



## Motivation is key in turning around learning disabilities

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Though there is surprisingly scant research on motivation and learning disabilities (35 relevant articles in the last 10 years, per a recent PsychInfo and ERIC library search), motivation is in fact key to helping create change for students with learning disabilities. It is the engine that drives the train of learning, the spark that propels the individual.



Here are a few testimonials from students with learning disabilities who learned how to engage their inner motivation:

- *“You have to want to learn. Things change when you figure how to motivate yourself.”*
- *“I decided if you’re determined enough, it doesn’t matter what learning issue. You can do it. I’m going to do this, and I don’t let anything get in my way.”*
- *“I actually care about school now. You helped me to care; you instilled in me the need to work hard.”*



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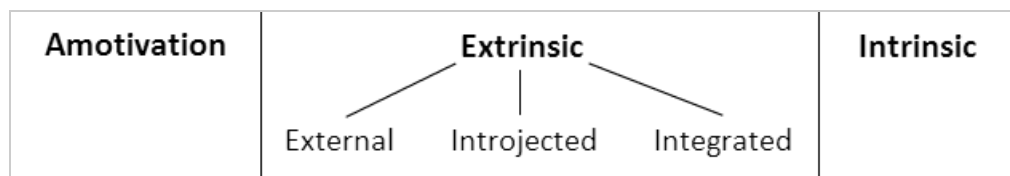
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What follows are comments from parents of students with learning disabilities who learned to self-motivate.

- “My son is now a highly motivated learner.”
- “You were a safe harbor for my son, and you reignited his joy in learning.”
- “Your steadfast belief in his ability to succeed has been invaluable.”

From these quotes, it is apparent that students with learning disabilities do change in their inner motivation to learn. To understand motivation, here is a look at what [the research by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci says](#). It first describes a continuum of different types of motivation, as shown below, followed by an explanation of each:



*Amotivation* describes when people are tuned out (for example, the unmotivated school rebel). *Intrinsic* motivation is when people act because they are interested in an activity — out of curiosity, challenge or to contribute (such as, figuring puzzles or losing oneself in music).

*Extrinsic* motivation is when people are motivated from the outside. *External* motivation is purely to gain rewards (like stars) or avert punishment (like taking away video games). *Introjected* motivation is when people act out of internalized rewards (as in conditional praise) and punishments (as in guilt and anxiety). *Integrated* motivation is when people agree with values of given tasks and take them into their inner value system as if they were their own (for instance, they work their hardest at chemistry, which they do not like, to help get something that matters to them, like getting into medical school).

Both intrinsic and integrated motivation are considered internal motivations. In the continuum, as people go from amotivation to extrinsic and then intrinsic motivation, they become more internally directed and autonomous (e.g., not under the control of others).

Deci and Ryan found that the more internal and autonomous the motivation, the better students' academic performance and psychological

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well-being. Others state that helping students choose to be involved in the educational enterprise and take an interest in learning is of the greatest import to the learning process and facilitates the uptake of learning strategies to address learning needs.

Based on the research by Deci and Ryan, how well the teacher fulfills students' basic needs determines where on the continuum of motivations students will fall. These basic needs are for relatedness (secure relationships, feeling cared about, belonging and being valued), competence (feeling some mastery and an ability to accomplish things, knowing what one is doing, being effective) and autonomy (feeling one has choice, having an ability to self-determine, and being the agent that creates outcomes).

## **Steps of motivation**

From this research, the following presents the steps of how motivation works:

### **I. Students strive to fulfill three basic needs, and the environment (teacher) supports or thwarts.**

- Students strive to fulfill the need for relatedness
- Students strive to fulfill the need for competence
- Students strive to fulfill the need for autonomy

### **II. The degree of support in fulfilling these three needs results in a continuum of motivations, from amotivation to extrinsic to intrinsic.**

- The more intrinsic, the better the performance and well-being
- The more integrated the motivation, the better the performance and well-being

## **Strategies for each step**

From these steps of motivation, here is a menu of strategies for each step.

### **Relatedness**

1. develop a supportive relationship and use empathic listening,
2. deal with the affective side of learning by countering self-doubt, worry, or frustration,
3. create a non-threatening, positive learning environment, and

4. help students accept their learning disabilities and delimit their impact.

### **Competence**

1. build on strengths,
2. scaffold needed skills,
3. give nonjudgmental, informational feedback, and
4. develop self-efficacy, the belief one can do the task.

### **Autonomy**

1. allow some choice,
2. support initiative,
3. credit students' success to their effort and to strategies, and
4. scaffold increased autonomy.

### **Intrinsic**

1. use hands-on activities,
2. give chances for self-direction, and
3. explore areas of curiosity.

### **Integrated**

1. give rationale and the usefulness for tasks,
2. model the valued behavior (like studying hard for chemistry), and
3. acknowledge students' feelings about less interesting but needed tasks.

Given that motivation is a prime factor in turning around learning disabilities, it is essential for educators and parents to be knowledgeable about and skilled in strategies that facilitate internal motivation, students' inner wellspring, their drive.

Indeed, help students light the spark of internal motivation, and you have strong, self-initiated learners, not just for today but for the future as well.

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About the Author



Ronald M. Kraus, Ph.D., is the author of "Reaching Students with Learning Disabilities: Toolkit of Strategies for Motivation, Metacognition, Attention, and Memory." He has a consulting practice in Rochester, New York, where he has served as learning coach for students in upper elementary through college the past 24 years, consulted with schools and presented at conferences. Ronald covers the areas of motivation, metacognition (or executive function), ADHD,

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