

Understanding and Resolving Ambivalence Workbook

Linda Paulk Buchanan, Ph.D.



"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do"

Have trouble making decisions?
Haven't achieve goals that you know you are capable of?
Can't stick to self-improvement plans?
Feel stuck but don't understand why?

USE THIS WORKBOOK TO GET UNSTUCK

Understanding and Resolving Ambivalence

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The Author's Personal Journey in Understanding Ambivalence

I have worked as a psychologist for over 30 years. My professional journey began in the 80s when I was getting a master's degree in counseling. Wait a minute. Imagine that you can hear sound effects of a tape rewinding (for those of you old enough to remember that sound and if not, maybe you can imagine a car breaking and going in reverse). Because I have to say that my professional journey began much earlier than my formal education. One of my earliest memories points to this aspect of my personality.

I was about three years old and before the time of toddler car seats. I was standing up on the floor board of the back seat with my head stuck over the front seat between my parents. They were arguing about how to pronounce the word *pecan*. My father being from South Georgia, pronounced it with the accent on the first syllable and the second syllable pronounced the same as a tin can (PEcan). My mother, having grown up in Atlanta pronounced the word with the accent on the second syllable and the *a* in pecan sounding like *ah* (peCAHN). As is often the case, simple arguments can spiral into larger arguments and the tension was beginning to rise in the car. After listening to them argue for a few minutes, I piped up and asked why we couldn't just say PEcahn or pCAN. I was coming up with a compromise that borrowed from both of their preferences. Their reaction was immediate and highly gratifying in that they chuckled at my creativity and the argument ceased. I learned two things: Finding compromises was very helpful and nothing feels better than making people laugh. I believe in that moment my destiny to become a psychologist was sealed (although my alter ego wanted to be a stand-up comedian, seriously).

Throughout childhood, I had many more opportunities to practice my untrained attempts at care taking. My parents did not see eye to eye on other issues as well and I eagerly became triangulated in their arguments though typically at my own expense. I would try to help them see something from the other's point of view. But since it was unpredictable whether this would be appreciated or resented, my need to help became laced with anxiety. When it helped, however, the reinforcement was very strong and rewarding. Thus, I developed my own ambivalence.

I was also a very sensitive child (I still can't watch bloody movies) and my level of empathy was so high that I often felt physical pain. I remember sitting in a large college classroom one day and a girl came in after me. She sat down in the chair in front of me looking very dejected. I felt a strong sense of pain for her. I realized that my reaction wasn't normal and that I might be feeling even worse for her than she was for herself. I had been teetering on psychology or journalism as majors and this awareness of my own high level of empathy swayed me into declaring my major course of study and my life's work. This sensitivity is based in physiology and often leads to perfectionism, as it did with me.

Additionally, I was the oldest of three children and at a very early age my father told my siblings I was in charge. Needless to say, I developed into a bossy, little girl who thought that she was supposed to tell everyone what to do - even my same-age friends. Fortunately, I began to understand my error, in large part to my best friend who was an only child. She told me in no uncertain terms that I better stop telling her what to do! So I changed my behavior. However, it took years or decades to unwire the feeling that I was supposed to tell people what to do.

Therefore, having been primed (through physiology as well as early learning) to enjoy or even crave integration and compromise while at the same time feeling like I was responsible for telling people what to do, I went into psychology. No surprise there. I struggled with the ambivalence of wanting to give advice that would help people but also not wanting to feel responsible for things in others that I couldn't change. To integrate my own ambivalence, I learned that the less I appeared to be doing the work and the more work my client was doing, the better. This came as a huge relief on some level to me.

I met my husband in graduate school and he definitely was not a perfectionist! Although he was working on his doctorate, he embodied the *play hard/work hard* mentality. I had the *work hard* part down but had never been very good at play. The saying "It's never too late to have a happy childhood" became real for me after meeting him. I began to learn balance between play and work though not before working through some ambivalence about it. He told me that he never aimed for the highest grade in the class which shocked me. Wasn't that everyone's motivation? His was much more adult as he taught me to learn for my own gratification rather than an external reward. I discovered that it took much less time and work to shoot for a 90 (in my program that was an A) than a 100 which resulted in much greater enjoyment in life.

