



## External Motivation

**Motivation** (*External*) – incentive or inducement

So you think you have strong external motivation? You had better make sure. Consider the following:

- > **Are you currently facing consequences if you do not change?**
- > **How much do you care about consequences? (If you care little or not at all, then external motivation is not a strength)**
- > **Can you easily identify real, actual (not imagined or exaggerated) reasons for change coming from outside of you? (For example from other people in your life, your employer, the legal system, etc.)**

When External Motivation is identified as an area of strength, the activities involved in further developing that area of strength can be easier to identify than internal factors as they are often very concrete in nature. Insight and Internal Motivation are much more abstract concepts that are experienced on a much more psychological and emotional level than external motivation. There are differences, however, in the role that external motivation plays in the upward change process, dependent upon the accompanying level of insight and internal motivation. In other words, if external motivation is the primary reason one is seeking help with a perceived problem, with little or no insight and internal motivation, then it is important to be realistic in viewing that help is being sought while it is likely not wanted. Obviously, when someone is only seeking help because they are being coerced with little or no desire for help on their own, that makes for a very challenging person to work with. Still, where there is motivation of any kind, there is hope.

### **Floor 2 Activity for Strength Area -High External Motivation:**

There are three main activities needed for enhancing strength in the area of strong external motivation:

1. **Establish and maintain open lines of communication with invested persons**
2. **Clearly identify and clarify expectations and requirements**
3. **Discuss outcomes if efforts to meet expectations and requirement are unsuccessful**



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[Then download and complete the activity: “External Motivation”](#)

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This exercise can serve as a contract to be utilized throughout the upcoming change process. As circumstances change, such as when progress is made or when new consequences arise, this contract may need to be amended. Involved parties should be involved wherever allowed and available particularly when they are the ones driving the external motivation. The key to using external motivation to drive change is to keep expectations and goals clearly defined and understood by all involved with regular, ongoing review of progress. The hope in situations where external motivation is driving the change process is that somewhere along the way something will “click” and some increased insight and internal motivation will develop along the way.



## **Support and External Motivation**

Closely linked with external motivation is support:

**Support:** n. a person or thing that gives aid or assistance

One of the primary reasons that 12 Step programs are so effective is because of the level of support provided by the meetings. When it comes to building external motivation, it is critical to identify then maximize utilization of existing areas of support. There can be a wealth of excellent support right in among your friends and family members that should be utilized to your advantage. The following activity is focused on the area of considering areas of support for the change process:



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[Then download and complete the activity: "Support Report"](#)

**Healthy Families** - Finally, the power of family cannot be underestimated. Unfortunately, substance use issues can often be associated with family dysfunction. Nevertheless, even if your family has its share of problems, it can be helpful to assess your family's areas of strength:



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[Then download and complete the activity: "Healthy Families"](#)

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## **Enhancing External Motivation**

Enhancing this area of need may be the most difficult to conceptualize because most often, external motivation comes from negative experiences such as an arrest, threats from family, relationship problems, and other negative consequences. It is therefore unreasonable to suggest that anyone who lacks external motivation, go out of their way to get themselves into trouble in order just to enhance external motivation. If that was the advice, no one would follow it because no sane person is going to go out of their way to look to get themselves into trouble. Most of the more severe external motivators come about within the natural course of the progression of a substance abuse problem and coexisting issues. For example, if someone truly has a problem with substance abuse and coexisting issues, eventually consequences will come naturally along with progression of the problem, especially when things start to spiral out of control.

Still, an absence of consequences and related external motivators does not automatically mean that someone who uses substances does not have a problem. Some people who abuse substances with coexisting issues have a strong co-shielder or group of co-shielders who effectively protect them from consequences. Others may have a degree of personal, professional, or political power or influence that keeps them from experiencing consequences, such as the child of a police officer or politician. As you would expect then, it is less likely someone will change on their own if they have been shielded by the consequences of their actions. Consequences deter negative behavior; therefore an absence of consequences may prolong negative behavior. A good analogy most of us can relate to is the illustration of a young bratty child who never experienced any consequences for acting out due to overly permissive caregivers. A person who abuses substances without consequences can develop a similar self-centered focused as an undisciplined "bratty" child who is used to always getting their way.

