

Be Inconsistent – it’s what makes you happy and successful!

Celebrate your inconsistency – it’s part of who you are and what makes you wonderfully flexible, adaptable and capable of personal change.

Healthy and Successful

Yes, it’s a fact, more than 30 years of research all over the world confirms it – we’re fickle and maybe that’s not a bad thing! We change our minds a lot, we all do, AND so we should. It’s this ability to see things differently, to change, perhaps (to put a more positive gloss on it) be more flexible that makes us successful and healthy human beings. Those of us who are more ‘fixed’ are the ones who are in danger of being psychologically unhealthy.

Changeable

This is big news for some people who may like to see us as relatively fixed in our personalities. But, according to Dr Michael Apter, we are not fixed at all. We are very changeable from moment to moment and over time. Michael Apter, and a team of researchers all over the world, have found that actually there are 8 different key ways that we can interpret the world around us, and this impacts our emotions, what we might want, our view on things and consequently how we then might behave. These 8 ways of being are called Motivational States.

Motivation

Understanding all this changeability helps us to understand better our relationship, our careers, why we don’t stick to that New Year resolution, that diet plan or that exercise regime – and much more.

In difficult times like these, understanding our motivational states helps us to appreciate how we and others are coping with the uncertainty of life. We shouldn’t expect to always feel down about the credit crunch, worried about whether we are going to keep our jobs and our homes. Sometimes, we’ll feel ready to fight to the death, or we’ll realise that someone else might be struggling more than us and might need our help or that actually, I’d really rather just put my head under the covers and wait for it to all end.

We’ll feel differently from time to time and that’s ok. The great thing about these motivational states is that they DO change. So, if we’re feeling bad right now, we might not later, and anyway if we can get a grip of our motivational states – we can even change ourselves and take control of how we feel.



The Eight Motivational States

Emotional Experience

All our experience depends upon which ‘motivational states’ we are in. The effect of motivational states is a bit like

looking at the world through tinted lenses, depending upon the colour of the lens different things will tend to stand out and look important and we will feel different things too.

Imagine – you’ve just had a row with your partner. You are angry and bit upset and feeling a tad sorry for yourself, when suddenly you see the situation from their point of view.

“Ah – yes, she must have been hurt when I told her I’d rather go alone. No wonder she was mad at me. I think I’ll go and say sorry.”

You’ve gone from feeling sorry for yourself to feeling sorry for someone else – you’ve gone from being combative to being consolatory. Quite a change!

Or, you might be hanging out with your friends and suddenly feel it’s all a bit pointless and superficial, and you should be doing something more significant or important. Or imagine you’re playing a friendly game with someone and suddenly feel an overwhelming need to thrash them.

We See the World Not As it Is But as We Are!

Researchers started by noticing that we often experience the same thing in quite different ways. For instance, people who queue up for those amusement park rides called Oblivion, Extinction, and Terminal Experience, don’t divide into two lines; those who are

frightened, or even petrified, and those who are excited. We all experience both emotions, it's just that some people feel frightened for longer than the others. And, paradoxically, we need to have the risk of being frightened, at least a little, so we can be excited!

Pairs of Opposites

The diagram of the 8 motivational states above – shows that they are combined in pairs of opposites. This means that we can only be in one state from each pair at any one time – and in effect are always in a combination of four motivational states.

We Switch

We all regularly switch between quite different ways of seeing the world. Very often it's not the world that has changed, but how we are seeing it.

This is one of those really obvious things that sometimes psychologists forget to talk about. We do change our minds all the time. We often talk about being in two minds about something, but in fact it might be better to talk about being in eight minds!

Why am I Doing this?



The Serious and Playful motivational states are concerned with why we are doing something at a particular moment. Are we playfully doing something for its own sake in which case we are looking for things to be interesting, exciting, enjoyable? If they are, we will be happy if they are not we will be bored. When we 'reverse' into a Serious state we will want our involvement to help us work towards something we feel is important or valuable. We'll want to be making progress of some kind.

Fit in or Break Out?



Another pair of states colour how we feel about the rules implicit in a situation - do we want to fit in with these, or do we want to reject them? Imagine you are going to a party and are worried about what you should wear. Quite often you will be concerned about wearing the 'right' thing. You are most clearly in the Conforming state, getting pleasure from signalling you belong here.

The same goes for men who like to wear a club tie, and teenage fashion victims, or football fans wearing the team shirt, they are indicating they are part of a particular pack.

The opposite state is the Rebellious state, when what is important is NOT to do what is expected! In this state expect to be labelled: bloody-minded, maverick, the devil's advocate etc.

Not surprisingly, quite a bit of heat might surround you when you are in this state but it is also the state in which you can be creative and instigate change.

