



Module Two: Why Do We Behave?

A Paradigm Shift

Choice Theory is a model of internal control psychology but most of us believe in external motivation for behavior. We live and function in an external control world. But let's look at why we really behave. What causes us to do the things we do?

Why do you answer a ringing telephone? Many people respond to this question with, "Because it rings." If that were all there were to it, you would always answer a ringing telephone. Anytime you hear a ringing phone, you would answer it. You would answer my phone when it rings. You would answer your friends' phone. You would answer the receptionist's phone at work. If you were to hear a public phone ringing, you would be compelled to answer it.

Of course this is ridiculous! You wouldn't answer phones that weren't your own. In fact, I'll bet there are times you don't even answer your own phone, aren't there? Of course, you wouldn't answer your phone if you looked at the caller ID and there was someone on the other end you didn't want to speak to. You may not answer the phone if you are eating, in the shower, or engaged in intimate time with your significant other. You may not answer your phone if you simply do not want to be bothered.

So back to my original question, why do you answer a ringing telephone? You answer it to see who is on the other end. You answer it because you want to. You answer it because you are bored. You answer it because someone may need something from you. There are as many reasons you answer your phone as there are reasons you may not answer it. Do you know where those reasons come from—inside of you! That's right! It's internal motivation. It has nothing to do with the phone.

Some people may argue that if the phone didn't ring, you wouldn't answer it. There is a lot of truth in that statement. However, it isn't the ringing that "makes" you answer it. The ringing simply provides you with information. It tells you there is someone on the other end of the phone. If you couple that with the information provided by caller ID, then you will have even more information to aid in your decision whether or not to answer the phone. But the ultimate decision is based on what you want to do at that particular point in time.

Let's move on to another scenario. Most people stop at red lights. Do you know why? Again, a common answer is because it's the law! This is true, however laws don't "make" us do anything. They are created as external guidelines and usually have some consequence imposed when you are caught breaking them.

However, it is generally a good idea to stop at red lights. It may not be safe to proceed. You don't want to get hurt or to hurt anyone else. And in most instances, you don't want to get caught and have to pay a fine or have your insurance rates increased. But, I wonder if you have ever run a red light? I don't think I'm the only one. In fact recently, I was ticketed based on camera evidence. I was turning right on red and failed to come to a complete stop. I might argue I was trying to save wear and tear on my brakes but the court didn't care about my brakes and I had to pay the fine anyway. That was basically an unintentional consequence of running of the light.

However, can you think of circumstances when you might intentionally choose to go through a red light? What if you had a bleeding child or a woman in labor in your car? What if it was 3 AM and no one was around? What if the light was broken and stuck on red? You may make a choice to go through. Where does this motivation come from? It comes from inside you! The light doesn't make you stop and sit there, waiting for green. The traffic signal, once again, is providing only information. It is telling you that it may not be safe to proceed through the intersection at that time. It is really up to your internal motivation what you will do in that situation. Most people will stop and wait for green. But if there is something stronger than civil obedience driving your behavior, you will choose to go through that light.

Now, for a moment, let's look briefly at the element of punishment. It is highly unlikely that you would go through a red light if there were a policeperson sitting there monitoring your movement, unless of course, you were involved in a medical emergency. The presence of a punisher will most likely gain compliance, especially if the cost of that punishment were high enough. So does that mean punishment works?

That depends on our understanding of human motivation. If you believe that external things can *make* you do things, even things you don't want to do, then you are investing in an external control psychology. If you really want to go through that red light, is it the police that stops you? No, it is your internal desire to be free of the consequences of doing so. Ask yourself, what would you do if the policeperson weren't there? What would you do the next time you were in a big hurry at a red light and no one was around? You would do exactly what you were internally motivated to do!

So, does punishment work? The answer is sometimes. Punishment works when the person likely to be punished wants to avoid the punishment at all costs and when there is the likelihood of being caught, as when the punisher is watching. Punishment typically does not change the internal motivation of the person. Punishment can get the punisher compliance in the moment but when the punisher isn't around, the behavior will likely revert back to what the person is internally motivated to do. Punishment generally teaches the punished to avoid the punisher or to get better at not getting caught!

