), feelings of autonomy in specific domains (e.g., work, school, sports, relationships) or in the context of specific activities (cooking dinner, drawing a picture) might vary from high to low. So, the same person might feel highly autonomous with family when, say, making decisions and plans regarding what to eat for dinner or where to go on vacation, but feel low in autonomy at work when being required to complete unenjoyable or menial tasks that are mandated by one's employer. This means that, although autonomy can be somewhat stable at the personality level, it can also vary from situation to situation and moment to moment. In other words, the extent to which an individual feels autonomous on any given day, or at any given moment, depends largely on the characteristics of the situation, the features of the task at hand, and the quality of the interpersonal interaction.

The experience of autonomy is subjective. It depends upon the moment-to-moment perception of three interrelated components – an internal perceived locus of causality, a sense of volition, and perceived choice (Reeve 2014). When an individual's *perceived locus of causality* (PLOC) is internal, she feels like the primary cause or source of her motivated action. That is, her behavior stems from her own personal beliefs or desires. For instance, she might choose to go to see a movie with her friend because she very much wants to see that particular movie and looks forward to spending quality time with that particular friend. Thus, the source of the motivation is internal and personal. In contrast, when the perceived locus of causality is external, the individual is likely to perceive his behavior as governed by environmental sources that are outside himself (e.g., another person or a controlling situation). For instance, he might join a friend for a movie because his friend pressured him into it, or because he feels obligated due to the commitment he originally made.

*Volition* refers to feelings of freedom and willingness to engage in activity or experience. The idea of volition is concerned with “wanting to” do something, as opposed to “having to” do it. Volition is marked by an absence of coercion.

Finally, *perceived choice* reflects the experience of flexibility and opportunity in making decisions. True choice occurs when the individual is able to reflectively decide to pursue one task or path over other courses of action, as opposed to feeling pressured into a certain way of thinking or acting, or having to “choose” between undesired alternatives.

## Satisfying the Need for Autonomy

Evidence from research labs around the world suggest that when the need for autonomy is satisfied, people feel more interested, engaged, and happy (Niemic and Ryan 2013). In contrast, when the need for autonomy is neglected or actively frustrated, people feel more alienated, helpless, and sometimes even hostile or destructive (Moller and Deci 2010). Because people cannot be separated from the environment in which they inhabit, the well-being of any individual depends largely on the extent to which the environment can provide opportunities to satisfy the need for autonomy. But how, exactly, is the basic need for autonomy satisfied? *Autonomy-supportive contexts* facilitate the development and satiation of the need for autonomy by offering choice and opportunity for self-direction. They nurture inner motivational resources, offer explanations and rationales, and use informational language rather than directives or commands. Autonomy-supportive people work to align activities with the other person's interests and preferences. Autonomy-supportive teachers, for instance, may help boost a learner's autonomy by offering him or her academic choices and options, or by conveying the personal relevance and utility of a task or assignment so that the learner can internalize the meaningfulness of the activity.

## Conclusion

Autonomy is the basic need to be self-directed and to feel self-determined. Similarly, autonomous motivation refers to the perception of volition, choice, and personal causation in an activity – as

opposed to feeling pressured, constrained, restrained, or coerced. People feel autonomous when they do the things they enjoy or find important and valuable. For these reasons, *motivational autonomy* is critically related to interest and engagement with the task at hand. Similarly, *dispositional autonomy* is related to psychological well-being – presumably because those high in dispositional autonomy tend to be self-congruent in their feelings, thoughts, and actions; that is, they select goals, activities, and courses of action that are consistent with their fundamental needs and preferences. This process facilitates growth and self-integration (i.e., self-concordance or self-coherence), and instead of perceiving their self-worth as contingent upon social approval and meeting expectations, autonomously functioning individuals feel free to express who they really are.

### Cross-References

- ▶ [Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation](#)
- ▶ [Self-Determination Theory](#)
- ▶ [The Need for Competence](#)

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