

Cracking the Curiosity Code

*The Key to Unlocking Human
Potential*

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Chapter 2

Curiosity, Motivation, and Drive

No one asks how to motivate a baby. A baby naturally explores everything it can get at, unless restraining forces have already been at work. And this tendency doesn't die out; it's wiped out.

B.F. Skinner

What motivates us? And what is the correlation, if any, between motivation and curiosity?

Assuming the two are connected, which happens first? Does motivation drive us to curiosity? Or does curiosity lead to motivation?

These are the types of questions I had to find answers to.

Again, I was curious.

For example, did my curiosity about the subject of curiosity motivate me to write this book? Or was I already motivated, and therefore became curious to learn more about the subject so I could write it? Let's go back to the beginning.

Curiosity is described by behavioral scientists as a quality related to inquisitive thinking such as exploration, investigation, and learning, as is evident from observation of humans and other animals. Motivation is described by those same behavioral scientists as the reason for people's actions, desires, and needs.ⁱ

Motivation is why we do what we do. We can typically find motivation for taking a certain action or believing a certain way by filling in the blank: I do an action because_____. I exercise because I want to be healthy when I am older. I work at my current job because I need the benefits. A motive is what prompts us to act in a certain way, or at least to develop an inclination for a specific behavior.

Okay, so curiosity is the interest to learn more about a subject; motivation is the desire to do something with that information. From my own studies, from the scientific research, and from the stories of professionals and motivational speakers interviewed on

my program, there's agreement that our motivation is driven by a combination of three factors:

- 1) Need: We need to sustain ourselves. We need to provide for ourselves and our families, and we need to have a place to live. Therefore, we are motivated.
- 2) Desire or want: We desire a certain type of house or car or a membership at the country club. We do not need these things, but we want them, so we are motivated.
- 3) Some missing element or void: We suffer some forms of shortcoming in our lives, whether mental, physical, or emotional. To varying degrees, we have a desire to overcome or attempt to mitigate those shortcomings. It's that desire that motivates us.

We've heard about individuals who overcame trying situations to accomplish great things. Consider the story of Leonard Kim. His motivation was driven by a different need, the need to survive.

This successful entrepreneur went from being homeless to becoming the managing partner at InfluenceTree, a personal branding consulting firm that has amassed a social media following of well over 500,000 people.

Leonard's motivation drove him to become a leading expert whose content has been read more than ten million times. That need led to his curiosity and ultimately to the counter-intuitive proposition in his TEDx talk he called "Why You Should Let Your Fears Guide You."ⁱⁱ

Rather than trying to escape your fears, this entrepreneur advised, run toward them and embrace them to find your motivation and purpose.

It took me losing everything to realize the true importance of curiosity. I had to reset my mind, body, and soul and start fresh.

Leonard Kim

Others are motivated by the notion that something is missing in their lives. The most vivid examples can be found in individuals who have physical drawbacks. From blind musicians such as Ray Charles and Stevie Wonder to the extraordinary achievements of Helen Keller, there are millions of people whose motivation and curiosity have been enhanced by a void in their sensory abilities.

Another guest, Robin Farmanfarmanian, was misdiagnosed with an autoimmune disease as a teenager. It resulted in countless hospitalizations and surgeries, not to mention the virtual loss of normalcy in her teen years. Her experience motivated her to become an expert in health care. This author, speaker, and serial entrepreneur was driven by the belief that technology can empower patients and create a positive impact in the health and medical fields.ⁱⁱⁱ

Another guest, Lance Collin Allred, grew to become a gangly near-seven-footer who was deaf. His deafness combined with his height motivated him to become the first legally deaf professional basketball player in the history of the National Basketball Association (NBA). He later became a recognized inspirational speaker, author, and TEDx presenter with his talk “What Is Your Polygamy?”^{iv}

Tanner Gers embarked on a similar path but for a very different reason. Tanner lost his sight at age twenty-one after losing control of his car in an auto accident. Since that day, despite being blind, Tanner graduated from college and became a 2011 Para Pan American gold medalist, 2012 U.S. Paralympic trials gold medalist, 2012 Paralympian, 2013 World Championship team member, two-time National Beep Baseball Association World

Series Offensive MVP, and four-time Offensive All-Star. He is also a published author and motivational speaker.

