

PERSONAL STRIVINGS

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Personal Strivings

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1. Core Definition

Personal Strivings (PS) represent a major theoretical construct within motivational and personality psychology, first systematically introduced by psychologist Robert Emmons in 1986. The concept defines the recurring, characteristic goals that an individual typically attempts to achieve, pursue, or avoid. Unlike discrete, situation-specific goals (e.g., finishing a report by Tuesday), personal strivings are generalized and often abstract classes of goals that capture the essence of what a person is characteristically trying to do in their life across various contexts. These strivings form an integrated system of personal objectives, serving as a dynamic link between stable personality traits (like the Big Five) and momentary, context-dependent behaviors. They answer the fundamental question: "What is this person usually trying to accomplish?"

The crucial element distinguishing personal strivings from simple goals is their chronic and repetitive nature. A striving is not a single end point but rather an enduring pattern of goal-directed behavior. For example, a person might list a single goal as "pass the history exam," but their corresponding personal striving might be "always seek approval from authority figures" or "consistently try to achieve excellence in academic pursuits." This systemic quality means that strivings often interact: some may be mutually supportive, facilitating progress toward a larger life aim, while others may be in direct conflict, leading to psychological ambivalence and stress. The entire system of personal strivings, therefore, offers a unique, idiographic lens through which to understand an individual's motivation, well-being, and personality structure.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The development of the Personal Strivings construct arose from a need within personality psychology to find a unit of analysis that was mid-level--something more dynamic and contextualized than broad, dispositional traits, but more enduring than highly specific behavioral acts. Prior to Emmons' work, traditional trait theory offered stability but lacked predictive power regarding behavior in specific contexts, while purely situational approaches lacked coherence across time. Emmons sought to merge the idiographic approach (focusing on the unique individual) with rigorous nomothetic measurement (applying standard dimensions across individuals).

Emmons formally introduced the concept in the mid-1980s, drawing heavily on earlier work in motivation and personality, particularly the emerging interest in cognitive approaches to personality. The construct was designed to capture the individual's "will" or "agency" as expressed through self-generated, recurring motives. The methodology associated with Personal Strivings

Assessment typically involves having participants list ten to fifteen of their own recurring strivings, which are then subjectively rated on various dimensions. This blend of self-reporting on unique content (idiographic listing) followed by standardized rating scales (nomothetic analysis) was revolutionary, providing a powerful empirical tool for studying personality differences related to motivation and emotional experience.

3. Key Characteristics and Dimensions

Personal strivings are characterized by several measurable dimensions that determine their functional relationship to psychological well-being and behavior. These dimensions move beyond simply identifying the content of the goal to assessing the qualitative nature of the goal pursuit process itself. Understanding these characteristics is vital because the relationship between strivings and well-being depends more on **how** the strivings are pursued than **what** they explicitly are.

The primary distinguishing characteristics include:

Recurrence and Generality: Strivings are defined by their repetitive nature across time and situations. They are not singular tasks but underlying themes of action. For instance, "I always try to make people laugh" is a striving; "I told a joke yesterday" is an act.

Idiographic Nature: Each person's list of strivings is unique and highly personalized, reflecting their specific history, values, and environment. Although researchers can categorize the content (e.g., achievement, affiliation), the exact wording and importance are individual-specific.

Approach vs. Avoidance Orientation: Strivings can be classified as either **approach-oriented** (goals focused on attaining a positive outcome, e.g., "I strive to be healthy") or **avoidance-oriented** (goals focused on preventing a negative outcome, e.g., "I strive to avoid getting sick"). Research consistently shows that a high proportion of avoidance strivings is associated with lower subjective well-being and higher anxiety, while approach strivings correlate with feelings of competence and vitality.

Expected Success and Importance: Individuals rate how important a striving is to them and their perceived likelihood of success. Low perceived success on highly important strivings is a significant predictor of distress and depression.

4. Striving Conflict and Ambivalence

One of the most theoretically and clinically significant aspects of the Personal Strivings model is the concept of **striving conflict**. Since an individual maintains a system of multiple goals simultaneously, it is inevitable that the pursuit of one goal may interfere with, or actively undermine,

the pursuit of another. Conflict can occur between two separate strivings (e.g., striving to save money vs. striving to impress friends through extravagant purchases) or internally within a single striving (e.g., wanting to be a successful leader while also fearing rejection from subordinates).

Emmons proposed that conflict is a chronic source of stress and ambivalence. When strivings conflict, the individual expends motivational energy by pulling in opposing directions, leading to a state of internal tug-of-war. This chronic expenditure of psychological resources results in measurable psychological costs, including decreased subjective well-being, increased depressive symptoms, higher levels of generalized anxiety, and even psychosomatic complaints. Therefore, the degree of integration and coherence within the striving system is often a more powerful predictor of mental health outcomes than the specific content of the strivings themselves.

