

Two Minds About It

A companion guide for when part of you wants to change, and part of you doesn't

THE PUSH AND THE PULL

Wants change

Wants something to be different — relief, growth, a life that fits better.

Stuck point

Fears change

Wants to stay safe — the familiar, the known, the cost already paid.

Both parts are real. Neither is the problem. The tension between them is.

A word about the title

Feeling of two minds about something you want to change is not confusion or weak willpower — it is one of the most well-documented and human parts of how change actually happens. This guide is about learning to work with that tension, rather than trying to argue one side of yourself out of existence.

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Welcome

This is a companion to *From Feeling to Need*, *Untangling Shame*, and *Coming Back to Safe*. Where those guides focus on feelings and states, this one focuses on a very particular kind of stuckness — the experience of wanting to change something, and finding yourself unable to, again and again, without a clear reason why.

This is one of the most common experiences people bring into counselling. It can look like knowing exactly what you want to do differently, and still not doing it. It can look like starting, then quietly stopping. It can look like feeling like two different people depending on the day. None of this means you lack willpower, insight, or motivation. It usually means two genuine parts of you want different things, and both have a point.

This guide will help you map that tension clearly, understand why it tends to intensify at exactly the moment change feels most possible, and find small, workable ways forward.

This is not laziness

Ambivalence about change is a normal, well-studied part of the change process — not a personal failing.

This is not a lack of willpower

Being pulled two ways is a feature of how motivation actually works, not evidence you're trying too little.

This is not permanent

Ambivalence shifts. Being stuck today doesn't predict being stuck forever.

This is practice, not persuasion

Understanding why you're stuck is different from feeling less stuck. Both matter, and the second takes repetition.

How it links with the other guides

Ambivalence often intensifies when a nervous system state or an old shame-rule gets triggered by the idea of change. Strategic, forward-looking thinking is much harder to access from a mobilised or shut-down state — so if a stuck point feels unusually stubborn, checking which state you're in first isn't a detour from working with ambivalence. It's often the fastest way through it.

The Pattern — Why the Pull Gets Stronger Up Close

When something has both appealing and threatening aspects, psychologists call this an approach-avoidance conflict. From a distance, the appealing side tends to feel stronger — change looks simple, even exciting. But as you get genuinely close to it, the avoidance side tends to grow faster than the approach side. This is why plans made on a calm Sunday evening can feel impossible by Monday morning: proximity itself changes the balance.

From a distance	Up close
The benefits of change feel vivid and motivating.	The costs and risks of change feel vivid and urgent.
The status quo feels clearly worse.	The status quo feels familiar, even comforting.
Commitment feels easy to imagine.	Commitment feels like real exposure.

The distinction matters

This isn't a character flaw showing up at the worst moment — it's a well-documented pattern in how motivation behaves near a genuine choice point. Expecting it means you're less likely to read it as proof the whole plan was wrong.

A useful reframe

"The pull I feel right now isn't evidence I don't really want this. It's what wanting something real, up close, tends to feel like."

STEP 1

Map Both Voices Honestly

Ambivalence gets quieter once both sides are actually written down, rather than only felt.

A decisional balance is a simple, honest map of what's pulling you in each direction — not to win an argument with yourself, but to see the whole shape of the conflict clearly.

	For staying the same	For changing
Gains	What do I keep by not changing?	What might I gain by changing?
Costs	What is staying the same costing me?	What might changing cost me?

Notice without accusation

Try: "Both sides of this map are honest." Resist the urge to write a weak case for the side you want to defeat — that just hides the real conflict instead of resolving it.

Locate Yourself on the Path

Change tends to move through recognisable stages — knowing which one you're in changes what actually helps.

Stage	What it looks like	What tends to help
Not yet considering	The idea of change hasn't really landed yet	Gentle information, no pressure
Weighing it up	Aware of the issue, genuinely torn	Honest exploration of both sides — this guide
Getting ready	Leaning toward change, making a plan	Small, concrete first steps
Taking action	Actively doing something different	Support, encouragement, troubleshooting
Holding steady	Change has taken hold; protecting it now	Noticing and reinforcing what's working

Questions for gentle exploration

- "Which of these feels most true for me right now, about this specific change?"
- "Have I moved back a stage recently — and if so, is that actually a failure, or just how this tends to go?"

No single origin is required

Movement through these stages is rarely a straight line. Moving back a stage doesn't undo the work already done — it's a normal part of how this process tends to unfold.

STEP 3

Notice the Short-Term Trade

Avoidance often isn't about the task itself — it's about relieving an uncomfortable feeling right now, at a cost paid later.



A short practice

"I notice the urge to escape this feeling rather than the task itself. What is the feeling underneath the avoidance — and is there a smaller version of this task I could tolerate starting?"

This is not about the task

Avoidance is often better understood as prioritising how you feel right now over a longer-term goal — not evidence about the task's importance, or your character.

STEP 4

Work With the Ambivalence, Not Against It

Arguing with the part of you that resists change tends to make it dig in harder.

A more effective stance treats both parts of the conflict as worth listening to, rather than treating one as an enemy to defeat. This tends to loosen the conflict rather than intensify it.

HOLDING THE CONFLICT WITH CURIOSITY

Your own reasons

The most durable motivation for change is the kind you find yourself, not the kind handed to you by someone else.

