

# Behavioral Strivings: Understanding Human Behavior

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## Behavioral Strivings

The concept of **Behavioral Strivings** represents a pivotal framework within personality psychology, offering a bridge between abstract personality traits and the concrete, habitual actions that define an individual's life experience. Defined by psychologist Robert Emmons, behavioral strivings are characterized as the recurring, characteristic goals that a person typically attempts to attain or avoid. Unlike discrete, time-bound goals (e.g., finishing a specific report), strivings reflect enduring motivational themes--the things an individual is constantly trying to do across various situations and over extended periods. These striving themes, such as "always trying to be helpful to others" or "avoiding situations where I might be judged," provide a rich, idiographic description of the active, goal-directed aspects of personality, moving beyond static trait descriptions to capture personality in motion.

Behavioral strivings are fundamentally rooted in the individual's subjective interpretation of their environment and self-concept. They are not merely behaviors but rather the underlying motivational drivers that organize behavior into meaningful sequences. This focus on recurring goals allows researchers to analyze how personality is dynamically expressed in daily life, providing insight into why individuals behave consistently, even as circumstances change. Furthermore, the systematic study of strivings allows for the quantification of typically qualitative motivational processes, enabling empirical analysis of how personal goals influence emotional states, relationships, and overall life satisfaction.

It is crucial to differentiate behavioral strivings from related but distinct psychological constructs. While often grouped under the umbrella of "personal goals," strivings possess a specific habitual and cross-situational quality that distinguishes them from personal projects (which often focus on specific tasks or outcomes) or life tasks (which are culturally or developmentally mandated problems to be solved). Strivings are seen as superordinate goals that orchestrate lower-level actions; they represent the characteristic mode of interaction between the self and the environment. For instance, while a personal project might be "write a book chapter," the underlying striving might be "to always demonstrate intellectual competence," a goal that recurs across professional and academic contexts.

## Theoretical Foundations and Origins

The theoretical lineage of behavioral strivings can be traced primarily to the pioneering work of Robert Emmons in the late 1980s, who sought to integrate trait theory with motivational psychology. Emmons recognized the limitations of traditional trait models, which, while excellent at describing stability, often struggled to explain the dynamic processes underlying behavior. Behavioral strivings provided a necessary mechanism to link stable individual differences (traits) to observable, goal-directed actions. This approach aligns with the personological tradition

championed by figures such as Gordon Allport, who emphasized the importance of idiographic (individual-specific) analysis and the concept of functional autonomy, where goals initially pursued for external reasons become ends in themselves, driving personality expression.

The framework rests on the premise that personality is expressed not just through consistent reaction patterns, but through consistent patterns of goal pursuit. These recurring goals shape how individuals select, interpret, and respond to environmental stimuli. Integrating insights from cognitive-affective personality systems (CAPS) theory, strivings can be viewed as the cognitive-affective units that are activated in relevant situations, guiding the individual toward specific outcomes. This integration allows the striving construct to serve as a mediating variable, explaining how a broad trait, such as neuroticism, translates into specific, maladaptive striving patterns, such as "always trying to avoid criticism."

Behavioral strivings, therefore, serve a critical explanatory function in bridging the often-cited gap between dispositional traits and immediate behavior. Traits describe **what** a person is like (e.g., conscientious), but strivings describe **what** a person is trying to accomplish (e.g., "striving to complete every task perfectly and on time"). The habitual nature of these strivings means they are strongly predictive of the frequency and intensity of goal-related activities, providing a robust, dynamic model for understanding personality structure. This theoretical emphasis on recurrent goal themes ensures that the analysis of personality remains grounded in the individual's lived motivational experience.

## Defining Characteristics and Structure

Behavioral strivings are characterized by several key structural features. First, they are inherently **recurrent**; they are not one-off events but patterns of striving that manifest across time and context. Second, they are **hierarchical**. While they represent mid-level constructs--more specific than global life goals but broader than immediate intentions--they are themselves organized hierarchically. Lower-level strivings (e.g., "trying to finish my emails quickly") serve the purpose of higher-level strivings (e.g., "trying to be a highly efficient professional"). Third, strivings possess a strong element of **context-specificity**, meaning they are formulated in the individual's own language and reflect their unique situational demands and internal conflicts. They are often expressed using verbs and gerunds, emphasizing the ongoing nature of the goal pursuit ("trying to," "working toward," "avoiding the risk of").

A fundamental distinction applied to the structure of strivings is the contrast between **approach strivings** and **avoidance strivings**. Approach strivings focus on attaining a desired positive outcome (e.g., "striving to make new friends"), whereas avoidance strivings focus on preventing an undesired negative outcome (e.g., "striving to avoid rejection"). Research consistently demonstrates that the balance between these two types of strivings holds significant implications

for psychological functioning. Individuals whose striving profiles are dominated by avoidance goals tend to experience higher levels of anxiety, lower intrinsic motivation, and reduced overall well-being, as avoidance inherently requires continuous vigilance and effort expenditure simply to maintain the status quo.