External motivation is often defined in terms of "hitting bottom". Often it is true that hitting bottom, or in other words experiencing serious consequences that makes someone feel as if they cannot get any lower, is often the impetus behind someone finally starting and then succeeding in the upward change or recovery process.



Various techniques such as “interventions” are designed to “raise the bottom” by helping someone with a substance use issue feel that sense of desperation and pressure that often comes with hitting bottom. Over the years, however, the field of substance abuse and addiction recovery has accepted the fact that not everyone needs to hit bottom in order to change. In fact there are many people who have succeeded in changing simply because they felt that they “had enough” without having to formally “hit bottom”. For some reason, the scales of motivation tip for some individuals toward the side of wanting the benefits of not abusing substances more than the desire for the substance itself at some point. Nevertheless, external pressure seems to be an extremely common thread among many who succeed in the upward change process. Whether or not one actually has to hit bottom may be less important than the fact that it seems to be helpful in many cases for there to be some sort of push from the outside to change. The presence of external motivators provides that extra reason to change. External motivators, such as pressure from work, family, or the legal system can often serve in role similar to a referee in a football game, who blows the whistle when someone steps out of bounds or commits a penalty by breaking one of the rules. The presence of someone who will enforce consequences when you step out of line can be a huge help with staying within the necessary boundaries.

Nevertheless, as stated earlier, there can still be upward change even when there is little or no external pressure to do so. When there is no specific external source pushing us toward upward change we can still in a sense put pressure on ourselves to change without having to deliberately get ourselves in trouble. The following exercises are designed to examine the concept of considering how to increase and somehow implement a sense of external motivation in a rational, practical manner particularly when actual specific external motivators may be lacking.

### **Motivating Yourself From the Outside Through Goal Setting:**

The premise behind this exercise is that if someone is lacking in external motivation, they can increase their level of external motivation by identifying meaningful goals. The presence of these goals can serve as a form of external pressure for change as we strive to attain them. In a lot of ways goal setting is like turning internal motivation outward. We can first use our internal motivation and insight in the goal making process, then by listing our goals and making some form of commitment to achieving them, these same goals can then serve as an external “force” which can push us forward and upward in the change process. Publicizing our goals to others who care about us and making a commitment to achieving them adds to the strength of this motivational process. Consider an example:

A student may start to realize that she needs to get better grades because that may one day positively affect her future. This student has not gotten such good grades in the past due to an overall lack of motivation to do the work and studying involved in order to get good grades. By using specific meaningful goals to motivate herself, she decides to set the goal that she will make sure not to get below a C in any subject the next semester and she will do her best to get at least one A. To increase the external pressure, she reviews these goals carefully with her parents and she encourages them to stay on top of her to stay vigilant with regard to her work. This student also writes down “No less than a C in any classes and at least one A!” in a large sign which she then hangs on her bedroom wall to remind herself every day. She also enlists her best friend in this process and her friend, who is in a similar predicament grade-wise decides to join her in this quest for improved grades. Additionally, she also tells her guidance counselor and one of her favorite teachers to help her stay on the right path and to provide reminders of these goals now and then. Finally, to increase the incentive for change, this student promises herself a reward that she will throw herself a party with a group of her closest friends to celebrate her improved report card once she achieves these grades. Her parents agree to pay for the party if she gets the grades she is striving for which is even more incentive. Throughout the entire next semester, this girl has constant reminders of her goals that now serve as external motivators helping her keep pressing forward to success.

The above example illustrates using the process of goal setting to manufacture external pressure that otherwise may not have been originally present. Based on this same idea, in the upward change process some reasonable, achievable goals can be first recognized and clearly identified. Then by using external sources and supports to provide a degree of pressure upon ourselves we can develop our own “manufactured” source of external motivation. The best way to start this process is to begin with some basic goal setting.



## Building Motivation through Goal Setting

The importance of goal setting cannot be undervalued. It is important for everyone alive to keep setting goals and adjusting old goals and making new ones when we achieve them. Goals give us a reason to get up in the morning and a reason to keep pressing forward in life by learning, growing, and improving. For many, living in a “goal-less” state can be depressing, anxiety-provoking, stagnating and spiritually draining. Think about it for a few minutes. Is life about grinding out at a mundane job, coming home and watching some of your favorite TV shows, maintaining some basic family and social relationships when you can, then going to bed and getting it up and doing it all over again the next day? There has to be more involved than just going through the motions. Goals make all the difference.