Let's move on to a third scenario. Imagine you are outside walking alone in a dark parking lot and someone big comes up behind you and puts a gun to your head, demanding your purse or your wallet. Would you comply? The majority of people would. In fact, in my informal research, about 90% of the people I have asked this question to say they wouldn't even think about it. They would immediately comply.

However, there is always that 10% of people who would resist. I have heard various reasons and justifications over the years. I am not writing about this to examine neither their wisdom nor their foolishness in whatever behavior they would choose. The truth is none of us know for sure how we would respond in any situation unless we are actually in it.

The point of asking the question is to demonstrate that even with the extreme threat of external control (the loss of one's life), not everyone would respond the way the person holding the gun would like. Some people say they work hard for their money and wouldn't give it up easily. Others say they are afraid they would freeze and be unable to comply. Still others have said they would try to reason with the person, offering all cash and credit cards but keeping sentimental items. I've had some people who had studied martial arts and thought they would attempt to disarm the attacker. Some have even said they would be unable to comply because they don't carry a purse or wallet.

The thought is that most people will do whatever they must to survive. The survival need is very strong and often supersedes other needs when it is threatened, but not always. Do you know of people who would give up their lives for something they want even more? People in service professions such as police, firefighters, and military personnel put their lives on the line every day for the safety of others. Most parents I know would gladly give up their life to save the life of their child. People who participate in extreme sports or high-risk hobbies know they could lose their lives but still want the thrill of the activity.

Alcoholics, drug addicts and people with eating disorders are not putting their survival needs above all else. A person with a strong faith or belief system may opt to die for their cause. Loyalty can keep people from saving their own lives. For example, if you know ratting out a friend could save your life, you may opt to die instead of putting your friend in harm's way. There are many examples.

So does the gun *make* you do what the holder of the gun is demanding? No. It's not the gun, although everything about the situation will be factored into your decision about what to do. Your decision isn't made absent the presence of the gun. The gun is providing you with information. The person holding the gun is providing you with information. Your values and the kind of person you want to be are all factored into your decision of how to respond.

It will be what motivates you most on the inside that will determine what you do. If surviving is the most important thing, then you will likely comply. If something else is more important at the time, you may not. Motivation is always internal.

Recommended Resources:

There are two recommended resources that support this notion of internal motivation. Of course, there are many more than two but these are the two I have found most helpful. Both do an excellent job of reviewing relevant research and make a compelling case for internal motivation.

Punished by Rewards by Alfie Kohn: This book looks at how when rewards are implemented, often over time, the behavior actually gets worse than it was before the reward was ever introduced.

Drive by Daniel Pink reviews research mostly done in the workplace and schools to demonstrate how internal motivation is really what drives behavior. He does, however, allow for the way carrot and stick rewarding can sometimes work and the conditions under which it should be used. However, even under these conditions, the reward must be something internally motivating to the person or no behavior change will occur.

Supportive Exercise:

Please complete the worksheet entitled Internal Control.

It will reinforce your understanding of internal motivation. I want you to think of a time when you felt controlled by external circumstances and write it down. Then identify what was really driving your behavior from inside. For example, if you agreed to do something your mother asked you to do but you really didn't want to, believing you mother "made" you do it, then realize and accept you actually did it because you didn't want to disappoint your mother.

Making this change will help you begin to shift from a victim mentality to someone who controls his or her own destiny. Nothing outside of you "makes" you do anything. Using the example of the man with the gun demanding your purse or wallet, you can say, "I was mugged and had no choice," (external control) or you can say "I gave him my wallet because I wanted to live" (internal control). The behavior was the same in both cases. Which perspective do you think would help you feel better? Yes, the second one because it puts you in the driver's seat. The mugger didn't make you hand over your wallet. You did it to survive.

As you become more comfortable with your understanding and application of internal motivation, you may get slightly frustrated because being a victim has its benefits. When in some situations, you used to say, "She *makes* me so angry," you can no longer use this justification. You now know, no one can evoke any emotion in you. You choose anger as your best response to get something you want in a given situation. We will discuss this more in module seven about total behavior.

You can use this worksheet any time you believe you are being controlled to do something you don't want to do. Get to the underlying internal motivation generating your behavior.