Furthermore, strivings can be categorized based on their content, relating them to core human motivations. Emmons identified several common content categories, which, while varying idiosyncratically, cluster around themes such as:

**Intimacy Strivings:** Goals related to forming and maintaining close, meaningful relationships.

**Achievement Strivings:** Goals focused on competence, performance, and success in tasks.

**Power Strivings:** Goals aimed at influencing or controlling others or one's environment.

**Growth Strivings:** Goals related to personal development, learning, and self-actualization.

The overall structure and consistency among an individual's strivings--for example, whether all strivings point toward self-enhancement or whether they are diverse and potentially conflicting--are highly predictive of the individual's psychological coherence and life satisfaction.

## Measurement and Assessment Techniques

The assessment of behavioral strivings utilizes a distinct methodology known as the **Personal Strivings Assessment Technique (PSAT)**, which is designed to capture the unique, idiographic nature of these goals. The PSAT typically begins with an open-ended elicitation task where participants are asked to list their personal strivings--the things they are "typically trying to do" in their daily lives. This method ensures ecological validity by allowing the goals to be expressed in the individual's own motivational language, rather than forcing them into predefined, nomothetic categories. Participants usually list between 10 and 15 strivings, which are then analyzed and categorized by researchers.

Once the list of strivings is generated, participants are asked to rate each striving on a variety of standardized dimensions. These ratings transform the qualitative data into measurable quantitative variables, allowing for sophisticated statistical analysis. Key rating dimensions often include:

**Commitment:** How important the striving is to the individual.

**Difficulty/Effort:** The perceived effort required to pursue the striving.

**Success/Efficacy:** The perceived likelihood of achieving the striving.

**Conflict:** The degree to which this striving interferes with other strivings.

**Ambivalence:** The degree to which the individual feels both positive and negative emotions toward the striving.

**Intrinsic/Extrinsic Motivation:** The degree to which the goal is pursued for enjoyment or external reward.

The quantitative data derived from these ratings--particularly measures of conflict, ambivalence, and success--are then correlated with measures of well-being, health outcomes, and personality traits.

The strength of the PSAT lies in its dual capacity to provide deep, individualized insights while also allowing for systematic comparison across individuals through the use of standardized rating scales. Researchers can examine the average properties of an individual's entire striving system (e.g., their average level of success across all goals) or focus on specific content categories. For example, by analyzing the proportion of approach versus avoidance strivings, researchers can create a motivational profile that is highly predictive of affective states. This methodological rigor has cemented behavioral strivings as a highly effective tool for studying personality processes in motivational science, offering substantial advantages over assessments limited to abstract, context-free personality traits.

## Functions of Behavioral Strivings

Behavioral strivings serve multiple critical functions in the psychological organization and regulation of the individual. Primarily, they function as **organizers of action**. Strivings dictate which stimuli in the environment receive attention, how information is processed, and which behaviors are initiated. A person whose dominant striving is "to always appear competent" will selectively attend to opportunities for achievement and avoid scenarios that risk exposure to failure, effectively streamlining their behavioral repertoire and reducing cognitive load related to decision-making in relevant contexts. This organizational function lends consistency and predictability to an individual's behavior across varying situations.

A second essential function is providing a sense of **meaning and purpose**. The ongoing pursuit of self-generated, valued goals imbues daily activities with significance. When strivings are aligned with core personal values, their pursuit contributes directly to an individual's sense of self-worth and purpose in life. This function is particularly relevant in the context of psychological resilience; individuals with a well-integrated system of meaningful strivings are often better equipped to cope with setbacks, as failure in one area does not necessarily negate the significance of their overarching motivational themes. Conversely, the absence of meaningful strivings can contribute to feelings of apathy, existential vacuum, and chronic distress.

Finally, strivings are indispensable mechanisms for **self-regulation and identity maintenance**. They act as internal standards or reference points against which an individual monitors their performance and adjusts their behavior. Successful pursuit of strivings reinforces the individual's desired self-image, while failure triggers self-corrective feedback loops and emotional responses. Through the consistent selection and pursuit of strivings, individuals continually express and validate their identity. For example, an individual with a strong "helping others" striving reinforces

their identity as an altruistic person through recurrent, prosocial behaviors, thereby maintaining self-consistency.

