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CrossFit Transference

Chris Cavallerano looks at how the benefits of the box extend to the rest of your life.

By Chris Cavallerano

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According to CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman, the psychology and emotional benefits of CrossFit are “hard to measure and difficult if not impossible to prove” (7).

That’s certainly true, but the field of psychology suggests several reasons why the things that happen during a CrossFit workout have such an effect on life outside the gym.

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People join CrossFit for fitness and health benefits. Yet, in that pursuit people experience a holistic transformation that extends beyond the physical (8). Coach Glassman has described this as the “transference effect.” Traditionally, this psychological phenomenon has been defined as unconsciously redirecting feelings from one thing to another. You have a bad day at work, you go home and kick the cat (13).

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Conversely, in the unique case of what we’ll term “CrossFit transference,” the same effect occurs but with a positive outcome. The stories are endless: the mom who says she makes partner in her law firm because of the determination she experiences doing CrossFit, the addict who finds an outlet to overcome his demons, channel his energy and live a fuller life (7).

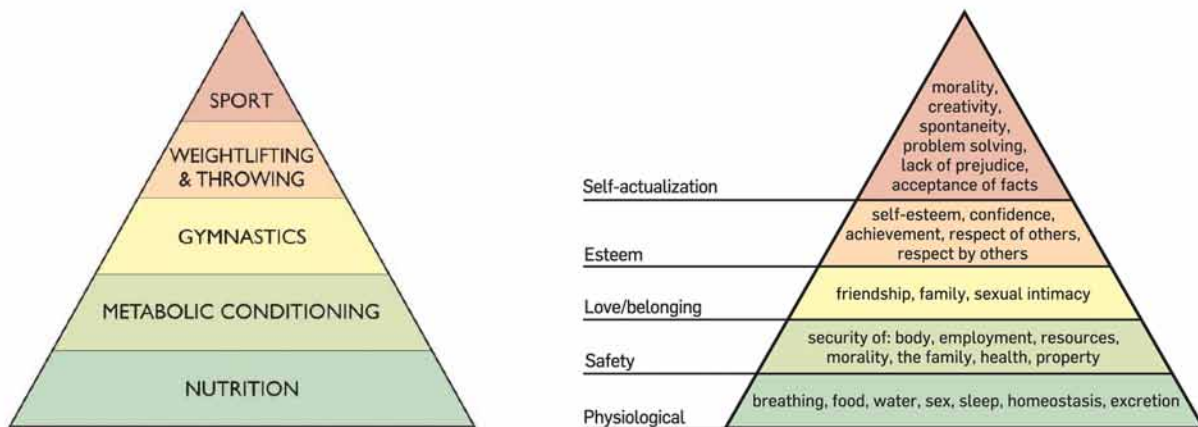
Many say results like these come from the positive stimuli of sacrifice and accomplishment experienced within the CrossFit box. As any CrossFitters will tell you, the lessons of the program extend far beyond the WOD and into their personal and professional lives, too. According to CrossFit Games competitor Heather Bergeron, “CrossFit has put that fire in us, not just our workouts but our family life ... we carry that out to so much of our other life” (18).

To better understand the “how” behind CrossFit transference, take a closer look at the relatedness between CrossFit and motivational psychology.

Anyone familiar with Abraham Maslow and his motivational hierarchy of needs theory should see a similar orientation when looking at CrossFit’s Theoretical Hierarchy of Development (10,9).

The premise of both hierarchies is that without strong foundations at lower levels of the pyramid, the higher levels will suffer (9). I would add that motivation is just as fundamentally important to the success within the hierarchy. Like any strong structure, such as these pyramids, it isn’t the sheer mass that creates strength but rather the mortar that hold the pieces together. In the case of CrossFit, the mortar is mixed from a culture steeped in intrinsic motivation and self-determination theory.

Taking this view adds a detail to the traditional CrossFit pyramid (see graphic on Page 3).



CrossFit's Theoretical Hierarchy of Development (left) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (right).

But what makes CrossFit's mortar so strong, and why is it so special?

Self-Determination Theory

In the 1970s, professors Richard Ryan and Edward Deci developed a broad framework within the field of motivational psychology that they called self-determination theory (SDT) (12). Since that time, Deci and others have proven and advanced on the theory. Motivational psychologists have identified two distinct types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. The studies of Deci and Ryan focused on the benefits that come from intrinsically motivated activities (16).

**You do CrossFit
because you want to
not because you have to.**

SDT proposes that by meeting the innate needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, people will be self-determined (11). Studies have shown this, along with intrinsic goals, will result in improved health, well-being and performance (15).