In my career, I have specialized in working with people with eating disorders. I was drawn to these folks because although I hadn't had a diagnosable eating disorder, I had struggled for a time with food and body image issues and they tended to be perfectionistic, highly sensitive and severely ambivalent. Sound familiar? These were my peeps! Possibly more than with any population, these people have very deep-seated ambivalence as the very thing that makes them feel worthy of life is killing them. Also when people are ambivalent, they generally don't like to be told what to do. These dear souls taught me so much about how to be helpful without diminishing their own personal power and responsibility. It is my hope that this workbook will do the same for you.



Understanding and Resolving Ambivalence Workbook

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Introduction: Understanding Ambivalence

“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do.” St. Paul, Romans 7:15

“In these times I don't, in a manner of speaking, know what I want; perhaps I don't want what I know and want what I don't know.” Marsilio Ficino

“It seems we are capable of immense love and loyalty, and as capable of deceit and atrocity. It's probably this shocking ambivalence that makes us unique.” John Scott

“I just have this happy personality and a sad soul in one body. It feels weird sometimes.” unknown

Ambivalence is the state of having mixed feelings or contradictory ideas about something or someone.

If you relate in any way to the quotes above, it is likely that you are struggling with ambivalence.

Everyone Experiences Ambivalence:

Most people will experience ambivalence as they attempt to make any kind of change. Just consider the many phrases we have for it:

Of two minds, I'm torn, It's a dilemma, The jury's still out, Waffling, It's debatable, Vacillating, Wavering, Having a foot in both camps, It's a quandary, Sitting on the fence, in limbo, Wishy-washy.

One part of you wants to change and another part doesn't. This workbook will help you understand how ambivalence functions and if you are more prone to getting stuck in ambivalence than others. You will also learn a step by step process for resolving your ambivalence so that you can be successful in achieving what you want.

Ambivalence can Become Unhealthy

Unhealthy ambivalence is often experienced when your beliefs are in conflict with normal human functioning. For instance, the belief that perfectionism brings acceptance is in conflict with the innate need to believe that you are loveable for who you are. Or to desire connection while fearing rejection. It is important to identify when you are at cross-purposes with yourself and to develop strategies for resolving this ambivalence.



To whatever degree you experience ambivalence, it is important to recognize it, harness it, and resolve it.

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook will help you understand how ambivalence functions and if you are more prone to getting stuck in ambivalence than others. You will also learn a step by step process for resolving your ambivalence so that you can be successful in creating what you want in life

Understanding Why Change is Hard

Habit

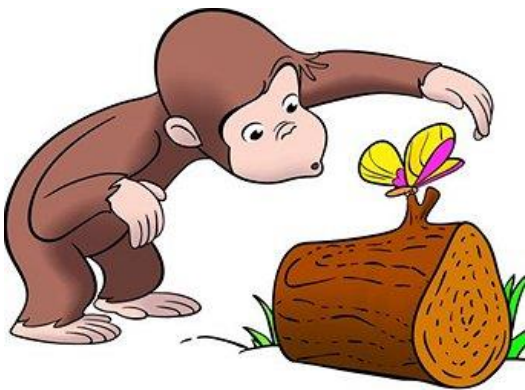
Whatever we repeat gets wired in. Every time you repeat a thought, feeling, or behavior, the neuropsychology of that experience is strengthened. Your brain naturally functions to *develop associations* as a way of learning and saving energy. For instance, when you get into your car, you can start driving with no thought about where the key goes and how to move out of *park* into *drive*. But try getting into someone else's car for the first time, and it is awkward. Thus change can be like trying to write with your non-dominant hand: awkward and inefficient at first, but can improve with practice.



