

BUSINESS INSIDER

Why Chasing 'Extrinsic Goals' Can Wreck Your Happiness



DRAKE BAER
JUL. 22, 2014, 4:06 PM

Some goals make you happy.

Others do the opposite.

It comes down to whether your goals are *intrinsic* or *extrinsic*. The former is great for your happiness. The latter, not so much.

Here's the difference between the two:

- Stemming from the Latin for "inward," intrinsic goals relate to "goods of the soul," like personal growth, close relationships, and physical health.
- Stemming from the Latin for "outward," extrinsic goals relate to "worldly goals," like money, status, or fame.



REUTERS/ Anton Ferreira

While we may have been told by our parents, religious leaders, and grade-school teachers that the intrinsic goals are good for you, the psychology research helps explain why.

[A 2003 study from the University of Rochester is a prime example.](#) In it, researchers asked 147 recent college grads to report their aspirations in life and their happiness or unhappiness.

The intrinsic aspirations included close relationships, community involvement, personal growth.

Extrinsic aspirations included money, fame, and having an appealing image.

The results: The folks who realized their intrinsic goals had high levels of happiness, but the people who attained their extrinsic goals didn't have an improvement in their subjective well-being. The authors theorize that they might feel momentarily satisfied after reaching such a goal, but it doesn't last.

The difference in how these goals affect happiness comes down to *needs*. One school of thought called "self-

[determination theory](#)" contends that folks need three things for psychological health:

- **Autonomy:** feeling in control of behavior and goals
- **Competence:** gaining mastery of tasks or skills
- **Relatedness:** feeling a sense of belonging or attachment to others

Now, the intrinsic/extrinsic thing becomes much clearer.

Extrinsic goals like money, fame, and image don't meet the psychological needs. Other research shows that they may even do the opposite. For instance, we adapt to the amount of pleasure we experience in a day — it's called the "hedonic treadmill" — which means that we need to have bigger and bigger pleasures if we're going to get the same rush.

On the other hand, intrinsic goals directly nourish psychological needs: Taking charge of your personal growth grants you a sense of autonomy, staying in shape is a way of mastering your body, and having awesome friendships gives you a sense of belonging.

What's this mean for our careers? That we'd do ourselves a favor by orienting around the intrinsic goals. And while a cynic might think that investing in relationships is a distraction from getting work done, "[Give and Take](#)" author and University of Pennsylvania organizational psychologist Adam Grant has found that relationships *drive* not just well-being, but career success.