Even more profound, SDT postulates that if you offer extrinsic motivation or influences—such as rewards or punishment—the innate desire/value originally associated with the activity actually decreases (17).

SDT: The Three Pillars

Ryan and Deci identified the three pillars of SDT as follows:

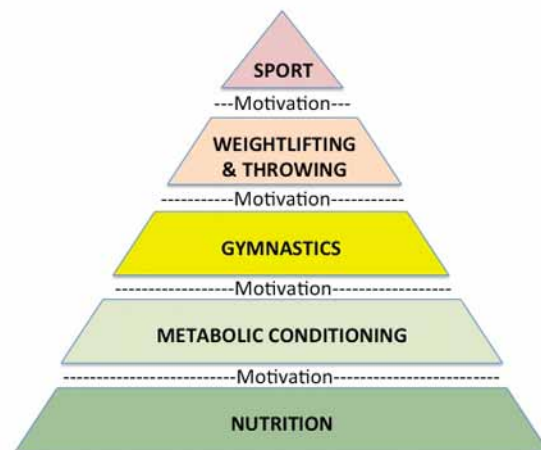
- **Autonomy**—The ability to have free choice and not be controlled, doing things for yourself by your own volition.
- **Competence**—The activity needs to be self-initiated/challenging; you need to be effective and competent but mastery is aspirational.
- **Relatedness**—Developing close relationships with others, a social mandate within a supportive community.

Now think to yourself about CrossFit: what does it mean to you, and by what means are your results achieved? Your answer will probably indicate that intrinsic motivation and SDT are in CrossFit's DNA.

At the *2010 Roundtable in Tahoe*, CrossFit legend Chris Spealler offered his thoughts: "When do I perform my best? When I'm doing what I know I can do to the best of my abilities, the best of what I can do. You guys all know that feeling. How awesome does that feel?" (18).

Clearly, Spealler doesn't fall into the trap of relying on external motivators. His fire burns from within. It's not just internal; it's an eternal spring of intrinsic motivation. Greg Amundson, the Original Firebreather, describes intrinsic motivation as "an indomitable spirit," a "spark" and an "internal fire" (1).

In their comments, Spealler and Amundson reveal what drives them, and by applying SDT framework, it can be suggested that CrossFit is really about applying the three tenets of SDT and intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, SDT research has proven that these three needs—autonomy, competence and relatedness—extend across time, gender and culture (4), mirroring CrossFit's appeal to soldiers and grandmothers alike in countries around the world.



Intrinsic motivation and self-determination are at the heart of CrossFit.



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Athletes remained motivated to stick with CrossFit because there are always new challenges to face and new skills to learn.

Further connections can be made by specifically examining the three pillars of SDT in the context of CrossFit.

In terms of autonomy, you do CrossFit because you want to not because you have to. CrossFit is characterized by an extreme attitude of independence that comes right from its founder, who imposes almost no restrictions on the gyms who affiliate to use the CrossFit name. They are allowed to run as they like, create workouts as they like and charge what they like.

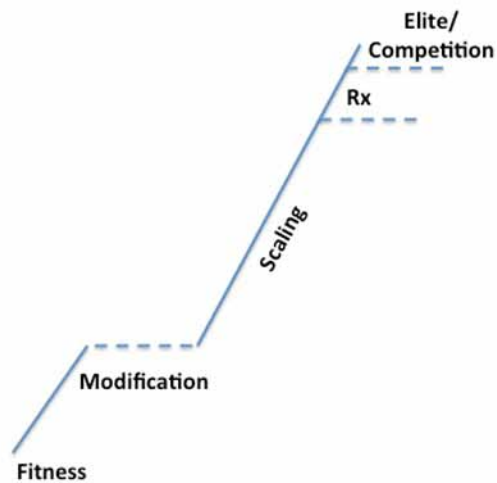
By forgoing one-size-fits-all programming and allowing scaling and adjustments as needed, CrossFit is certainly far from rigid in its prescriptions. Add to that the tenet of training for the unknown and unknowable and you have a program that encourages individual experimentation and creativity.

Studies evaluating choice find that increasing a participant's options and choices increases their intrinsic motivation to engage in these activities (19). Maybe our muscles explain

what isn't as obvious to our hyper-focused brains: striving for work capacity across broad time and modal domains delivers optimal physical and psychological results, at least partially because having constantly changing WODs and variations creates infinite choice and autonomy.