Negativity Bias

Brains are also hard-wired to learn more efficiently from negative events than positive (it's more important to know where the bear lives than where the daffodils grow) thus negative messages may be very deeply ingrained. This is often referred to as a negativity bias which is helpful for life-threatening events but not helpful with daily living.

Be Fascinated With Your Ambivalence



You will get the most out of this workbook if you can become fascinated with your own ambivalence. Watch for it and see it as an opportunity to focus on change. For instance, I've learned that if I am procrastinating, I need to stop and ask myself if I am ambivalent for some reason. If so, I have an opportunity to learn about myself and what's important to me. There is probably a good reason for my ambivalence, but I need to get better and better at identifying where and why I get stuck. The process can be fascinating! It is vitally important that you have an attitude of fascination, openness, and gentleness with yourself as you continue on this journey. The more self-criticism you experience, the longer it will take.

Frequently Asked Questions

What do I need?

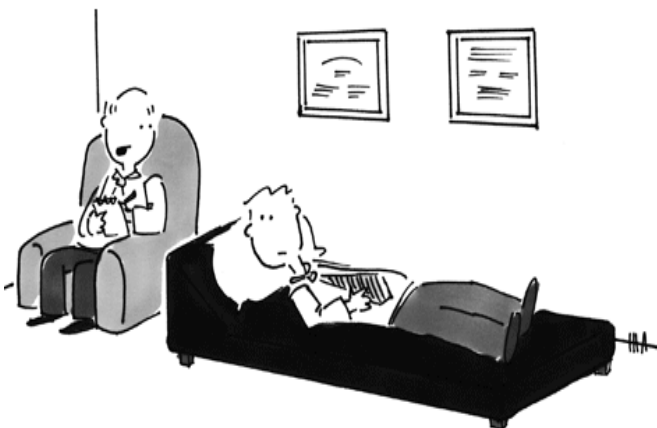
The most important thing that you need to get the most out of this workbook is a curious, open and kind attitude toward yourself. Real change does not come about through self-judgment or shame. It is also helpful to consider self-awareness and growth as honorable values which require a commitment of time. Beyond this, you will only need a pen and possibly extra paper for doing more in-depth journaling. Some people like to dictate rather than write responses to these questions. This is good, however, writing is better because it slows the process which often allows time for increased awareness.

You are likely to feel ambivalent about working on your ambivalence!

A Word about Blame:

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"What do you say we blame your parents and knock off early?"

It is natural to either place blame on others or, in contrast, to resist exploring your ambivalence because you don't want to blame anyone else. Neither of these perspectives will help you move forward. If you resist due to a fear of blaming someone else, you may be left with shame related to your needs. It is important to be open to all the reasons that you became ambivalent. Conversely, it may feel gratifying to blame others for your pain. This is natural, however, the better approach is "eyes on you." It's true that people hurt each other, however, once the pain has been experienced it becomes the "property" of the one that felt it. Thus, your pain is yours to manage and to heal. You don't have to wait for someone else to change! Although this is great news, some people feel lonely when thinking about letting go of the wish that things had been different or they feel angry that they have to make the changes on their own. These feelings are understandable but they will keep you stuck.

I recommend a nonjudgmental stance toward yourself and others while using this workbook

Should I be in Therapy?

This workbook may have been suggested to you by a mental health professional as it was written as a companion to *A Clinician's Guide to Pathological Ambivalence* (2019). However, it is also intended to be used as a self-help guide. I recommend if you are dealing with severe ambivalence that is interfering with the quality of your life, that you find a therapist with whom you can talk while doing the workbook.

Practice Makes Progress

Do I Really Need to Do the Practice Exercises?

