Motivating Humans: The Science and Lore of Behavior Change

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# Intro

“There’s only one question you can ask people that matters,” Dr. Cleere said as she raised her coffee cup in a dramatic pause.

Dr. Michelle Cleere was Stevo’s counseling skills supervisor, and he was pretty sure she enjoyed messing with him like this. Stevo had chosen John F. Kennedy University because it was the only school offering a Master’s Degree in Sport Psychology that emphasized counseling skills as the means to apply research. Dr. Cleere had attended the program before going on to get a Clinical Psychology PhD and now helping students like him learn how to ask effective questions.

Stevo had been drilling Open-Ended Questions, the core skill of anyone trying to help people. OEQs are questions that can’t be answered with, “yes” or “no” and they encourage people to explore their answers with more depth. Stevo had spent hours asking them in roleplays with other students. He’d spent even more hours listening to tapes of himself with clients and figuring out new and better ways to ask them. He’d made lists of hundreds and practiced using them casually in talks with friends. And Dr. Cleere accurately perceived—as was her habit—that he was over thinking things—as was his habit.

“What question is that?” Stevo asked.

Dr. Cleere put down her cup.

“**Why?’ Ask in, ‘Why do you think that?’ ‘Why do you believe that?’ ‘Why do you want that?’ ‘Why the hell did you do that?’**‘Why’ is the only question that really matters. The problem is, you can’t ever ask people ‘why?’ It’s too much. We get defensive when we have to answer ‘why?’ Even though it’s kinda all that matters if we want to get better.”

“Oh.” Stevo said. “So what should I ask instead?”

Dr. Cleere put down her coffee cup. “Everything else.”

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Human beings have always been fascinated by why humans—ourselves and others—do things. For as long as we’ve been human we’ve watched people, listened to our friends tell us stories about themselves, told our friends stories about strangers, and thought, “why the hell did they do that?” Whenever we hear a story about someone doing something unexpected, we have a compulsion to stop and ponder “why?” Why do we eat too much? Work out too little? Why do some people persist with diets and so many of us do not? Why do some people seem to always be motivated while the rest of us struggle to get out of bed in the morning? Why do some kids seem to love math and others hate it?

We all do wonderful, stupid, brilliant, lazy, powerful, amazing things every day for reasons ranging from mysterious and obvious. And as we watch or hear about those behaviors, there seems to be a parallel compulsion to explain those behaviors. We just need to make people’s actions make sense.

As humans, we just seem to need to know…“why?”

## Motivation and Why

When George Mallory announced he was going to attempt climbing Mount Everest for the 3rd time in 1923, a *New York Times* reporter did not say, “cool. Have fun!” They asked, “why?”

“Because it’s there,” Mallory replied. Three words every mountaineer knows to be true, but an explanation that doesn’t make any sense to those of us watching from the ground.

## Why do 33-50% of people do not take medication as prescribed?

And throughout history, we’ve come up with ways to explain human behavior.

“Psychology,”  (Ebbinghaus, 1908) writes, “has a long past, yet its real history is short” (pg. 3). 110 years later, this quote is still at the beginning of most Psychology text books. And yet, much has happened in the field over the past century that has yet to filter into common consciousness. When people wonder, “why can’t I motivate myself to workout?” or when companies ask, “why are we losing customers?” they often have no idea that there are academics who have spent whole careers figuring out the answers to these questions. Which really isn’t the lay person’s fault. If you’re looking to Psychology for the Truth with a capital “T” for why people do what they do, you’ll be disappointed. The last 100 years in field of psychology has undergone radical shifts, only to splinter, shift back, and splinter again. It’s not uncommon for people to get PhDs researching a phenomenon and never even hear that there are a dozen models competing to explain that same phenomenon.  As (Hergenhahn & Henley, 2013) points out, "Psychology is not a place for people with a low tolerance for ambiguity" (pg. 625).

# References

Ebbinghaus, H. (1908). *Psychology: An elementary text-book*. DC Heath.

Hergenhahn, B. R., & Henley, T. (2013). *An Introduction to the History of Psychology*. Cengage Learning.