When we are children in school, to some degree, like it or not, we are in a situation where goals are before us constantly and we are programmed to make progress in a variety of life areas. We grow physically without trying year after year until adulthood. We are in an educational system based on grades and progression from grade to grade which places educational and other learning goals before us whether we want it or not. By gaining maturity we progressively face new challenges resulting in emotional and intellectual growth. Regardless of what we are taught to believe, as we get older as children we formulate a deeper understanding of the world and our sense of meaning intensifies causing some level of spiritual growth. All of this continues into young adulthood for most of us until we can eventually reach a point where we have a career or at least a means to financially survive and meet our basic needs. Many of us then have a family, a basic social network, and some hobbies and other interests. For some, growth and goal attainment can slow down drastically or even stop at adulthood. Sadly, this stagnation of goals and growth often occurs even sooner and more drastically for those who overuse or depend upon substances to get by in life. This too may be complicated by the presence of coexisting issues, particularly issues like clinical depression, a mood disorder or anxiety. Depression itself, including the feelings of hopelessness it so often brings can be a driving factor with regard to finding oneself in a “goal-less state” Anxiety and fear can also hold individuals back from taking the risks needed for goal attainment and personal growth. Combine that with substance abuse which characteristically delays emotional and spiritual development and progress and then it is easy to see why many people with these conditions find themselves lacking goals and motivation at some point.

The following activity is all about getting back to basic goal setting in a variety of life areas. Part I is about making a comprehensive effort to identify and brainstorm some meaningful goals across a broad range of life areas, Part II is about refining that list to effectively redefine and choose specific goals we care about and then set out on attaining some of these goals in a few relevant life areas where we can hopefully start to see some growth. The third aspect of this activity, Part III is all about cleverly using these identified goals to create an atmosphere of increased external motivation by using our goals as the proverbial carrot on the end of the stick that we can reach out for in an increasingly motivational way.



[Click here to go to the Escalator, Therapy Tools Webpage](#)

[Then download the activity “GOAL SETTING”](#)

## Follow Up – Choosing what is best for now in order to increase motivation

Although it would be nice to be able to work on all of our goals from it is better to focus on just two or three to start so that your resources and abilities are not spread too thin over too many areas.

### Using Your Own Goal Statements as External Motivators

In this section, the idea is to publicize our goals developed in order to create a sense of external pressure that can help serve as a source of motivation from the outside. There are several ways to do this so please consider each of the following:

Utilizing Helpers – Helpers can be counselors, family members, close friends, or even a traditional 12 Step sponsor. Your helpers should be a good source of external motivation and support for you. With each of your



identified helpers, arrange to have at least a brief conversation about your specific goal statements that you developed. Try to cover the following points:

- Explain and discuss each of your goals and how you will **define success**.
- Discuss what it will look like if you are **not doing so well**. Specifically discuss what you want your helpers to say and do for you if they see you slipping or going backward with your goals.
- Come up with a specific arrangement for what you are comfortable with and what you expect when it comes to your helpers giving you reminders about your goals and giving you **encouragement**. For example, do you want them to say something every time they see you or would you rather limit that to avoid frustration?
- Try to develop a specific **emergency plan**. It is always better to be proactive rather than reactive it comes to crisis. Therefore, rather than wait until a problem arises, discuss with your helpers what to do if things get really bad. Tell them now what to do for you in a crisis rather than waiting until you are caught up in the middle of everything and you may not be able to then make good decisions for yourself because you're thinking may be clouded at that time.
- **Coordinate**: If at all possible try to let all of your helpers know about each other and make arrangements for them to be able to communicate if they are willing and able to. For example if one of your helpers is your counselor and another is your family member, sign a consent to release information with your counselor so he or she can communicate with your family member for the purpose of coordinating their efforts to support you and help to try and keep you motivated and on the right track to the degree they are able.
- **Set up your own reminders**: In order to keep your goals alive in your mind it is important to be able to make an effort to set up reminders so that you don't forget about them and that you are able to remain conscious of them for as long as possible.
- **Advertise**: Advertisements can serve as a form of external motivator. An advertisement is designed to draw your attention to a product so that it looks appealing and eye-catching and therefore increases your desire to use that product. By the same token, try to be creative with ways to "advertise" your goals to yourself by making them conspicuous in your life. Reminders can be placed on your refrigerator, in your car, on your phone, etc. If you want to maintain confidentiality around others try to come up with clever ways to advertise your goals to yourself in ways that only have meaning to you. Just like advertising agents do, use visual aids, pictures, or whatever you can to help use your goals as an external form of motivation.
- **Be your own sponsor**: This was mentioned earlier but it bears repeating because it can be a very effective tool for external motivation. If you are able to somehow record yourself, then use the technology that you have at hand to recite a short motivational soliloquy for yourself that you can watch again later. If you are able to do this on your phone so that you have something available with you at any time or place then that is even better. Go over your goals with yourself and motivate yourself so you have access to this recording to watch again later to keep your motivation for your goals alive should your motivation start to fade. If you do not have access to a way to record yourself then you can try writing a motivational letter to yourself that you can hold onto and read later, when needed.
- Try to set up your own motivational system of **rewards and consequences**: This can be difficult to do and may not always work because it is difficult to maintain and follow through with rewards and consequences on yourself but it is worth a shot because when this does work it can be highly effective with regard to keeping yourself motivated. Review your specific goals that you set for this exercise and try to come up with some reasonable and practical rewards for periods of success and consequences for setbacks. For example, with regard to a goal about abstaining from abusing substances a reward can be: "For every week that I go without drinking, I will use a portion of the money I saved by not drinking to treat myself and my spouse to a nice dinner out on Saturday night". As a consequence, an example may be "The morning after I drink, I have to call both my counselor and my best friend to tell on myself so I can stay on the right track" Remember to be creative but also be reasonable with yourself. If you can stick with this it can be very effective, just make sure that your rewards aren't simply ways of going back on your own goals. For





example, “If I go a month without using cocaine, I will celebrate by letting myself buy a gram of coke at the end of the month”. That just wouldn’t make any sense

- If available, use your existing forms of external motivation to help you – This idea is suggested last, because it is probably the most difficult to do. However if you can do this, it can be the most effective by far. The reason that this technique can be so challenging is that it takes a **commitment to honesty**. Sadly, honesty does not always come so easy but if you can do this then you are at a huge advantage. The suggestion is discuss your goals with those who are able to put pressure on you, to the degree that you are able without causing undue harm to yourself or others. It is important to use discernment and again be reasonable with this because the suggestion is not that you do something like for example say too much to your boss and get yourself fired or say too much to your probation officer and get yourself thrown in jail. However, if you are doing the right thing now and you want help staying in line, you can make a commitment to yourself that you are going to honestly face the consequences of your actions if you do not stay on the right course. For example, let’s say you have been successfully hiding your drug use from your wife. In that case, it can be a huge form of external motivation if you make a commitment to yourself by saying something like “If I use drugs again, I am going to tell my wife about my use the next day” Your desire not to have to face your wife after a setback in this case could be a deterrent the next time you feel like using. If you have helpers that you know and trust, use them to guide you through this process. A commitment to honesty is a good thing because the easiest way to stay honest is to avoid doing anything that you will later have to lie about. Based on this premise, if you promise yourself, that you have to come clean and admit your mistakes rather than hide them or lie about them, then you should be less likely to allow yourself to go down the wrong course.

### **Support Zones and Interpersonal Boundaries:**

Building support is not easy, especially if this is an area of weakness. The following information and activity below is focused on understanding what is involved with starting to venture out of your comfort zone in order to get started with the process of expanding support.



[Click here to link to the Taking the Escalator Recovery Tools webpage and then complete the activity: SUPPORT ZONES & INTERPERSONAL BOUNDARIES](#)

### **Examining Common Family Issues in the Change Process**

The positive influence that one’s family can have on the upward change process can extremely helpful. Off course, there are varying levels of family support from one person to the next, however it can be useful to assess where you and your family are at with regard to some of the issues that directly affect the change process and then move forward from there:



[Click here to link to the Taking the Escalator Recovery Tools webpage and then complete the activity: THE PENDULUM: EXAMINING COMMON FAMILY ISSUES](#)

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*Whatever strategies that you use to enhance external motivation, allow some time for them to work. It may be best to use a combination of strategies listed above. Keep track of your progress as you allow these self-directed external factors to build your motivation from the outside.*

