

CONTROLLING GOAL

Authored by
mohammad looti

November 4, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *CONTROLLING GOAL*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=67632>

CONTROLLING GOAL

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology (Motivation Theory, Social Psychology, Educational Psychology)

1. Core Definition

The **controlling goal** is a psychological construct describing an objective that an individual pursues primarily due to external pressure or the promise of a contingent, extrinsic reward. Unlike autonomous goals, which are driven by internal interest or self-endorsed values, controlling goals are typically posed by external agents--such as parents, managers, or institutions--and are inherently linked to obtaining favorable outcomes or avoiding unfavorable ones. The core dynamic of a controlling goal is the establishment of a clear contingency: success in reaching the objective secures the desired advantage (e.g., approval, money, praise), while failure results in the withholding of that advantage or the application of punishment. This structure places the individual under a feeling of **obligation** or pressure rather than volitional choice.

This type of motivation operates on the principle of necessity rather than intrinsic desire. As observed in motivational psychology, controlling goals often provide sufficient impetus for individuals to complete mandated tasks, especially those that are routine or require immediate compliance. However, this compliance is fundamentally based on an **external locus of causality**; the person perceives the reason for their action as residing outside of themselves. Consequently, while controlling goals are efficient for ensuring short-term behavioral completion, they often come at the expense of psychological well-being, deep internalization of values, and long-term persistence in the absence of the external constraint.

2. Theoretical Context: Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The concept of the controlling goal is most clearly delineated and examined within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. SDT postulates that human motivation exists on a continuum ranging from amotivation (lack of intention or motivation) to intrinsic motivation (action driven purely by interest and enjoyment). Controlling goals represent the least autonomous and most externally driven forms of motivation on this continuum, specifically categorized under the rubric of non-self-determined extrinsic motivation.

Within SDT, motivation is classified according to the degree to which it is internalized and integrated into the self. Controlling goals primarily align with **external regulation** and **introjected regulation**. External regulation involves performing a behavior solely to satisfy an external demand or obtain an external reward. Introjected regulation, while slightly more internalized, involves acting

out of internal pressure, such as avoiding guilt, seeking ego enhancement, or maintaining a conditional sense of self-worth--a form of control that has been adopted but not fully integrated. Both of these regulatory styles are considered controlling because they fail to satisfy the basic psychological need for autonomy, a core tenet of SDT.

The theoretical distinction is crucial because it predicts behavioral outcomes. SDT research consistently demonstrates that environments structured around controlling goals (where autonomy is denied, choice is restricted, and rewards are used to manipulate behavior) undermine intrinsic motivation. The underlying mechanism is often explained by the **Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET)**, a sub-theory of SDT, which suggests that rewards or feedback perceived as controlling diminish feelings of competence and self-determination, thereby shifting the perceived cause of behavior from internal interest to external compliance.

3. Mechanisms of Goal Control and Regulation

Controlling goals exert their influence through two primary mechanisms: the conditional provision of tangible rewards and the application of interpersonal pressure or threats. The psychological effect of these mechanisms is to shift the individual's focus away from the inherent enjoyment or value of the task itself and towards the contingent outcome. When a manager promises a substantial bonus contingent upon meeting a specific, externally imposed quota, the goal becomes controlling because the individual's behavior is regulated by the external agent's expectation and judgment.

A significant dimension of control is the use of **conditional regard**, particularly in interpersonal relationships such as parenting or teaching. When affection, acceptance, or validation are made contingent on achieving an external standard (a high grade, a championship win), the goal becomes deeply controlling. The individual is not pursuing the goal because it is valuable or interesting, but because it is necessary to maintain a secure sense of connection or worth. This introjected form of control is highly stressful, as failure threatens the individual's self-esteem and relationship security, leading to high levels of anxiety and perfectionism.

Furthermore, controlling goals often foster a context of **ego involvement**. Instead of focusing on competence or mastery (the process of learning), the individual focuses on demonstrating superiority or avoiding shame (the outcome relative to others). The goal itself is thus transformed into a measure of personal worth, externalizing the standard of success. This mechanism results in a fragile motivation, where effort is often withdrawn following anticipated difficulty, as a protective measure against the ego-damaging realization of failure.

4. Key Characteristics of Controlling Goals

External Origin: Controlling goals typically originate from sources external to the individual, such

as societal expectations, institutional requirements, or figures of authority. They are imposed objectives rather than self-generated aspirations.

Contingent Rewards and Punishments: The achievement of a controlling goal is strictly tied to an extrinsic outcome--a reward (e.g., payment, privilege, praise) or the avoidance of a negative consequence (e.g., demotion, criticism, grounding).

