

PERSONAL STRIVINGS

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The Conceptual Framework of Personal Strivings

Personal strivings represent a cornerstone concept within the motivational domain of personality psychology, defined formally as the objective systems which consist of many interrelated goals, some of which might support each other while other goals might be in conflict. These are not merely momentary desires or immediate tasks; rather, they are habitual, recurring goals that an individual typically attempts to pursue over extended periods, providing a crucial lens into the enduring motivational architecture of the self. Pioneered primarily by psychologist Robert Emmons, the personal strivings approach bridges the gap between broad, stable personality traits and the dynamic, context-specific behaviors that constitute daily life. The system emphasizes that human motivation is organized not as a linear sequence of isolated aims, but as a complex network where the pursuit of one goal inevitably impacts the feasibility and emotional resonance of others, shaping both daily action and overall subjective well-being.

The true utility of the striving construct lies in its ability to capture the subjective interpretation and personal meaning an individual attaches to their motivational pursuits. Unlike impersonal, externally imposed objectives, personal strivings are deeply internalized and self-generated, reflecting the individual's core identity, values, fears, and life commitments. For instance, a striving such as "always trying to be perceived as competent by my superiors" reveals a motivational pattern linked to achievement and social evaluation, dictating a wide range of behaviors across different settings. This systemic organization allows researchers and clinicians to move beyond simple behavioral observation and delve into the underlying psychological structure that governs consistency in action, highlighting how the interplay of these various pursuits generates both psychological harmony and significant internal struggle.

Understanding personal strivings requires recognizing their role as mid-level units of analysis. They are more specific and mutable than global traits (like Extraversion or Conscientiousness) yet more abstract and stable than specific daily tasks (like "finish this report by 3 PM"). They function as the connective tissue between dispositional tendencies and concrete actions, translating general personality orientations into specific, repeated behavioral intentions. This intermediate position makes them particularly powerful predictors of emotional experience and adjustment, as chronic difficulties in pursuing a central striving can lead to persistent negative affect, whereas successful management of the striving system generally correlates strongly with life satisfaction and reduced psychological distress.

Origins in Personality Psychology

The concept of personal strivings emerged in the 1980s as part of a broader shift in personality psychology away from purely dispositional models toward dynamic, motivational, and cognitive approaches. Prior theories, such as Allport's emphasis on functional autonomy or the Five-Factor

Model's focus on stable traits, struggled to fully explain the intentionality and goal-directed nature of human action. Emmons and colleagues sought a motivational unit that captured the ongoing, recurring nature of goal pursuit, differentiating it from related concepts like Cantor and Kihlstrom's Personal Projects Analysis or Little's Life Tasks, though all share a similar interest in the idiographic, or personalized, nature of goals. The personal strivings approach specifically focuses on the chronic nature of effort and the recurrent themes that define an individual's life struggles and aspirations, offering a unique window into the self-regulatory processes that define identity.

The methodology developed for studying personal strivings provided a critical tool for grounding this theoretical shift. By asking individuals directly to list "what they are typically trying to do in their everyday lives," researchers gained access to the spontaneous, self-generated motivational system. This idiographic approach stands in contrast to nomothetic methods that impose standardized goal lists upon participants. The core strength of the striving methodology is its ability to reveal the subjective significance and emotional investment tied to different goals, which are often highly idiosyncratic. For example, while two individuals might both list "To be successful," the underlying striving might be "To constantly prove my worth to my father" for one, and "To maximize my free time through efficient work" for the other, revealing vastly different motivational processes and implications for well-being.

This framework provided the necessary conceptual language to link internal psychological states--such as anxiety, depression, and meaning in life--directly to the structural qualities of the individual's objective system. It established that it is not simply the presence or absence of goals that matters, but the internal dynamics of the system: specifically, the degree of conflict, the level of abstraction, and the alignment with core values. By establishing these connections, personal strivings solidified their place as a vital middle layer between personality traits and life outcomes, demonstrating that how a person organizes their goals is a powerful determinant of their psychological health.

Structural Properties and Interrelation

The architecture of the personal striving system is defined by its inherent complexity, characterized by various structural properties that determine its functional effectiveness. When individuals list their strivings (typically ranging from 10 to 15 items), the resulting inventory reveals motivational priorities that can then be analyzed along several key dimensions, including importance, commitment, perceived difficulty, and control. However, the most vital structural analysis involves examining the relationships between strivings, particularly the degree of mutual support or opposition that exists within the system. This interrelation analysis is critical because it moves beyond the examination of single goals to assess the overall efficiency and psychological cost of the entire motivational framework.