I intentionally did not say *practice make perfect* because striving for perfectionism causes more problems than it solves. But you will make progress if you work through and practice the concepts shared. You will get out of this workbook exactly what you put into it. I would recommend spending at least a half hour a day working through the exercises and reflecting on your responses. Consider it part of your self-care routine. After working for 30 years as a psychologist, I have heard every conceivable excuse people can make for not spending time on their own personal growth. I have summarized some of the universal excuses with my responses. I hope it inspires you to push past the typical resistance in service of your future self.

I get this; I don't need to work at it: After 12 years of graduate school, I certainly had earned the right to tell myself that I had a great understanding of human personality and behavior and that my education alone would solve all my problems. Why would I need to practice to create change? That kept me stuck in some old patterns that could have changed much earlier. This is like a star athlete saying “I have natural talent so I don't need to practice.” Again, insight and knowledge alone will not create the change that you want.

This feels awkward: Yes, it will seem awkward at first because that is the nature of change (like writing with your non-dominant hand). Telling yourself that you're good enough will not feel natural after years of striving for perfectionism. It will feel like you're lying to yourself. However, the actual “untruth” was your earlier formed belief that you were unworthy if you weren't perfect.

I tried it, but nothing happened: These strategies will take time to produce change and you already know why: you are having to rewire your brain. You probably didn't give up if you fell the first time you tried to ride a bike.

This is just a gimmick: This reminds me of the saying: “it's just a cliché” to which I want to answer, sure but what made the saying turn into a cliché in the first place? The truth behind it. Of course you will be using tricks or gimmicks at first to create behavior change. These strategies have been *connived* to help you create change.

This might work for other people, but not me: I hate to be blunt but this is what we in the profession call “terminal uniqueness.” You think that you are somehow different from others and that you can't have or don't need what most people do. When I hear this, I like to gently point out that you aren't that different or special from everyone else. If your brain functions somewhat normally on a physiological level, these strategies work.

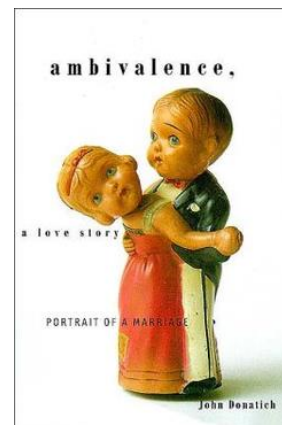
If you notice that you are thinking any of the above excuses (or any others that have come up for you), try to override that thought with another thought or just ignore it (it will pass) and do the exercise anyway. Some strategies will work better than others, based primarily on preference, so pick the ones you like best. It does take time and commitment but the outcome can be life-changing.

Handout 9a: Ambivalence as Interpersonal Confusion

Ambivalence can cause you to communicate mixed messages and project your false beliefs onto others. For example:

*I harbor a belief that I'm not important. But nevertheless, deep down maybe even unconsciously, I crave the experience of being taken care of. I therefore **act** in a way that will get you to take care of me. However, I can't believe that you actually do care for me regardless of what you do, so I **act** in a way that shows that I don't care or need you.*

Sounds confusing, right? It is, and it can be a life-crippling dilemma. Notice how the **actions** are mutually exclusive but co-exist. That's what ambivalence is, wanting two opposing things at the same time. For example, if you grew up with a distant father, you may be drawn to others who are similarly distant (this is an unconscious attempt to get someone like your father to love you as a substitute for not feeling important or loved by him). Coupled with the pre-formed **belief** that you're not loveable, the relationship will be difficult at best. Begin by affirming to yourself your right to have needs and to ask directly for what you need.



Step 1: Reexamine the beliefs about others that you checked off (or wrote in) from Handout 5. Consider how the belief affects you in your relationships and come up with alternative actions for each belief. This overlaps the exercise in Handout so you may either skip it or become even more specific about examples in your life.

