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**Psychological Withdrawal ("Lying Flat") Among University Students from
the Perspective of Self-Determination Theory: Mechanisms and Counselor-
Led Intervention Strategies**

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Abstract

Against the background of intensified academic competition, uncertain employment prospects, and increasingly diversified standards of success, some university students display a pattern of motivational withdrawal commonly described in Chinese public discourse as “lying flat.” This article conceptualizes psychological lying flat not as simple laziness, moral failure, or a clinical diagnosis, but as a context-sensitive form of defensive disengagement characterized by reduced goal commitment, avoidance of evaluative situations, diminished initiative, and the protection of self-worth through nonparticipation. Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT), the article proposes that this pattern can be understood as the cumulative result of frustration of the basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence frustration may generate perceived uncontrollability and helplessness; autonomy frustration may intensify controlled motivation and self-worth-protective withdrawal; and relatedness frustration may weaken social support, help-seeking, and the internalization of personally meaningful goals. These processes can form a self-reinforcing cycle in which withdrawal reduces opportunities for mastery and connection, thereby deepening need frustration. The article further analyzes three practical barriers faced by university counselors: the mismatch between grand educational narratives and students’ current motivational capacity, defensive resistance to relationship-building, and outcome-dominated evaluation systems that overlook incremental progress. An SDT-informed intervention framework is proposed that combines nonjudgmental relational engagement, graded mastery experiences, process-focused feedback, meaningful choice, clear structure, and professional referral when students present substantial psychological impairment. The framework offers a theoretically grounded and operationally feasible approach for moving university counseling from behavioral correction toward motivational support and developmental empowerment.

Keywords: self-determination theory; psychological lying flat; amotivation; basic psychological needs; university counselors; psychological education

1. Introduction

The expression “lying flat” (tangping) has become a visible term in contemporary Chinese discussions of youth motivation. In higher education, it is often used to describe students who reduce effort, avoid competition, disengage from long-term planning, or present an attitude of indifference toward academic and career development. Existing Chinese discussions have linked this phenomenon to competitive pressure, uncertainty, defensive avoidance, and changing youth values (Fu, 2024; Liu, 2024; Zheng, 2024). However, the term remains conceptually broad. It may refer to a temporary reduction in effort, a rhetorical rejection of excessive competition, a coping response to repeated frustration, or a more persistent pattern of motivational withdrawal. Treating all of these forms as equivalent risks both moralizing normal stress responses and overlooking students who require more structured support.

For the purposes of this article, psychological lying flat is defined as a nonclinical pattern of defensive motivational withdrawal in which students reduce goal commitment, avoid situations that may expose inadequacy or failure, and limit psychological investment in academic, social, or career-related tasks. This definition emphasizes three boundaries. First, psychological lying flat is not synonymous with laziness because it may emerge after sustained effort, repeated failure, or perceived lack of control. Second, it should not be treated as a psychiatric diagnosis; similar outward behaviors may arise from very different psychological conditions and therefore require careful assessment. Third, the behavior can have both protective and maladaptive functions. In the short term, withdrawal may reduce shame, anxiety, and exhaustion. Over time, however, it may restrict opportunities for mastery, social connection, and identity development.

Self-determination theory (SDT) provides a coherent framework for explaining why students become energized and persistent in some environments but passive or resistant in

others. SDT proposes that high-quality motivation and psychological functioning depend substantially on the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, or the experience of volition and self-endorsement; competence, or the experience of effectiveness and growing capability; and relatedness, or the experience of mutual care, belonging, and meaningful connection (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Importantly, contemporary SDT distinguishes low need satisfaction from active need frustration. A student may simply lack sufficient opportunities to feel competent, whereas competence frustration involves experiences of failure, inadequacy, or ineffectiveness. Similarly, autonomy frustration involves pressure and coercion, while relatedness frustration involves exclusion, rejection, or relational insecurity (Chen et al., 2015; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). This distinction is central to understanding psychological lying flat because persistent withdrawal is more likely when students experience not only an absence of support but repeated need-thwarting experiences.

This article develops an SDT-based account of the psychological mechanisms underlying lying-flat tendencies and translates that account into intervention strategies for university counselors. In the Chinese higher education context, counselors occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of student affairs, developmental guidance, educational management, crisis identification, and psychological support. Their proximity to students gives them opportunities to identify motivational deterioration early, but their effectiveness depends on whether intervention practices support or further frustrate students' basic psychological needs.