The two primary dimensions of interrelation are **congruence** and **conflict**. Congruence, or goal support, exists when the pursuit of one striving facilitates or aids the accomplishment of another. For example, the striving "To save money diligently" might be highly congruent with the striving "To provide a stable future for my children," creating a synergistic effect where efforts toward one goal reinforce the other, leading to greater feelings of progress and positive affect. Highly congruent striving systems are efficient, requiring less cognitive and emotional resource expenditure, and are strongly associated with self-efficacy and vitality. Conversely, goal conflict, or ambivalence, occurs when the actions necessary to achieve one striving actively inhibit or undermine the achievement of another. This structural feature is a major source of chronic stress and psychological distress, as detailed in the following section.

Furthermore, strivings can be classified based on their underlying content, which often reflects fundamental human needs. Research has identified several common thematic categories, demonstrating that while the specific wording of a striving is idiosyncratic, the motivational themes tend to cluster around universal concerns. These categories offer insight into the dominant life priorities of the individual:

Achievement Strivings: Goals focused on competence, success, mastery, and performance evaluation (e.g., "Always strive for A's," "To be the best in my department").

Intimacy Strivings: Goals centered on forming and maintaining close, warm, and meaningful relationships (e.g., "To always be a good listener," "To avoid hurting people's feelings").

Power Strivings: Goals related to influence, control, and status over others or one's environment (e.g., "To make people respect my decisions").

Self-Exploration/Growth Strivings: Goals aimed at personal development, understanding oneself, or seeking meaning (e.g., "To learn something new every day," "To pursue spiritual enlightenment").

The balance and dominance of these content themes, combined with the level of internal coherence (congruence versus conflict), constitute the overall structural quality of the individual's striving system, which is highly predictive of long-term psychological outcomes.

Functional Dynamics: Conflict and Ambivalence

Goal conflict is arguably the most psychologically taxing aspect of the striving system, representing a state where the individual is motivated to pursue two or more incompatible goals simultaneously. This internal dynamic forces a zero-sum allocation of resources--time, energy, attention, and emotional bandwidth--leading to chronic indecision, procrastination, and pervasive feelings of guilt or failure. When conflicts are chronic and central to the individual's identity, they can become deeply linked to neurotic patterns of behavior and significant decrements in both physical and psychological health. For example, the striving "To spend maximum time with my family" might be

in direct, chronic conflict with the striving "To accept every high-profile work assignment to secure promotion." The constant attempt to satisfy both demands simultaneously results in partial failure on both fronts and a persistent state of internal strain.

The impact of striving conflict extends beyond mere frustration; it is associated with specific negative psychological outcomes. Individuals with high levels of conflict in their striving systems often report higher levels of depression, anxiety, and general distress. This is due, in part, to the exhaustion of self-regulatory resources. Self-control is finite, and when resources are continuously spent mediating internal motivational battles, less energy remains for productive goal pursuit or coping with external stressors. Furthermore, chronic conflict can undermine self-esteem, as the individual perceives themselves as constantly failing to live up to their own standards, resulting in a fractured sense of identity and competency.

Resolving or mitigating striving conflict is therefore crucial for improving psychological adjustment. Conflict management strategies can range from cognitive reappraisal (reinterpreting the goals so they are perceived as less contradictory) to structural prioritization (explicitly choosing to downgrade the importance or commitment level of one striving). In clinical settings, identifying the core conflicts often provides a clear pathway for therapeutic intervention, allowing the client to acknowledge that the distress stems not from a lack of effort, but from a systemic incompatibility within their motivational framework. Successfully reducing conflict allows for the consolidation of effort, leading to greater perceived progress and reinforcing the positive feedback loop between action and outcome.

Strivings, Meaning, and Subjective Well-being

A strong and consistent finding in striving research is the profound connection between the content and coherence of personal strivings and an individual's subjective well-being (SWB). Well-being is maximized when strivings are pursued effectively and, most importantly, when they align with the individual's core values and inherent needs. Strivings that are experienced as meaningful, enjoyable, and freely chosen--meaning they are intrinsically motivated rather than externally pressured--are far more likely to contribute to happiness and satisfaction. This highlights the distinction between simply achieving a goal and achieving a goal that truly reflects the authentic self.

