

Not always reaching your potential is okay, but overthinking it is a problem

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Having aspirations helps us navigate life in a meaningful and fulfilling way, but it can also cause psychological distress when hopes are left unfulfilled.

New Edith Cowan University (ECU) research has found that it's not failing to make progress toward our 'ideal-self' that is problematic but rather the tendency to focus on that lack of progress in a negative way that leads to psychological distress.

In other words, it pays to be kind to yourself, say the key researchers.

The study, led by Associate Professor Joanne Dickson from ECU's School of Arts and Humanities, explored whether 'ideal-self' and 'actual-self' discrepancies were associated with depressive and anxious symptoms.

It also considered whether 'rumination', or excessive negative thinking, played a role in these relationships.

Professor Dickson said there are two key 'self-guides' that typically motivate us and provide standards for self-evaluation: the 'ideal-self' and the 'ought-self'.

"The 'ideal-self' is the person we ideally want to be—our hopes and aspirations. The 'ought self' is who we believe we ought to be—our duties, obligations, and responsibilities," she said.

"Our findings showed that perceiving one's hopes and wishes as unfulfilled and the loss of desired [positive outcomes](#) increases emotional vulnerability and psychological [distress](#).

"Whereas actual-ought self-discrepancies were associated with anxiety (but not depression)."

The role of excessive negative thinking

Professor Dickson said a novel finding was the role of 'rumination', the

tendency to engage in repetitive negative thinking.

"It's not failing to make progress toward our 'ideal-self' that is necessarily problematic but rather the tendency to repetitively think about this lack of progress that represents a significant vulnerability that, in turn, leads to increased [psychological distress](#)," she said.

In contrast, lack of progress in relation to our 'ought self' (ie duties, responsibilities, obligations) directly increased anxiety (but not depression), and this was not facilitated via repetitive thinking.

"It may be that fulfilling obligations, duties and responsibilities is more pressing or urgent than the pursuit of hopes and the more immediate negative consequences of not fulfilling these 'ought to' obligations may mean there is less time to engage in reflective contemplation," Professor Dickson said.

Advice for minimising psychological distress

Professor Dickson said self-guides as standards that we aspire to are beneficial in giving a sense of purpose and direction in life and promoting wellbeing, even if we don't always reach them, but turning the focus toward negative self-evaluation and self-criticism is counter-productive.

"Reflecting on and at times modifying our self-guides may be helpful, particularly if we are caught in a spiral of negative self-evaluation that is accompanied by a constant sense of failing to meet overly high standards.

"We need to be kind to ourselves and keep our self-guides in perspective," she said.

The study 'Rumination selectively mediates the association between actual-ideal (but not actual-ought) self-discrepancy and anxious and depressive symptoms' is published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

More information: Joanne M. Dickson et al, Rumination selectively mediates the association between actual-ideal (but not actual-ought) self-discrepancy and anxious and depressive symptoms, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2019.05.047](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.05.047)

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