No judgement

Both the part that wants change and the part that resists it are trying to look after you, in different ways.

Held with
curiosity,
not argument

Small steps count

Progress doesn't require resolving the whole conflict at once — a small, genuine step is real movement.

Approach	A question to try
Your own reasons	"What is my own reason for this — not anyone else's?"
No judgement	"What is the resisting part of me actually trying to protect?"
Small steps	"What's the smallest true step I could take today?"

STEP 5

Shrink the Gap

You can't eliminate the pull of avoidance up close, but you can change the size of the gap it has to cross.

Experiments to choose from

- Make the first step smaller than feels necessary — small enough that avoidance has little to grip onto.
- Reduce the friction of starting — lay out what you need the night before, open the document, put the shoes by the door.
- Add a small, immediate reward to the approach side, rather than relying only on a distant benefit.
- Decide the next step in advance, at a calm moment, rather than deciding in the moment it's needed.

Consent and safety matter

If the stuck point involves risk to your safety, health, housing, or a coercive relationship, these small-step approaches are not a substitute for direct support. Bring that to counselling, or to the appropriate service, first.

STEP 6

Expect to Wobble

Moving back a step is a normal part of this process, not proof it isn't working.

- 1 **Expect movement in both directions.** Very few people move through change in a straight line — going back a stage doesn't erase the ground already covered.
- 2 **Notice what the wobble is telling you.** Sometimes it points to a step that was too big, or a cost that wasn't fully accounted for.
- 3 **Separate the wobble from your worth.** A setback is information about the plan, not a verdict on you.
- 4 **Return to the smallest workable step,** rather than the whole plan, when restarting.
- 5 **Bring the pattern to counselling,** especially if the same wobble keeps recurring at the same point.

A distinction to carry

"Going back a step doesn't mean I've failed at change. It usually means I'm still in the process of it."

Practice Page — When You Notice the Pull

Use this after noticing yourself stuck, avoiding, or pulled two ways.

What is the change I'm ambivalent about?

What does the part of me that wants this actually want?

What is the part of me that resists actually trying to protect?

Which stage am I in right now, honestly?

What is the smallest true step available to me?

What would I bring to counselling?

A Week of Practice — Small Repetitions, Not a Test

Choose one practice only. Working with ambivalence is a skill built through repetition, not a single insight.

Day	A small experiment	What to notice
Day 1	Write an honest decisional balance for one specific change.	Whether writing it down changes how loud either side feels.
Day 2	Notice one moment of avoidance and name the feeling beneath it.	What you were actually trying to escape.
Day 3	Take the smallest possible version of a step you've been avoiding.	Whether shrinking the step changed the resistance.
Day 4	Ask what the resisting part of you is protecting.	Whether it's easier to hear that part with curiosity rather than frustration.
Day 5	Reduce one piece of friction ahead of time for tomorrow's step.	Whether starting felt any easier.
Day 6	Notice a wobble, if one happens, without treating it as failure.	What the wobble might be telling you about the plan.
Day 7	Review with compassion — what moved, even slightly.	Progress may look like noticing the pull sooner, not eliminating it.

Quick Reference — Five Questions for a Stuck Moment

Keep this close for the moment the pull feels strongest.

1. WHAT'S HERE?	Am I feeling the pull of approach, avoidance, or both?
2. WHAT STAGE?	Am I weighing this up, getting ready, or already acting?
3. WHAT'S PROTECTED?	What is the resisting part of me trying to keep safe?
4. WHAT'S SMALLER?	Is there a smaller step this pull might allow?
5. WHAT'S ONE STEP?	Not the whole plan — just the next honest move.

Remember

Feeling pulled in two directions doesn't mean the plan is wrong, or that you don't really want this. It usually means you're close enough to something real for both parts of you to have noticed.

Evidence & Notes — What Informed This Companion Guide

The language here is deliberately practical and non-diagnostic. It supports counselling; it does not replace individual formulation or clinical judgement.

Key learning from the research

When a goal has both appealing and threatening aspects, the pull to avoid it tends to intensify faster than the pull to approach it as a person draws closer — a long-standing finding in the psychology of motivational conflict.

Ambivalence about change is understood as a normal and expected part of the change process, not a sign of resistance or low motivation, and approaches that explore it openly tend to be more effective than approaches that argue against it.

Change tends to move through recognisable stages, and movement backward through these stages is a common, expected part of the process rather than evidence of failure.

Avoidance and procrastination are often better explained as prioritising short-term relief from an uncomfortable feeling over a longer-term goal, rather than as a lack of discipline.

Important limits

Not all "stuckness" is ambivalence in this sense — sometimes hesitation reflects a genuinely unsafe or unready situation, and that judgement deserves respect rather than being pushed past.

This model doesn't diagnose a particular condition or explain every instance of stuckness. Explore your own pattern tentatively and collaboratively.

If the change in question involves safety, health, housing, or a coercive relationship, practical support comes first — these practices assist that work but don't replace it.

Sources — Further Reading

Selected research and professional sources used to shape this guide.

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- Miller, W. R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd ed.). New York: Guilford Press.
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Using this alongside the other companion guides

When you notice the pull of ambivalence, let this guide help you ask what each part of you is actually protecting — rather than which part is right. Bring what you notice, including the uncertain parts, to counselling.