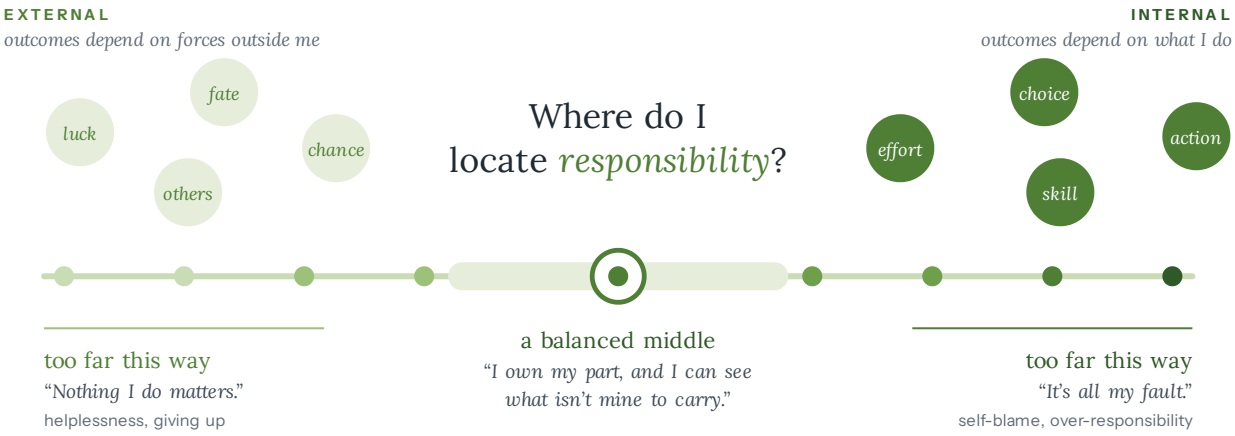
Locus of Control

LEARN · REFLECT · JULIAN ROTTER

What I can influence, what I cannot control, and where I place responsibility

Julian Rotter described locus of control as a general expectation about whether the outcomes in our lives depend mainly on our own actions (internal) or on forces outside us, such as luck, chance or other people (external) (Rotter, 1966).



a continuum, not a type, and it can differ across areas of life (Rotter, 1975)

01 Two ends of the line

each has strengths and costs

A more external locus

Can help us accept what genuinely isn't ours, and avoid unfair self-blame. Taken too far, it can leave us feeling powerless, as if nothing we do makes a difference.

"There's no point trying."

A more internal locus

Often linked with taking action and persisting. Taken too far, it can become over-responsibility: blaming ourselves for things that were never in our control.

"If I'd just done better, it wouldn't have happened."

02 Three questions

the heart of this resource

What can I influence?

My actions, words, effort, choices, how I respond, and who I ask for help.

What can't I control?

Other people's choices, the past, chance events, and much of how things turn out.

Where am I placing responsibility?

Fully on me, fully elsewhere, or shared in a way that fits what actually happened?

03 Where it comes from

and what it isn't

Learned from experience

Rotter saw these expectations as learned: if effort often led to results, we may come to expect it will; if outcomes felt random or out of our hands, we may expect that instead (Rotter, 1966).

Not the same as confidence

Locus of control asks: **do outcomes depend on what I do?** Self-efficacy asks: **can I do the thing?** Someone can believe effort matters, yet doubt they can manage it (Bandura, 1977).

04 How it might sound

the same moment, read two ways

MORE EXTERNAL	MORE INTERNAL
"I failed because the test was unfair."	*"I failed because I didn't prepare enough."*
"They got promoted through luck."	*"They put in work I could learn from."*
"My mood just happens to me."	*"Some things I do can shift my mood a little."*
"Whatever I do, it won't change."	*"If I try a different approach, it might."*

Neither column is always right. The most accurate view often sits somewhere between them.

This pairs with our Circle of Control resource: the circle maps *what* is in reach; locus of control explores *where you tend to look* for the cause.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.

05 Sort one situation

something on your mind

The situation:

What I can influence

even a little

What I cannot control

what I may need to accept

Where I locate responsibility

share it out roughly

me ____% others ____%

circumstances ____% chance ____%

06 Where do I tend to look?

mark each area of life

Work or study	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL
Relationships	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL
Health	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL
Mood and wellbeing	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL
Money	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL
The past	EXTERNAL	INTERNAL

There is no right score. Notice where you lean, and whether it fits.

07 Rebalancing

gently, in whichever direction helps

If I lean too external

What is one small thing within my influence here?

If I lean too internal

What else contributed that wasn't mine to control?

08 Reflection

what am I noticing?

A fairer way to see my part in this

To remember, or to bring to a session

if you are working with someone

SOURCES

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*(2), 191–215.

Rotter, J. B. (1966). Generalized expectancies for internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied, 80*(1), 1–28.

Rotter, J. B. (1975). Some problems and misconceptions related to the construct of internal versus external control of reinforcement. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 43*(1), 56–67.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology · Evidence-informed educational resource · For educational purposes only.