Emmons specifically emphasized the importance of **spiritual strivings**, defined as goals related to religious faith, existential understanding, or contributions to society beyond the self. Research consistently shows that individuals whose striving systems include a significant component of spiritual or transcendent goals report higher levels of positive affect, greater meaning in life, and reduced fear of death. These types of strivings often provide a stable, overarching framework that lends coherence and resilience to the entire system, cushioning the impact of setbacks

encountered in more pragmatic or materialistic pursuits. The ability of spiritual strivings to connect daily activities to a larger narrative of purpose is a powerful mechanism for enhancing life satisfaction, even in the face of adversity.

Conversely, strivings focused excessively on extrinsic rewards, such as wealth, appearance, or social status, tend to be weakly correlated with, or even inversely related to, long-term well-being. While extrinsic goals can provide temporary satisfaction upon achievement, they often fail to satisfy deep psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and may foster social comparison and anxiety, leading to a hedonic treadmill effect. Therefore, the psychological health derived from a striving system is not solely dependent on the success rate of goal achievement, but critically hinges upon the quality, meaning, and coherence of the goals themselves. A healthy striving system is balanced, intrinsic, and characterized by high congruence and low chronic conflict.

Measurement and Assessment Methodologies

The assessment of personal strivings employs a unique, idiographic methodology designed to capture the richness and complexity of the individual's motivational life. The standard procedure begins with the **Elicitation Phase**, where participants are asked to list approximately 10 to 15 statements detailing "what they are typically trying to do in their everyday lives." These statements must be formulated as "To..." goals (e.g., "To always try to be cheerful," "To avoid confrontation"), ensuring they represent recurring actions rather than one-time events. This open-ended approach ensures that the resulting inventory accurately reflects the individual's subjective motivational priorities, free from researcher bias.

Following the elicitation, the **Rating Phase** commences, where participants rate each listed striving along various descriptive dimensions using Likert scales. These dimensions are crucial for calculating structural and dynamic properties. Key dimensions frequently assessed include:

Importance: How central the striving is to the individual's sense of self.

Difficulty: The perceived effort required to successfully pursue the goal.

Enjoyment: The pleasure derived from the process of pursuing the striving.

Controllability/Efficacy: The belief that one possesses the skills and resources needed to achieve the striving.

Expected Success/Outcome: The likelihood of ultimately achieving the goal.

These ratings allow researchers to calculate motivational profiles and identify high-investment, high-risk, or high-pleasure goals within the system. For instance, strivings rated high in importance but low in controllability are likely candidates for generating chronic anxiety.

The final and most methodologically complex step involves assessing the **Interrelation Matrix**. Participants are asked to consider every possible pair of strivings and rate the degree to which

pursuing one goal either helps or hinders the pursuit of the other. These ratings are synthesized into quantitative measures of **overall system conflict** and **overall system congruence**. High conflict scores derived from this matrix are robustly correlated with indicators of psychological ill-health, such as depression and anxiety, validating the theoretical premise that the structural organization of goals, rather than just their content, determines psychological adjustment. The rigor of this assessment methodology ensures that personal strivings remain a highly utilized construct in motivational and clinical psychology research.

Therapeutic and Applied Implications

The personal strivings framework has significant utility in clinical and counseling psychology, providing a structured, personalized method for diagnosing and treating motivational imbalances. By mapping out a client's striving system, therapists can quickly identify the source of chronic distress, which often stems from unacknowledged goal conflict or the pursuit of strivings that are extrinsic and non-congruent with core values. The process of listing and rating strivings itself often provides clients with crucial insights into their own patterns of ambivalence and self-sabotage, facilitating therapeutic progress.

Therapeutic interventions based on strivings often focus on several key areas. First, **Conflict Resolution**: helping the client recognize and restructure high-conflict pairings. This might involve setting explicit boundaries, finding superordinate goals that integrate the conflicting pursuits, or deciding to temporarily or permanently disengage from one striving. Second, **Value Alignment**: guiding the client to assess whether their most important strivings truly reflect their deepest values. If a client reports high levels of anxiety while pursuing a striving that is rated low in intrinsic meaning, the therapist may encourage shifting resources toward more personally meaningful, intrinsic goals, thereby strengthening the motivational system's coherence.

Furthermore, the striving framework is effective in addressing issues related to identity crisis and life transitions. For individuals undergoing significant life changes (e.g., retirement, divorce, career shift), the old striving system often becomes obsolete or functionally irrelevant, leading to feelings of aimlessness. Therapeutic work can then center on **Goal Re-engagement and Formulation**, helping the client articulate new, meaningful strivings that align with their current developmental stage and future aspirations. By focusing on the habitual, recurring nature of goals, the striving approach empowers individuals to make sustainable, systemic changes to their motivational lives, leading to lasting improvements in self-regulation and overall quality of life.