Belief				
Action in relationship				
Self Fulfilling Prophecy				

Step 2: Make a **specific plan** for practicing the alternative actions (good intention doesn't make change happen). For example, John wrote: *"the belief that people will leave me has caused me to hold back my feelings (action) from Kiara. She has complained that I'm not vulnerable with her and this could cause her to leave (self-fulfilling prophecy). I am going to talk to her tonight about what I remember feeling when my parent's divorced (specific plan)."*

Handout 9b: Ambivalence as Interpersonal Confusion

Healthy relationships are based on trust, honesty, openness, compromise, acceptance of imperfections and forgiveness. However, if you struggle with ambivalence in relationships, you may feel like you have to resort to indirect means to get your needs met. These indirect means can lead to a lack of honesty, blaming self and others, rigidity, lack of compromise and passive or passive-aggressive attempts to feel cared about, loved and important. If you are ambivalent about your needs, you are likely to misinterpret the shortcomings of others as a lack of caring. It is important to accept that every relationship consists of two imperfect beings and naturally both will make mistakes.

Step 3: The following is based on an article by George Ziogas (Medium, April 25, 2019). Honestly consider how they apply to you and write out a specific step that you will take to practice an alternative approach.

**You are imperfectly perfect,
You make me happy and sad at the same time**

Have the courage to be honest. You don't need to invent situations or alternative facts to communicate directly. Own your feelings and your happiness and speak your truth.
I will admit or share _____

Avoid blame. Blaming others rarely has a positive effect, regardless of the situation. They're your feelings and your needs, so it's your responsibility to take responsibility.
I will accept responsibility for _____

Behavior (doing what?) _____

Look for mutual solutions. Compromise is often the best tactic for finding balance.
One mutual solution that I can offer is _____

Remember your partner's needs too. It is natural to be more aware of your own needs than your partner (especially when we feel they aren't being met), however when you are gracious to others it can be a very fulfilling and empowering experience for you.
I will be gracious by _____

Congratulations! This is possibly the most difficult handout in the whole workbook.

If you can do this, you can do anything!!!

Handout 9c: Ambivalence as Interpersonal Confusion

Defense Mechanisms

Defense mechanisms are well-ingrained strategies that we use when we are anxious or afraid. These mechanisms protect us from feeling or thinking things that make us feel uncomfortable. That wouldn't be so bad except that we usually don't realize when we are using defense mechanisms in that they become habitual and then automatic responses over time. (My excessive joking is a defense mechanism, my excessive laughing is a defense mechanism. Our defense mechanisms were made for each other!

Definition:

1. An automatic reaction of the body against disease-causing organisms.
2. A mental process (e.g., repression or projection) initiated, typically unconsciously, to avoid conscious conflict or anxiety.

In interpersonal relationships, it is the second meaning of the word that causes confusion but notice that both definitions describe automatic reactions set off by a threat. In relationship, these threats might be:

- Fear that someone will get mad at you
- Fear that you will be criticized
- Fear that you will do something wrong
- Fear that you will be abandoned
- Fear that you will be misunderstood
- Fear that someone will take advantage of you
- Fear that what you wish for is wrong or bad

"We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are." - Anais Nin

Challenge Yourself: Consider things that you might do or might not do because it makes you feel too vulnerable and anxious. Some examples are:

- "I don't share my feelings because I'm afraid you will not understand."
- "I don't introduce myself because I assume you won't like me."
- "I isolate because I'm afraid you will take advantage of me."
- "I don't let you know I like you because I'm afraid you will hurt or judge me."
- "I always say no (or yes) because I fear that you won't approve of me."

Now fill in this sentence with as many responses as you can think of using as many situations as you can think of (friends, family, partners, etc.):

I do (or don't) _____, because I'm afraid that you will _____. Or I'm afraid that you will _____, so I do (don't) _____.

The more often we use them, the less uncomfortable we need to feel to resort to them. They can become habitual. For instance, if you have often received a message that your feelings don't make sense, you are likely to be guarded about who you share them with. Then over time you might generalize this strategy to keeping your feelings pushed down (repression) regardless of who you are with and finally, maybe even from yourself.

The more often you use a defense mechanism, the less threat or anxiety you need to experience for it to automatically kick in.