

16 Basic Desires Theory ^[1]

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A theory of motivation by Steven Reiss, the 16 Basic Desires Theory talks about the sixteen fundamental needs, values and drives that motivate a person.

Origin of the Theory

The 16 Basic Desires Theory is a theory of motivation proposed by Steven Reiss, Psychology and Psychiatry professor emeritus at the Ohio State University in Ohio, USA. The concept for this theory originated from the time when Reiss was hospitalized during the 90s. As he was being treated in the hospital, he was able to observe the devotion and hard work of the nurses who took care of him. As he saw how the nurses loved their work, he began to ask himself questions about what gives happiness to a person.

From the questions “What makes a person happy?”, “What makes another person happy?” and “What makes me happy?”, Professor Reiss started to search for answer to these questions in the field of motivational research. He found out that there was little emphasis and no analytical models for the structure of human desires. Following his recovery, he commenced his own series of studies about human desires. In his vigorous research, he found out that there are 16 essential needs and values he called “basic desires”, all of which are drives that motivate all humans.

After conducting studies that involved more than 6,000 people, Professor Reiss came up with these 16 basic desires:

1. Acceptance - the need to be appreciated
2. Curiosity, the need to gain knowledge
3. Eating, the need for food
4. Family, the need to take care of one's offspring
5. Honor, the need to be faithful to the customary values of an individual's ethnic group, family or clan
6. Idealism, the need for social justice
7. Independence, the need to be distinct and self-reliant
8. Order, the need for prepared, established, and conventional environments
9. Physical activity, the need for work out of the body
10. Power, the need for control of will
11. Romance, the need for mating or sex

12. Saving, the need to accumulate something
13. Social contact, the need for relationship with others
14. Social status, the need for social significance
15. Tranquility, the need to be secure and protected
16. Vengeance, the need to strike back against another person

The Reiss Profile

Professor Reiss developed a scientific test procedure called the “Reiss Profile” that can be used to measure the shape of the basic desires of an individual. The purpose behind measuring the intensity of a basic desire of an individual is to identify a person’s “point of happiness”. As humans are unique, each of us will have a different profile from one another.

The profile is represented by a colored bar chart. A strongly active desire is shown in the chart as a “green” value, whereas a “red” value means a poorly active desire. The middle value is the “yellow” value and means that the basic desire depends upon the context of a particular situation. The red value can also be called as “high striving”, while the green value is also termed as “low striving”.

To understand the Reiss Profile, let’s put the basic desire “Power” in the limelight. A person who has a strong basic desire for Power (high striving or green value on the Reiss Profile) is likely to take the leadership role in a group of people. He is a challenge-seeker and a hard-worker for the sake of reaching his goals and ambitions. On the other hand, an individual who has a weak basic desire for Power (low striving or red value on the Reiss Profile) is one that does not like to assume leadership roles, and is nondirective of others, and even of himself.

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