These individuals are like many who have suffered similar mishaps or shortcomings, be they mental, emotional, or physical. Driven by those shortcomings, they illustrate the power of curiosity and motivation.

Human beings have an innate inner drive to be autonomous, self-determined, and connected to one another. And when that drive is liberated, people achieve more and live richer lives.

Daniel H. Pink

To uncover some misconceptions about what drives us, I found insights in the book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, by Daniel H. Pink.^v

In his book, Pink provided an interesting study of how reward, fear, and punishment play into our drive, motivation, and curiosity. Fear and punishment, he concluded, do not motivate us or give us the drive to want to be more curious. Rather, our desire to learn and explore is better driven by reward and by viewing learning as a choice rather than a requirement.

Pink highlighted three elements that drive our motivation: a need for autonomy, a need for mastery, and a need for purpose. He explained how intrinsic motivations are renewable, like solar power and pointed out that those who are intrinsically motivated will outperform those driven by external rewards. Therefore, it's important to focus on the internal rewards that we can realize from developing a sense of curiosity.

Pink also described how our early childhood can play into our curiosity and drive. If we're involved in actions and behaviors that

we don't find rewarding, we won't continue to explore new ones. If people lack curiosity toward something, they might have received a negative consequence for pursuing things in the past. For example, if parents used negative reinforcement to get their kids to avoid exploration, the child might fear exploring.

While curiosity might spur the release of dopamine, if we have had enough negative rewards associated with exploration, it could have a much different impact. That's what causes us to recall past incidents and how we were rewarded or punished for inquisitive behaviors.

Further, not all things will be equally fascinating to us upon discovery. If we explore an area that we find uninteresting, it's important not to give up and assume that exploration is a waste of time. Rather, it indicates that perhaps other areas of exploration might be more rewarding.

There are endless studies on the interconnections between curiosity and motivation. There is also ample research on how much of our curiosity is intrinsic, or internally driven, and how much is externally driven. (We will examine this further in subsequent chapters.)

Regarding this linkage between motivation and curiosity, we ask: can you have one without the other? Is it possible to be curious but not motivated?

Conversely, we ask: is it possible to be motivated but not curious about what motivates us? How does that work?

The answer appears to be "yes" to the first questions and "yes but probably ill-advised" to the second pair.

At one time or another, each of us has been determined to improve our health and fitness, for example. We were curious enough to explore various ways of achieving that goal. We researched diet and exercise recommendations. We explored gym memberships. We studied different types of exercise machines for the home. Some of us even purchased the exercise equipment and set it up, then we only used it as a clothes rack. Thus, we were curious enough to explore the possibilities, but not quite motivated enough to act. Yes, we were curious but not motivated.

In other circumstances, we decided to begin an exercise regimen, such as jogging. We eagerly embarked on our first five-mile run without researching how to best do it. We probably ended up out of breath after the first 500 yards, unable to bend over to tie our shoes the next day, and determined never to jog again. We were motivated but not curious enough to explore the subject well, and we paid the price.

Going deeper into the scientific realm, in his classic 1890 publication *The Principles of Psychology*,^{vi} William James described two other types of curiosity.

The first is an instinctual arousal to an unfamiliar object. Imagine our fascination being introduced to our first computer. That fascination, according to the famed psychiatrist, was instinctual. The second type of curiosity is what James described as a scientific curiosity and metaphysical wonder in which the “brain responds to an inconsistency or a gap in its knowledge, just as the musical brain responds to a discord in what it hears.”^{vii}

The underlying belief was that either form of curiosity was sufficient to compel us to some form of motivation. Hence, curiosity yielded motivation.

For the longest time, that belief seemed to withstand scientific scrutiny. In the early twentieth century, scientists assumed that curiosity was one of the basic human drives, along with hunger, thirst, and sex. But the research took a new twist when researcher Daniel Berlyne found more nuance to the connection between curiosity and motivation.

Berlyne also divided curiosity into two types, which he described as diversive curiosity and specific curiosity. Diversive curiosity is akin to casual or fleeting curiosity, a general tendency for a person to seek novelty, take risks, or search for adventure. Specific curiosity is a more proactive type of curiosity, the desire to investigate a specific object or problem to better understand it.