## Strivings, Conflict, and Ambivalence

A significant area of research within the strivings framework focuses on the concepts of **striving conflict** and **ambivalence**, which are highly detrimental to psychological functioning. Striving conflict occurs when the pursuit of one important goal actively hinders or prevents the attainment of another equally important goal. For example, the striving "to always be available for my family" might conflict directly with the striving "to achieve rapid professional advancement," forcing the individual into a costly trade-off scenario. High levels of inter-striving conflict are strongly associated with indicators of poor well-being, including increased distress, physical symptom reporting, and reduced self-esteem, because the conflict necessitates constant internal negotiation and resource depletion.

Conflict manifests in several forms. **Inter-striving conflict**, as described above, involves opposing goals within the overall motivational system. **Intra-striving conflict**, or ambivalence, refers to internal conflict specifically related to a single goal--when the individual desires a goal but simultaneously fears or dislikes the process of pursuing it, or when the goal itself has both positive and negative consequences. For instance, a person might strive "to lose weight," but the necessary actions (dieting, exercise) are viewed negatively, leading to procrastination and emotional turmoil. Both types of conflict undermine self-regulatory efficiency, leading to indecision, chronic worry, and a sense of being perpetually stuck.

The psychological costs associated with high striving conflict stem largely from the diversion of cognitive resources. When strivings are in opposition, the individual expends considerable energy on rumination and attempting to reconcile incompatible demands, leaving fewer resources available for goal implementation and execution. Effective psychological functioning, therefore, requires a high degree of **striving coherence**, where goals are perceived as mutually supportive rather than inhibitory. Individuals who successfully manage conflict often do so by prioritizing their core values and structuring their lower-level strivings instrumentally to serve these fewer, overarching, harmonious goals.

## Behavioral Strivings and Psychological Well-Being

The empirical link between the content and structure of behavioral strivings and psychological well-being is one of the most robust findings in motivational psychology. Research consistently demonstrates that the characteristics of an individual's striving profile are powerful predictors of life satisfaction, happiness, and mental health outcomes. Specifically, profiles characterized by high levels of **intrinsic strivings** (goals pursued for inherent satisfaction, interest, and personal growth)

and low levels of extrinsic strivings (goals pursued for external rewards, approval, or image) are strongly correlated with greater positive affect and self-actualization. When strivings align with autonomy and relatedness needs, they provide sustained motivational energy.

Furthermore, the valence of the striving--approach versus avoidance--is critical. Individuals whose systems are dominated by **approach goals** experience higher positive emotions, optimism, and engagement, as their focus is directed toward positive potential outcomes. Conversely, a predominance of avoidance goals ("striving not to fail," "trying to avoid looking foolish") is highly predictive of negative affect, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Avoidance goals foster a defensive motivational style, where success is merely the absence of failure, offering little in the way of positive reinforcement or resource building, leading to chronic exhaustion and lower self-efficacy.

Beyond content and valence, the perceived **success and attainability** of strivings also mediate well-being. Individuals who report moderate to high success in their most important strivings tend to report higher life satisfaction. However, the quality of the striving matters more than sheer success; achieving an intrinsic goal (e.g., personal mastery) provides a greater boost to well-being than achieving an extrinsic goal (e.g., accumulating wealth). Ultimately, a healthy striving profile is characterized by coherence, low conflict, a balance of approach over avoidance, and a strong emphasis on goals that are personally meaningful and rooted in intrinsic motivation, thereby fostering a sense of psychological flourishing and meaning in life.

## Applications and Future Directions

The behavioral strivings framework has significant practical applications, particularly within clinical and counseling psychology. Analyzing a client's strivings can quickly illuminate core motivational conflicts and maladaptive patterns that fuel distress. For instance, a therapist can use the PSAT to identify a client's dominant avoidance strivings or high-conflict goals, which can then become the direct target of therapeutic intervention, such as cognitive restructuring or goal modification. By shifting focus from abstract symptoms to concrete, recurring goals, therapy can become highly effective in promoting self-concordant and resource-building motivational systems.

In organizational and educational settings, the striving concept aids in understanding motivation and engagement. Organizations can benefit from assessing whether employees' personal strivings align with institutional objectives. When the environment supports the pursuit of intrinsic, meaningful strivings (e.g., fostering competence and relatedness), employees exhibit higher job satisfaction, creativity, and productivity. Conversely, environments that force the pursuit of extrinsic or conflicting goals lead to burnout and decreased performance, highlighting the value of motivational alignment in applied contexts.

Future research directions are poised to expand the scope of the behavioral strivings construct.

There is growing interest in conducting **longitudinal studies** to track how striving profiles evolve across the lifespan, particularly during key developmental transitions (e.g., adolescence, retirement). Furthermore, integrating striving research with neuroscientific methods--examining the neural correlates of striving conflict and goal pursuit--promises to deepen our understanding of the biological underpinnings of motivational dynamics. Finally, cross-cultural studies are essential for determining the universality of striving structures (such as the approach/avoidance distinction) versus the cultural specificity of striving content, ensuring the framework remains relevant in a global context.

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