Another way you might recognise a reversal between these two different ways of seeing the world might be when you stop at a red traffic light – you are doing what you should be doing. But, what about when you knowingly break the speed limit. The rules aren't so important to you then, even if they should be.

Research in the US Mid-West on people who were trying to quit smoking discovered that people often gave up quitting when they switched from the Conforming state to the Rebellious state.

Love or Dominance?



A young boy is struggling with his math's homework. Stereotypically, Dad is trying to help and getting irritated. Again and again he explains how the formula works, getting increasingly pointed in his remarks to his, by now increasingly discouraged, son how he "isn't trying" and how he "should have listened more carefully in class."

As world war three is about to break out, Mum stereotypically arrives, gives the boy a cuddle, tells him not to worry about his homework, he can do it later and offers him a biscuit.

Mum and Dad are displaying opposite states concerned with relationships. Dad is in the Mastery state; what is important to him is his son getting in control of the work, becoming more capable. What is important to her is that her son feels love and affection and isn't upset. Interestingly, both parents are concerned about their son.

The danger for Dad in the Mastery state is that - he treats his son as an object – in the Mastery state we can even treat ourselves as objects - think about how some people 'punish' themselves in the gym! Or how Mount Everest climbers drive themselves so hard and put themselves and others in very real danger.

The classic reversal between these two states you could call the 'cup-of-tea moment'. It occurs when you are struggling to manage to do something such as Ski, Salsa, assemble a flat pack wardrobe (Mastery) feel increasingly defeated and then end up feeling sorry for yourself (Sympathy). Time for a cup of tea and a biscuit!

Me or You?



One of the most positive things about Reversal Theory is that it acknowledges we are not completely selfish, only seeing things from our own point of view. It distinguishes between when we see the world through our own eyes and how things impact upon us and when we see the world through another's eyes and recognise how it impacts them.

This Self/Other distinction is supported by discoveries in the brain of mirror neurons through which we can actually experience the feelings and emotions of another. The distinction helps to show why you might indeed be willing to surrender that last Rolo. It also accounts for those amongst us who really do put others first a great deal of the time – remember Mother Teresa!

We are Dancers not Statues

So, we are not fixed personalities – we can and do change. What makes us different from each other and shapes our personality is the amount of time we spend in each state. Some of us are Serious dominant - recognised by our persistence in wanting to see the point of something, maybe displaying anxiety that something might go wrong.

Others of us are Sympathy dominant spending time wondering whether everyone, including ourselves, is alright. But, however dominant we are we will spend time experiencing all 8 of the states. Importantly just because we might not experience a state as often as it's opposite, it does not mean we experience it less strongly - just less often.

What Makes us Change?

What drives us through this changing pattern of motivational states? It appears there are three different sorts of things that prompt a reversal:

First of all the situation can change. Imagine you are home, feet up enjoying a glass of wine, feeling distinctly chilled, and your partner rushes in shouting "someone's stealing our car". The reversal from Playful to Serious would feel like a jolt.

We also change because we get frustrated in the state that we happen to be in. Remember trying to assemble flat pack furniture. How often do we struggle on, desperately trying to follow the instructions, getting more and more frustrated until, out comes the hammer "just to help things along" – and oops!

It also turns out that we also have some sort of internal rhythm that will (even if nothing externally has changed) switch us from Serious to Playful, Conforming to Rebellious, Mastery to Sympathy or Self to Other. We are wired to change!

Infinite Variety

The art of a healthy psychological life is not to deny that our lives are sometimes paradoxical and inconsistent, but to ensure, whichever motivational state is colouring our experience, that we maximise the benefits we can get from it - both for ourselves and for those around us. What makes us intriguing and human is our capacity for "infinite variety". Enjoy it!

Motivational Mapping

Check yourself out – where are you spending most of your motivational time?

Do you tend to spend more time:

Focussing on making progress, thinking about the future, worrying about goals and deadlines?



Or

Enjoying the moment, looking for excitement or stimulation, perhaps easily bored?



Do you tend to spend more time:

Wanting to do the right thing, enjoying fitting in with others, liking traditions and norms?



Or

Looking for different ways to do things, being unconventional, getting angry sometimes?



Do you tend to spend more time:

Looking for co-operation, wanting to build relationships' seeking to be liked?



Or

Wanting to get things under control, being competitive, feeling proud?



Do you tend to spend more time:

Being concerned with your own self image and your own emotions, being assertive?



Or

Doing the best you can for others, putting them first, helping others to learn or do well?



Now ask yourself, "Is this working for me"? What might you want to change?

To find out more about this psychological theory and managing your inconsistency more effectively, take a look at:
www.reversaltheory.org or
www.apterinternational.com