Pressure and Tension: Psychologically, the pursuit of controlling goals is characterized by feelings of tension, anxiety, and obligation. The individual often experiences the task as a "must" or a "should" rather than a choice.

Focus on Outcome over Process: The primary emphasis is placed squarely on the end result (the grade, the quota met, the scale reading) rather than the enjoyment, learning, or mastery gained during the process of working toward the goal.

Reduced Creativity and Flexibility: Research shows that when individuals are focused on an external reward, their cognitive processing becomes narrower. They are less likely to employ creative problem-solving or adapt flexible strategies, instead focusing on the minimum required effort to secure the payoff.

5. Impact on Performance and Well-being

While the source content notes that controlling goals are often sufficient for task completion, especially for routine or simple tasks, psychological research reveals a complex trade-off between short-term compliance and long-term psychological outcomes. In the immediate term, highly salient rewards or severe punishments can effectively channel effort toward a specific objective, achieving high performance metrics for standardized, repetitive work where deep conceptual engagement is not required.

However, the pervasive use of controlling goals has demonstrably negative long-term effects. Individuals motivated by control exhibit poorer performance on tasks that require creativity, conceptual understanding, or complexity. This is due to the "**crowding out**" effect, where the external focus on the reward supplants and diminishes any underlying intrinsic interest the individual may have had in the task itself. Once the external structure (the boss, the grade system, the looming deadline) is removed, motivation often collapses entirely, leading to **amotivation** or minimal effort.

Crucially, controlling motivation exacts a significant toll on well-being. The pursuit of objectives out of pressure rather than choice is consistently associated with higher levels of psychological distress, including anxiety, burnout, somatic symptoms, and reduced life satisfaction. When performance becomes linked to self-worth via introjected regulation, failures are perceived as

catastrophic, hindering resilient coping strategies and fostering maladaptive perfectionism.

6. Applications in Educational Settings

Controlling goals are ubiquitous in traditional educational systems. High-stakes testing, competitive grading curves, public performance rankings, and tangible rewards (e.g., money for good report cards) are all mechanisms designed to instill controlling motivation. The primary goal often shifts from genuine learning and intellectual curiosity (mastery goals) to achieving the external standard (performance goals).

When students operate under controlling goals, they often adopt surface-level learning strategies, such as rote memorization, rather than deep processing required for conceptual understanding. Their behavior is geared toward demonstrating competence to external evaluators. This pressure also increases evaluation anxiety, particularly in testing situations. Educators who rely heavily on controlling language ("You must study if you want to pass," "Only the top students get extra credit") inadvertently undermine the students' natural curiosity, making learning feel like an obligation imposed by others rather than a worthwhile pursuit.

7. Controlling Goals in Organizational Behavior

In the workplace, controlling goals are institutionalized through rigid performance management systems, mandatory quotas, and contingent financial incentives. While management by objectives (MBO) often employs goal setting to align individual effort with organizational strategy, the goals become controlling when they are imposed top-down without employee input and when the rewards are used to coerce specific behaviors.

Research on workplace motivation suggests that controlling financial incentives (such as large, contingent bonuses for meeting a specific metric) can be effective for simple, algorithmic tasks. However, for heuristic tasks--those requiring creativity, problem-solving, or collaboration--controlling goals often backfire, leading to ethical shortcuts, competitive behaviors among colleagues, and reduced long-term commitment to organizational values. Effective goal setting in organizations strives to move goals away from pure external control toward **identified regulation** or **integrated regulation**, where employees understand and endorse the value of the objective even if it is not intrinsically interesting.

8. Debates and Mitigation

A key debate surrounding controlling goals acknowledges their necessity in certain contexts. Society relies on compliance for public safety (e.g., following traffic laws) or organizational efficiency (meeting deadlines). The mitigation strategy, derived from SDT, is not necessarily the removal of the goal or the reward, but the transformation of the motivational climate surrounding its

pursuit.

To mitigate the negative impacts of an externally required goal, the external agent can employ an **autonomy-supportive style**. This involves: 1) providing a clear, non-pressuring rationale for why the goal is important (connecting it to existing values), 2) offering choice regarding the means and methods of achieving the goal, and 3) acknowledging the individual's feelings of difficulty or resistance. By shifting the focus from controlling language ("You have to") to informational language ("We suggest this approach because..."), the external goal can be partially internalized or at least accepted as an identified regulation, minimizing the psychological cost of the control.

9. Further Reading

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) Official Website. Provides foundational literature and research on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. New York: Plenum. Classic text detailing the distinction between autonomous and controlled motivation.

Goal-setting Theory. Contrastive theory often utilized in organizational psychology, which focuses on goal difficulty and specificity rather than the underlying regulatory style.