



Mindful About Life

Focus, Flourish and Fly
using the science of positive psychology

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Rivalry – Good or Bad? Or Both?

Is rivalry a good thing or a bad thing? It is a simple question but what would you guess is the answer? Do you think I am going to write that a healthy rivalry improves performance? Or that competition blinds us to our true goals or blinds us to people that we hurt along the way? Or perhaps I will write that it depends?

Firstly, did you notice the little switch I made there from rivalry to competition? In competition there is usually a zero-sum game. If I win, you lose. How is rivalry different? One example is the rivalry between Bill Gates of Microsoft and Larry Ellison of Oracle. They have had a rivalry for many, many years. Is it zero-sum? I don't think so. They both became gazillionaires. One thing that characterizes rivalry is that rivals always have a history and are usually competing for more than just "this one game". Rivals look at the bigger picture, the long game. This reminds us of sibling rivalry which has a life-long history. Also, two rivals may not see the relationship in the same way. It may be a rivalry for one and an afterthought for the other.



What makes a rival? Firstly, your rival has to be similar to you. Michael Jordan would not view me as a rival, I am not similar to him. But he and Shaq were similar in that both were the best on their team and among the best in the NBA. They were rivals.

Dr. Gavin Kilduff did a study on rivalry that found that rivals bring out the best in us. People reported that when they were competing against a rival, they were more motivated and that they worked harder. The people responding to his survey also said that their rivals were similar to them. The more similar they were, the greater the boost in performance.

Dr. Kilduff then went on to do some really fancy math to compare runners. He matched runners as rivals if they were similar gender and age, they ran many races against each other and if they ran at about the same pace. In races where runners had a rival present they ran faster than in races where a rival was not present. This did not matter if they were fast runners or "mid-pack" runners, if

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they had a rival there – someone of similar age and running ability, they ran faster.

What does this mean for you? Do you have a rival at work who motivates you to perform better? Someone at the gym who you try to match? A study buddy at school who you try to outperform? 1. If not, perhaps you might want to start looking for one. 2. If you do have one, say “Thank you!”

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