



3rd Global Conference on Psychology

24 - 26 October 2025

Oxford, United Kingdom

Depression and the wish to live versus the desire to die

**Eleanor Beale¹, James Overholser², Stephanie Gomez³, Christopher McGovern⁴, Christi Silva⁵,
Josephine Ridley⁶**

^{1,2,3,4,5,6}Case Western Reserve University, United States

ABSTRACT

The treatment of suicidal clients relies on a thoughtful understanding of suicidal ideation. Suicidal ambivalence is the subjective experience when a person simultaneously holds a wish to live with a wish to die. The present study was designed to understand the subjective feeling of suicidal ambivalence as it relates to suicidal behavior in a sample of depressed psychiatric outpatients. The 76 depressed psychiatric patients who reported a history of suicidal ideation were asked to rate their desire to live and their wish to die as experienced during their most difficult emotional struggle. Across the entire sample, 87% reported experiencing an internal struggle between living and dying. As compared to depressed patients who had never attempted suicide, depressed patients who had previously attempted suicide reported a higher wish to die ($t = 3.54, p < .001$), a lower wish to live ($t = 2.04, p < .05$), and higher levels of ambivalence ($t = 3.04, p < .01$). Furthermore, suicidal patients provided brief narrative descriptions underlying their suicidal distress, revealing issues related to wanting to end the feeling of pain, feeling like giving up, losing a sense of hope for a better future, a fear of a negative afterlife, and concern for surviving family members. Suicidal ambivalence appears important for the assessment of and understanding of a suicidal crisis. Psychotherapy can explore feelings of ambivalence reported by clients during a suicidal crisis and can help to promote a stronger desire to live despite experiencing stress, conflict or loss in their lives.

Keywords: death; psychiatry; psychology; risk; suicide