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# Why So Many People Can't Make Decisions

By SHIRLEY S. WANG



Some people meet, fall in love and get married right away. Others can spend hours in the sock aisle at the department store, weighing the pros and cons of buying a pair of wool argyles instead of cotton striped.



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Seeing the world as black and white, in which choices seem clear, or shades of gray can affect people's path in life, from jobs and relationships to which political candidate they vote for, researchers say. People who often have conflicting feelings about situations—the shades-of-gray thinkers—have more of what psychologists call ambivalence, while those who tend toward unequivocal views have less ambivalence.

High ambivalence may be useful in some situations, and low ambivalence in others, researchers say. And although people don't fall neatly into one camp or the other, in general, individuals who tend toward ambivalence do so fairly consistently across different areas of their lives.

For decades psychologists largely ignored ambivalence because they didn't think it was meaningful. The way researchers studied attitudes—by asking participants where they fell on a scale ranging from positive to negative—also made it difficult to tease apart who held conflicting opinions from those who were neutral, according to Mark Zanna, a University of Waterloo professor who studies ambivalence. (Similarly,

psychologists long believed it wasn't necessary to examine men and women separately when studying the way people think.)

Now, researchers have been investigating how ambivalence, or lack of it, affects people's lives, and how they might be able to make better decisions. Overall, thinking in shades of gray is a sign of maturity, enabling people to see the world as it really is. It's a "coming to grips with the complexity of the world," says [Joff Larson](#), a psychology professor who studies

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[Wang discusses what's behind the ambivalence that plagues so many](#)

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### Different Strokes

PEOPLE WHO SEE THE WORLD AS BLACK AND WHITE TEND TO...

Speak their mind or make quick decisions.

Be more predictable in making decisions (e.g., who they vote for).

- Be less anxious about making wrong choices.
- Have relationship conflicts that are less drawn out.
- Be less likely to consider others' points of view.

PEOPLE WHO SEE THE WORLD IN SHADES OF GRAY TEND TO....

- Procrastinate or avoid making decisions if possible.
- Feel more regret after making decisions.
- Be thoughtful about making the right choice.
- Stay longer in unhappy relationships.
- Appreciate multiple points of view.

**Quiz: How Do You See the World?**

Psychologists use various tests to tell if a person sees the world as black and white or shades of gray, or somewhere in between. Click to take two such quizzes:

**What Shade Are You?**

Psychologists use various tests to tell if a person sees the world as black and white or shades of gray, or somewhere in between. Here are two such quizzes:

**How You See Relationships**

Rate each statement on a scale of one to nine, with one being the least ambivalent and nine being the most.

- \_\_\_ I am confused about my feelings toward my partner
- \_\_\_ I think about or worry about losing some of my independence by being involved with my partner.
- \_\_\_ I am ambivalent or unsure about continuing in the relationship with my partner.
- \_\_\_ I feel that my partner demands or requires too much of my time and attention.
- \_\_\_ I feel "trapped" or pressured to continue in this relationship.
- \_\_\_ Total Scores



JEN LARSEN, a psychology professor who studies ambivalence at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

In a recent study, college students were asked to write an essay coming down on one side or another of a contentious issue, regarding a new labor law affecting young adults, while other groups of students were allowed to write about both sides of the issue. The students forced to choose a side reported feeling more uncomfortable, even physically sweating more, says Frenk van Harreveld, a social psychologist at the University of Amsterdam who studies how people deal with ambivalence.

If there isn't an easy answer, ambivalent people, more than black-and-white thinkers, are likely to procrastinate and avoid making a choice, for instance about whether to take a new job, says Dr. Harreveld. But if after careful consideration an individual still can't decide, one's gut reaction may be the way to go. Dr. van Harreveld says in these situations he flips a coin, and if his immediate reaction when the coin lands on heads is negative, then he knows what he should do.

Researchers can't say for sure why some people tend towards greater ambivalence. Certain personality traits play a role—people with a strong need to reach a conclusion in a given situation tend to black-and-white thinking, while ambivalent people tend to be more comfortable with uncertainty. Individuals who are raised in environments where their parents are

ambivalent or unstable may grow to experience anxiety and ambivalence in future relationships, according to some developmental psychologists.

Culture may also play a role. In western cultures, simultaneously seeing both good and bad "violates our world view, our need to put things in boxes," says Dr. Larsen. But in eastern philosophies, it may be less problematic because there is a recognition of dualism, that something can be one thing as well as another.

One of the most widely studied aspects of ambivalence is how it affects thinking. Because of their strongly positive or strongly negative views, black-and-white thinkers tend to be quicker at making decisions than highly ambivalent people. But if they get mired in one point of view and can't see others, black-and-white thinking may prompt conflict with others or unhealthy thoughts or behaviors.

People with clinical depression, for instance, often get mired in a negative view of the world. They may interpret a neutral action like a friend not waving to them as meaning that their friend is mad at them, and have trouble thinking about alternative explanations.

Ambivalent people, on the other hand, tend to systematically evaluate all sides of an argument before coming to a decision. They scrutinize carefully the evidence that is presented to them, making lists of pros and cons, and rejecting overly simplified information.

Ambivalent individuals' ability to see all sides of an argument and feel mixed emotions appears to have some benefits. They may be better able to empathize with others' points of view, for one thing. And when people are able to feel mixed emotions, such as hope and sadness, they tend to have healthier

coping strategies, such as when a spouse passes away, according to Dr. Larsen. They may also be more creative because the different emotions lead them to consider different ideas that they might otherwise have dismissed.

People waffling over a decision may benefit from paring down the number of details they are weighing and instead selecting one or a few important values to use in basing their decision, says Richard Boyatzis, a professor in organizational behavior, psychology and cognitive science at Case Western Reserve University.

For example, in making a decision about whether to buy a costly piece of new medical equipment, a hospital executive may weigh the expense, expertise needed to operate it and space requirements against its effectiveness. But ultimately, Dr. Boyatzis says, in order to avoid getting mired in a prolonged debate, the executive may decide on a core value—say, how well the equipment works for taking care of patients—that can be used to help make the decision.

In the workplace, employees who are highly ambivalent about their jobs are more erratic in job performance; they may perform particularly well some days and poorly other times, says René Ziegler, a professor of social and organizational psychology at the University of Tübingen in Germany whose study of the subject is scheduled for publication in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*. Positive feedback for a highly ambivalent person, such as a pay raise, will boost their job performance more than for someone who isn't ambivalent about the job, he says.

Every job has good and bad elements. But people who aren't ambivalent about their job perform well if they like their work and poorly if they don't. Dr. Ziegler suggests that black-and-white thinkers tend to focus on key aspects of their job, such as how much they are getting paid or how much they like their boss, and not the total picture in determining whether they are happy at work.

Black-and-white thinkers similarly may recognize that there are positive and negative aspects to a significant relationship. But they generally choose to focus only on some qualities that are particularly important to them.

By contrast, people who are truly ambivalent in a relationship can't put the negative out of their mind. They may worry about being hurt or abandoned even in moments when their partner is doing something nice, says Mario Mikulincer, dean of the New School of Psychology at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya in Israel.

Such shades-of-gray people tend to have trouble in relationships. They stay in relationships longer, even abusive ones, and experience more fighting. They are also more likely to get divorced, says Dr. Mikulincer.

Recognizing that a partner has strengths and weaknesses is normal, says Dr. Mikulincer. "A certain degree of ambivalence is a sign of maturity," he says.

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