

Self-reflection theme: Goals and life improvement



Locus of Control and Your Life

By [Kendra Cherry, MSEd](#) | Updated on June 24, 2024

Kendra Cherry, MS, is a psychosocial rehabilitation specialist, psychology educator, and author of the "Everything Psychology Book."

Reviewed by [Sabrina Romanoff, PsyD](#) | Fact checked by [Karen Cilli](#) | Verywell / Theresa Chiechi

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 at the mercy of outside forces? Your answer to this question refers to your locus of control.

Our locus of control influences our response to events in our lives and [our motivation to take action](#). If you believe that you hold the keys to your fate, you are more likely to change your situation when needed. Conversely, if you think that the outcome is out of your hands, you may be less likely to work toward change.

What Is Locus of Control?

Locus of control is the extent to which you feel you have control over [events that impact your life](#). Put another way, it 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)," explains psychologist [Philip Zimbardo](#).¹

In 1954, psychologist Julian Rotter suggested that our behavior was controlled by rewards and punishments. The consequences of our actions helped determine our beliefs about the likely results of future behaviors.²

Our anticipation of certain results influences our behaviors and attitudes. In other words, an individual is more likely to [pursue a goal](#) if they have been rewarded for similar efforts in the past and believe that they can influence their chances of future success.

In 1966, Rotter published a scale designed to measure and assess external and internal locus of control.³ This scale utilizes a forced choice between two alternatives, requiring respondents to choose 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.⁴

Internal vs. External Locus of Control

If you believe that you have control over what happens, 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, you have what is known as an external locus of control.⁵

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

These are characteristics of people with a dominant internal or external locus of control.⁶

Internal Locus of Control	External Locus of Control
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 Locus of Control Play in Your Life?

Internal locus of control is often used synonymously with "self-determination" and "personal agency." Some research suggests that men tend to have a higher internal locus of control than women,⁷ while others suggest the opposite: that women have a greater internal locus of control in comparison.⁸ Other research reports a shift toward more internal locus of control [as people grow older](#).⁹

Experts have found that, in general, people with an internal locus of control tend to enjoy more positive effects, such as [greater emotional stability](#).⁶ However, it is also important to remember that internal locus of control does not always equal "good" and external locus of control does not always equal "bad."

In some contexts, having an external locus of control can be a good thing—particularly when a situation poses a threat to self-esteem or is genuinely outside of a person's control. For example, a person who loses a sports game may feel depressed or anxious if they have a strong internal locus of control.

If this person thinks, "I'm bad at sports and don't try hard enough," they might allow the loss to affect their self-image and feel stressed in future games. However, if this person takes an external focus during such situations ("We were unlucky to get matched with such a strong team," 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.

Final Thoughts

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.

By [Kendra Cherry, MSED](#)

Kendra Cherry, MS, is a psychosocial rehabilitation specialist, psychology educator, and author of the "Everything Psychology Book."

Moment of gratefulness

Think of one little thing in your day that you feel grateful for. It could be about your morning, or something at school, or just life in general. Write why you are grateful for it, and reflect on one reason why you are “lucky” to have this, because not everyone has this, for example.

Journaling on internal and external locus of control

Mark Millar wrote a book called *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a Fuck*. In this book, he wants you to take responsibility for everything in your life, but he also explains that just because something has become “your responsibility” does not mean it is “your fault.” He gives the example of if you wake up one day and there is a baby at your front door. The baby being there is definitely not “your fault.” But you can’t just walk past it and do nothing. It has become “your responsibility.” Reflect on one recent thing that has happened to you based on these ideas. Try to express how, in a way, no, it is not your fault, but still, it can be a good thing for you to treat it as your responsibility, now.

[illegible]

Part 2: Videos (take notes of “important” sentences as needed)

Ali Abdaal on research-based techniques for achieving goals



[illegible]

Journaling on life goals

Use some of Ali's advice to reflect on your current goals. For example, if you don't have a written-down list of goals, you can use the lines here to write them down. If you already have your current goals written down, you could instead reflect on Ali's tips and how you think you could apply them.

[illegible]

Chelsea Fagan on positive self-improvement

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on its right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Moment of gratefulness

Think of a positive change you've made in your life that you're happy about. It could be from a long time ago. Examples can include bad habits we work on or moving on from unhealthy relationships. Express why you're grateful for this change and the impact that has on your current life.

Journaling on self-improvement

Imagine yourself 8 weeks from now. They look like you, but not exactly. Their hair is just a bit longer. They look just a bit tired from the semester. It's almost you. Are there things you could do in your life right now to help that person? I mean: If you make a change right now, is it possible to give this person a slightly better day? If so, are there self-improvement techniques or mindsets that you saw today that you think might help you get there?

[illegible]