

Intrinsic Motivation or Intrinsic Values?

Lessons from Health Coaching

Which Way to Hold the Mirror?

How can we tell when we've reached the end of the line in enhancing a client's intrinsic motivation? After all, if intrinsic motivation, by definition, comes from inside, we're left dredging up reasons for change that they've often already considered and found wanting. How long should we keep tapping motivation when we continue to see ambivalence in spite of tireless efforts to bolster confidence concerning their ability to change? The problem may be spending too much time batting around pros and cons for change when the sticking point — or more hopefully the turning point — resides in the participants' values, not their motivation? Semantic nit-picking? Two sides of the same coin? Not really.

Motivation is basically the pleasure from making a change versus the pleasure from staying the same.

Tipping the balance in *intrinsic motivation* is the purview of psychology — and motivational interviewing techniques are great for confronting ambivalence, assessing and working through stages of change, and examining and building confidence.

Intrinsic values reside in the realm of philosophy. Questions of virtue and vice, right or wrong and, ultimately, morality — owning up to the consequences of our actions — are all part of values. Without delving into Greek philosophy, Immanuel Kant, or John Dewey, it's fair to say there's virtually no dispute across philosophies that we humans consider many things are important values for their own sake. For example, being a good parent or friend is a value we feel committed to, in and of itself.

Here's how insufficient motivation gave way to core values in coach Tammy's encounter with a smoking cessation participant we'll call Teresa.



...by Paul Terry and Tammy Sadoff

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Coach Tammy: I couldn't be more pleased for you with the progress you've made this year, Teresa. You started at a pack a day, and the last few times we've talked, you'd cut down to 2 a day. Tell me where you are this month with your smoking.



Teresa: I'm still at 2 smokes a day, Tammy, and I'm really struggling with the idea of giving them up. I really, really enjoy both my smelly Camels. I still look forward to those 2 breaks a day with friends at work, and I'm feeling confident I can keep it to just those.



Coach Tammy: Well, like I've said for months now, Teresa, 2 a day compared to a pack a day is an amazing achievement and will absolutely benefit your heart and lungs. Maybe this is as far as you go, but let's look at what got you this far. Is your biggest reason for wanting to quit still the same?



Teresa: Ugggh. Knife to the heart, Tammy! No fair. I know you know the answer to that.



Coach Tammy: I think I do but I'm also pretty sure you want me to hold you accountable on this question.



Teresa: Okay, okay. Yes, I still worry Timmy will figure out I'm still smoking. He just turned 12, and boy, is he ever getting to be a perceptive little rascal.



Coach Tammy: Months ago you used the word ashamed when you talked about wanting to quit. Why such a strong word?



Teresa: If Timmy ever started smoking, I know I'd feel responsible. Or at least I'd know that I wasn't the role model I should be. I suppose I'm down to this being a parenting issue, not just a bad habit. But that's the thing, Tammy; I can't come to accept that taking time for a smoke with my friends is a bad habit.



Coach Tammy: Can I offer a perspective on this dilemma, Teresa? It comes from research about how people deal with health issues.



Teresa: Bring it!



Coach Tammy: We've learned that people who finally come to value and accept treatment need to feel it's a priority among other competing psychological and social issues. For example, people with depression often neglect treatment when they believe other health or life issues matter more. They'll put off dealing with depression until their heart condition is resolved or until their job demands are less pressing.



Teresa: Ugggh again, Tammy! Have you ever been told that having a coach is the ultimate love/hate relationship? I feel like you're asking me to decide what's more important — being a good parent or indulging my pesky little outings with my friends.



Coach Tammy: Well, you've framed the decision in your own words, but I don't mind admitting I like the way you boiled it down. And you're right; you're not the first to wish I'd stop with the questions.



Teresa: That's because you know there's only 1 right answer on this. Timmy deserves a mom who can do without 2 damn cigarettes a day. Let's talk about my goal this month.

Good coaches are comfortable offering reflections that help participants sort out their motivations. Are we equally comfortable using reflective listening to clarify values? Some may feel that exploring values is too much the domain of theologians or therapists. Perhaps that's true if the conversation strays too far from the basics of decision balance. But the questions that help clarify values are really pretty basic and shouldn't make you feel you're being a mental health counselor. In a case like Teresa's, consider questions as simple as:

- Why is being a role model important to you?
- Where does this value of being a great mom come from?
- How has your conviction about being a great parent affected your decisions in the past?

Participants are ranking priorities about their work, families, health, and accomplishments every day. We need to listen for whether those rankings ring true. Sometimes our job is simply to hold up the mirror at an angle they've not yet seen. 🪞