The resolution of striving conflict often requires metacognitive processes, where the individual must prioritize, compartmentalize, or reframe the goals to minimize mutual interference. Successfully integrated striving systems--where goals complement each other--are hallmarks of a well-adjusted, high-functioning personality, allowing for efficient resource allocation and clear behavioral trajectories.

5. Personal Strivings and Well-Being Outcomes

Empirical research utilizing the Personal Strivings Assessment technique has consistently established robust links between the qualitative dimensions of strivings and various indicators of psychological well-being (SWB). The findings transcend mere goal success; they focus on the motivational structure underlying success.

Several key findings highlight this relationship:

Coherence and Integration: Individuals whose strivings are highly organized, mutually supporting, and aligned with core values report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and positive affect. The clarity provided by a coherent system reduces decision fatigue and internal friction.

Avoidance vs. Approach: As mentioned, reliance on avoidance strivings is strongly associated with negative outcomes, including higher neuroticism and lower self-esteem. When motivation is driven primarily by the desire to escape negative states (e.g., "striving to avoid looking foolish"), attention is focused on potential threat, fueling anxiety rather than progress.

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation: Strivings rooted in intrinsic motivation (pursued for inherent enjoyment, interest, or personal growth) lead to greater happiness and vitality compared to strivings driven by extrinsic motives (pursued for external rewards, approval, or obligation). Emmons' work paved the way for self-determination theory's detailed exploration of motivation

quality.

Furthermore, personal strivings have been shown to mediate the relationship between personality traits and emotional experience. For instance, an individual high in Neuroticism may express their trait through a system dominated by avoidance strivings and high conflict, which then precipitates depression. By analyzing and adjusting the striving system, psychologists can target the mechanisms through which stable traits manifest as detrimental motivational patterns.

6. Relationship to Other Motivational Constructs

While Personal Strivings are highly influential, they exist alongside several related mid-level goal constructs developed concurrently in the 1980s and 1990s. Distinguishing these concepts clarifies the unique contribution of Emmons' framework:

Personal Projects (Brian Little): Personal Projects are defined as a set of interconnected acts extending over time, designed to achieve a specific outcome. Projects are typically more temporally constrained and situational than strivings. While one's overall striving (e.g., "to be a better writer") might generate many personal projects (e.g., "finish the novel draft this year"), the striving is the enduring thematic pattern, whereas the project is the episodic action unit.

Life Tasks (Nancy Cantor): Life Tasks refer to the major goals individuals work on during specific developmental or social transition periods (e.g., "establishing independence" during late adolescence, or "balancing career and family" in mid-life). Life tasks are often socially or culturally prescribed, whereas personal strivings are purely self-generated and may or may not align with normative social expectations.

Goal Hierarchy Models: Personal strivings fit neatly into broader goal hierarchy models, typically residing in the middle layer. They translate high-level, abstract values (the top layer, e.g., "security") into concrete, recurring strategies (the middle layer, e.g., "striving to save 10% of my income"), which then guide specific actions (the bottom layer, e.g., "depositing money today"). Personal strivings provide the essential bridge that links abstract identity to concrete, observable behavior.

7. Applications in Clinical and Counseling Psychology

The assessment and modification of personal strivings provide a valuable, actionable framework for clinical interventions, particularly in the treatment of anxiety, depression, and adjustment disorders. By identifying a client's strivings, a therapist gains rapid insight into the core themes of the client's life, their chronic sources of failure, and their motivational conflicts.

In practice, clinical work often focuses on:

Identifying Striving Conflict: Helping clients articulate the exact nature of their conflicting goals (e.g., "I strive for intimacy" versus "I strive to maintain emotional distance") allows the therapist to target the source of chronic ambivalence and distress. Interventions then focus on reconciling these goals through cognitive reframing or behavioral prioritization.

Reducing Avoidance Strivings: Therapy can involve converting maladaptive avoidance strivings into functional approach strivings. For example, changing the striving "to avoid failure at all costs" to "to strive for measurable improvement through practice" shifts the motivational focus from threat avoidance to positive competence building, reducing associated anxiety and improving self-efficacy.

Assessing Goal Disengagement: The PS framework is also useful for determining when failure to attain a goal is leading to chronic distress. Emmons argued that sometimes the most adaptive psychological response is not persistence, but rather the strategic disengagement from unattainable or highly conflicting strivings, freeing up resources for more viable pursuits.

Further Reading

[Robert Emmons \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Goal Theory \(Wikipedia\)](#)

Emmons, R. A. (1986). Personal strivings: An approach to personality and subjective well-being research. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(5), 1058-1068.