

# Goal conflict linked to psychological distress

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Being torn about which personal goals to pursue is associated with symptoms of psychological distress, new research shows.

A survey of more than 200 [young adults](#) by the University of Exeter and Edith Cowan University (ECU) investigated two forms of motivational

[conflict](#).

These were inter-goal conflict (when pursuing one goal makes it difficult to pursue another) and ambivalence (conflicting feelings about particular goals).

The results showed that each of these forms of goal conflict was independently associated with anxious and [depressive symptoms](#), but did not predict worsening of symptoms over one month.

"People with poorer mental health are more likely to report that their [personal goals](#) hinder one another," said Dr. Nick Moberly, of the University of Exeter.

"Such conflict between goals may be more manageable if it is conscious.

"However, ambivalence may indicate a clash between a goal and a higher-order value that lies outside awareness.

"Attention to these deeper motivational conflicts may be an important step towards resolving them and relieving distress."

Professor Joanne Dickson, of ECU, said: "We know that striving for goals that are important to us gives life meaning and purpose and promotes wellbeing.

"However, when these goals generate conflict they can contribute to [psychological distress](#)."

Inter-goal conflict occurs either because the objectives are incompatible or because pursuit of both goals draws upon a limited resource, such as time or money.

For example, a person's goal to spend more time with their family may conflict with their goal to get promoted at work.

Ambivalence is thought to reflect a deeper motivational conflict of which the person is unaware.

For example, a person may feel ambivalent about initiating an intimate relationship because this challenges a more abstract [goal](#) of independence.

The young adults in the study were aged 18-35, with an average age of 20.

**More information:** Nicholas J. Moberly et al, Goal conflict, ambivalence and psychological distress: Concurrent and longitudinal relationships, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2018.03.008](#)

Provided by University of Exeter

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