In terms of competency, this is the journey to mastery, and at its core CrossFit sets out to not only test the most elite level of athletic fitness but also to encourage scaling and modification so that all can climb to their own personal records, whatever the workout.

Even if you are fortunate enough to ascend to the heights of Mt. CrossFit (see next page), there are always more challenges to work toward. More importantly, CrossFit requires such variety in modalities and time domains that it makes "mastery" truly aspirational. If elite lifters can spend decades trying to perfect but two Olympic lifts, how much more is there to learn in a discipline in which athletes aspire to virtuosity in realms as diverse as powerlifting, gymnastics and running?



There is still room for improvement, even at the top of Mt. CrossFit.

Absolute mastery of CrossFit is simply unattainable even by the very best. Rich Froning Jr. has room for improvement, and so do you—all the better to keep you continually motivated and engaged.

Empirical studies by Deci found that when people are provided unexpected positive feedback on a task it serves to increase their intrinsic motivation to perform (5). This positive feedback not only fulfills people's need for competence but also decreases extrinsic motivation for the task. In later studies, researchers found that negative feedback is so damaging that its use results in decreased intrinsic motivation because it erodes people's need for competence (14).

Look no further than Greg Amundson's *Positive Self-Talk*, Mark Divine's wolf-of-courage metaphor, or Ben Bergeron's coaching approach that "creates an atmosphere of success" as the best of many examples of positivity within CrossFit (2,6,3).

The third and final SDT need is relatedness, and this is really at the heart of what makes CrossFit so special and intrinsic motivation so powerful. No matter how much autonomy and competence you have, if you don't have a personal connection within a larger context, you cannot obtain the full benefits of self-determination.

In a CrossFit class, your fellow members are not there for competition's sake but rather for the sake of togetherness and celebrating achievements. It's not company but camaraderie! This experience typifies the CrossFit ethos, which I refer to as the "CrossFit competitors' circle." It is forged through strong individual bonds and competition but ultimately places an even greater emphasis on a supportive and caring community.

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Relatedness is seldom found at a Globo Gym. Forget about it. The mantra of CrossFit New England is "No TVs, no mirrors, no machines ... just results." But when you go to a Globo Gym, you see folks looking in mirrors, putting on headphones, working out alone, etc. These choices contribute to external forces that limit the individual's growth and happiness. This may provide "escape," but what's really happening is he or she is putting life on a physiological and psychological treadmill to nowhere.

I spent most of my athletic career as a "lone wolf" at a Globo Gym, working out on my own time and in my own world. I knew CrossFit was special, but I didn't fully realize the true mental and physical adaptations and benefits until I joined an affiliate and embraced the CrossFit community.

The Hero Within

Within the safe and supportive setting of a CrossFit box, people can strengthen themselves not only physically but also emotionally via the transference effect. So long as you give your absolute best, every CrossFitter can become a firebreather. There is no doubt Greg Amundson and others came to experience how CrossFit acts as a catalyst for one's own internal fire, making them stronger and more resilient both within and outside the box (18). It's the journey and the internal battles, struggles and victories that will ultimately provide the greatest rewards in life.

Every day you go to your CrossFit affiliate and work out, you are in fact drawing a line and crossing it. That line is mediocrity, and once you cross the threshold and “Go!” is called out, you’ve already crossed the line to success. PR or not, RX or not, giving your all in the pursuit of something that gives you meaning and connectedness will extend far beyond the box.

Additional Reading

Turning Pro, Warrior Ethos and War of Art by Steven Pressfield

Drive by Dan Pink

The Fire Inside by Web Smith

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About the Author

Chris Cavallerano is founder of Motivo Inc., helping to inspire individuals and organizations to reach their fullest potential. Chris was a collegiate-football-player-turned-Ironman, and he's now IronDad and CrossFitter. He recently ran the 2012 Boston Marathon blindfolded in record 90-degree heat to raise funds for the National Braille Press charity. Chris is on the road of perpetual progression with his wife, Jenny, and three aspiring firebreathers: Jackson, Nicholas and Louis. Chris would like to thank Edward L. Deci, Steven Pressfield, Greg Glassman, Jimi Letchford, Greg Amundson, Tony Budding, Mark Divine and his CrossFit New England brothers and sisters. Chris blogs at Inspirethefire.com and Vision42k.org, or follow him on Twitter: [@vision42k](https://twitter.com/vision42k) and [@chris_cav](https://twitter.com/chris_cav).



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The personal connections forged through CrossFit are intensely motivating and fulfilling.