

Locus of Control and Your Life

Are You in Control of Your Destiny?

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Locus of control refers to the extent to which people feel that they have control over the events that influence their lives. When you are dealing with a challenge in your life, do you feel that you have control over the outcome? Or do you believe that you are simply at the hands of outside forces?

If you believe that you have control over what happens, then you have what psychologists refer to as an internal locus of control. If you believe that you have no control over what happens and that external variables are to blame, then you have what is known as an external locus of control.

Your locus of control can influence not only how you respond to the events that happen in your life, but also your motivation to take action. If you believe that you hold the keys to your fate, you are more likely to take action to change your situation when needed. If on the other hand, you believe that the outcome is out of your hands, you may be less likely to work toward change.

What Is Locus of Control?

"A locus of control orientation is a belief about whether the outcomes of our actions are contingent on what we do (internal control orientation) or on events outside our personal control (external control orientation)," explained psychologist Philip Zimbardo in his 1985 book *Psychology and Life*.

In 1954, psychologist Julian Rotter suggested that our behavior was controlled by rewards and punishments and that it was these consequences for our actions that determined our beliefs about the underlying causes of these actions. Our beliefs about what causes our actions then influence our behaviors and attitudes.

In 1966, Rotter published a scale designed to measure and assess external and internal locus of control. The scale utilizes a forced-choice between two alternatives, requiring respondents to choose just one of two possibilities for each item. While the scale has been widely used, it has also been the subject of considerable criticism from those who believe that locus of control cannot be fully understood or measured by such a simplistic scale.

It is also important to note that locus of control is a continuum. No one has a 100 percent external or internal locus of control. Instead, most people lie somewhere on the continuum between the two extremes.

Those With an Internal Locus of Control

- Are more likely to take responsibility for their actions
- Tend to be less influenced by the opinions of other people
- Often do better at tasks when they are allowed to work at their own pace
- Usually, have a strong sense of self-efficacy
- Tend to work hard to achieve the things they want
- Feel confident in the face of challenges
- Tend to be physically healthier
- Report being happier and more independent
- Often achieve greater success in the workplace

Those With an External Locus of Control

- Blame outside forces for their circumstances
- Often credit luck or chance for any successes
- Don't believe that they can change their situation through their own efforts
- Frequently feel hopeless or powerless in the face of difficult situations
- Are more prone to experiencing learned helplessness

What Role Does Your Locus of Control Play In Your Life?

Internal locus of control is often used synonymously with "self-determination" and "personal agency." Research has suggested that men tend to have a higher internal locus of control than women and that locus of control tends to become more internal as people grow older. Experts have found that, in general, people with an internal locus of control tend to be better off.

However, it is also important to remember that internally does not always equal "good" and external does not always equal "bad." In some situations, an external locus of control can actually be a good thing, particularly if a person's level of competence in a particular area is not very strong.

For example, a person who is terrible at sports might feel depressed or anxious about their performance if they have a strong internal locus of control. If the person thinks, "I'm bad at sports and I don't try hard enough," they might feel stressed out in situations where they need to participate in athletics, such as during a physical education class. If this person takes an external focus during such activities ("The game is too hard!" or "The sun was in my eyes!"), they will probably feel more relaxed and less stressed.

Do You Have an External or Internal Locus of Control?

Where does your locus of control fall on the continuum? Read through the statements below and select the set that best describes your outlook on life:

Outlook 1

- I often feel that I have little control over my life and what happens to me.
- People rarely get what they deserve.
- It isn't worth setting goals or making plans because too many things can happen that are outside of my control.
- Life is a game of chance.
- Individuals have little influence over the events of the world.

If the statements above best reflect your view on life, then you probably tend to have an external locus of control.

Outlook 2

- If you work hard and commit yourself to a goal, you can achieve anything.
- There is no such thing as fate or destiny.
- If you study hard and are well-prepared, you can do well on exams.
- Luck has little to do with success; it's mostly a matter of dedication and effort.
- In the long run, people tend to get what they deserve in life.

If the statements above best reflect your outlook on life, then you most likely have an internal locus of control.

Your locus of control can have a major impact on your life, from how you cope with stress to your motivation to take charge of your life. In many cases, having an internal locus of control can be a good thing. It means that you believe that your own actions have an impact. If you tend to have more of an external locus of control, you might find it helpful to start actively trying to change how you view situations and events. Rather than viewing yourself as simply a passive bystander who is caught up in the flow of life, think about actions you can take that will have an impact on the outcome.