Berlyne further concluded that curiosity can be aroused by external stimuli such as complexity, novelty, uncertainty, and conflict. And here's the important part: if an external stimulus is too low, there will be no motivation to explore it. If a stimulus is too high, it will result in anxiety, almost paralysis. If it's just right, it will result in the desired exploratory behavior.

For example, think of the end of your company's fiscal year when the bosses want you to meet and exceed your financial quotas. If the incentive is only a five-dollar bonus for another sale, it hardly seems worth the effort. On the other extreme, if the incentive is a \$10,000 bonus for fifty more sales, it may seem out of reach and therefore equally non-motivating. According to the research, we are motivated only when the stimulus seems reasonable and attainable.

Hence, motivation is tied to the levels of curiosity with which we are presented. Just like Goldilocks and her three bears, if the curiosity is too low, we're not interested. If it is too high, we're scared off. However, if it's just right, we're motivated to act on it.

Other studies have suggested the same. Our knowledge gaps, which are the basis of our curiosity, must feel manageable for us to be motivated to act on them. Consider the animal that seems curious about your presence and even exhibits a desire to come closer, yet it is repelled by the fear of the unknown, the unmanageable.

Berlyne concluded that curiosity and thus motivation are aroused by a combination of complexity, novelty, uncertainty, and fear. But what about the curiosity and motivation that have no tangible benefit? What is it that motivates video gamers to undertake endless challenges for no traditional reward?

For example, what induced millions of people around the world to play a video game called Cube? The game (originally titled Curiosity but changed to avoid confusion with the Mars explorer of the same name) is a collection of cubes or cubelets to navigate through to get to the center. Indeed, it's a high-tech version of the popular Christmas wrapping game in which a gift is embedded in multiple layers of wrapping paper. Participants or recipients are challenged to get to the final layer of paper and find the gift.

In most video games (excluding Cube), there is no prize other than the social reward of competing with others to win the game. Scientists tell us that the same intrinsic drive that motivates us to be social is the same drive that motivates us to be curious. So, the social interaction is motivation in and of itself.

It is clear that curiosity and motivation are essential to our being productive, healthy, and happy. It is also clear that the two must work hand-in-hand for us to achieve whatever goals we set for ourselves: personal, professional, or altruistic.

Further, our curiosity and motivation can take us in positive and constructive directions or toward less positive or sinister outcomes. That's where choice comes into play.

There have been additional studies asking which comes first, curiosity or motivation, and what differentiates the mildly curious and motivated from the passionately curious and motivated and everyone in between. (These topics will also be tackled in chapters to come.)

For now, we conclude that, like love and marriage, horses and carriages, peanut butter and jelly, curiosity and motivation must go together to function properly, regardless of which came first.

Consider advertising campaigns. They are designed first and foremost to arouse our curiosity. That curiosity is intended to motivate us to explore the product or service and ultimately buy it. These are called teaser campaigns. Mercedes had an appealing ad, where two young men watch a new car on a computer screen that remains hidden from the viewer. Their reactions entice consumers to know more about the product.

Consider the Rubik's cube. Not until we are exposed to its complexity are we curious, and therefore motivated, to find the solution.

Consider the mystery of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, or the cliffhanging soap operas, or the many crime dramas on television. Our curiosity compels us to follow them.

Consider the tragic saga of Scott Peterson and his pregnant wife, Laci. What kept us glued to our televisions to see the case brought to justice? Curiosity.

So, which is it? Does our curiosity stimulate and provoke our drive and motivation? Or does our motivation and drive spur our curiosity?

Stated another way, are we curious only about the things we are motivated to learn or do? Or are we motivated or driven to pursue initiatives without being curious to learn more about them?

According to behavioral scientists, it depends. However, the consensus is that it's our curiosity that serves as the driving force.

Whether it's in combination with the drivers Berlyne described, uncertainty, novelty, complexity, or conflict, or not, it's ultimately our curiosity that fuels our motivation.

ⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curiosity>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MrIWL17KHS0&t=16s>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7Su2XF0To4>

^{iv} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbXzVrzTXHQ>

^v <https://www.amazon.com/Drive-Surprising-Truth-About-Motivates/dp/1594484805>

^{vi} <https://www.amazon.com/Principles-Psychology-William-James/dp/1855066793>

^{vii} Ibid.