2. An SDT-Based Explanation of Psychological Lying Flat

2.1 Competence Frustration, Perceived Uncontrollability, and Helplessness

Competence refers to the need to experience oneself as capable of producing desired effects and making progress through interaction with the environment. University students encounter frequent evaluative situations, including examinations, scholarship selection, postgraduate admission, internships, competitions, and employment recruitment. When effort is repeatedly followed by failure, ambiguous feedback, or outcomes perceived as structurally unattainable, students may begin to doubt the instrumental value of action. The problem is not merely that they feel temporarily unsuccessful; rather, they may infer that their behavior has little influence over outcomes.

This process resembles learned helplessness, in which exposure to uncontrollable negative events weakens subsequent attempts to act even when some degree of control becomes available (Maier & Seligman, 2016). In student populations, helplessness may be reinforced by global and stable interpretations of setbacks, such as “I am fundamentally incapable” or “nothing I do will change the result.” Chinese educational discussions have similarly identified repeated frustration and negative attribution as important contributors to learned helplessness among students (Jin, 2019). Once these beliefs are consolidated, withdrawal can appear subjectively rational: reducing effort protects the student from investing further resources in an outcome that is expected to remain unchanged.

Competence frustration also interacts with self-efficacy. Students with weakened efficacy beliefs are less likely to select challenging goals, persist after setbacks, or interpret temporary difficulty as informative feedback (Bandura, 1997). Consequently, psychological lying flat may be maintained by a circular process: low perceived competence reduces action; reduced action limits mastery experiences; and the absence of mastery experiences further

confirms low competence. An effective intervention must therefore do more than encourage effort. It must restore credible experiences of controllability and progress.

2.2 Autonomy Frustration, Controlled Motivation, and Self-Worth Protection

Autonomy is not equivalent to independence or unrestricted freedom. Within SDT, autonomy refers to acting with a sense of volition and psychological ownership. Students may comply with externally imposed expectations while experiencing little personal endorsement of those expectations. A history of tightly controlled schooling, intense parental expectations, and narrow definitions of success can produce students who are behaviorally compliant but have limited experience identifying personally meaningful goals. When they enter a university environment characterized by greater choice and less direct supervision, they may lack the internalized values and self-regulatory skills needed to transform freedom into purposeful action.

Under conditions of autonomy frustration, students often experience motivation as pressure: they study to avoid criticism, compete to protect status, or pursue credentials primarily because significant others expect them to do so. Controlled motivation can produce short-term performance, but it is less likely than autonomous motivation to support sustained engagement, adaptive coping, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When externally prescribed goals become increasingly difficult, withdrawal may function as a rejection of the controlling system as well as an escape from the emotional costs of failing within it.

Self-worth theory further clarifies why deliberate nonparticipation can become psychologically attractive. When achievement is closely tied to personal worth, failure threatens not only a specific performance outcome but the individual's overall sense of value. Withholding effort allows a student to preserve an alternative explanation: "I failed because I did not try," rather than "I tried fully and was not capable." This self-worth-protective

strategy can reduce immediate shame but also prevents accurate feedback, skill development, and corrective experience (Covington, 1984). Thus, lying flat may represent a defensive attempt to maintain dignity under conditions in which both success and failure feel externally controlled.

2.3 Relatedness Frustration and the Erosion of Real-World Support

Relatedness concerns the need to feel cared for, understood, and significant to others. The broader psychological literature also identifies belonging as a fundamental human motivation with substantial implications for adjustment and well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). University students who lack reliable relationships with classmates, roommates, teachers, or family members may find it harder to regulate distress, seek assistance, and sustain commitment during setbacks. Digital communication may increase contact frequency without necessarily producing the mutual responsiveness and relational security required for genuine belonging.

Relatedness frustration can contribute to psychological lying flat in at least three ways. First, socially isolated students receive fewer opportunities for encouragement, informational support, and corrective feedback. Second, they are less likely to disclose difficulty before problems accumulate. Third, goals promoted by institutions are less likely to be internalized when students do not experience the institutional environment as respectful or caring. From an SDT perspective, people are more willing to adopt externally introduced values when those values are communicated within relationships that support autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When students experience counseling interactions as surveillance, criticism, or administrative control, even well-intended guidance may deepen withdrawal.

2.4 An Integrated Recursive Mechanism

The three needs should not be understood as isolated causes. They form an interacting motivational system. A student who repeatedly fails an examination may experience

competence frustration; if the examination is tied to a career path chosen primarily by parents, autonomy frustration is also present; if the student expects criticism rather than understanding, relatedness frustration reduces help-seeking. These combined experiences can shift motivation from autonomous engagement toward controlled compliance and eventually amotivation—a state in which the individual sees little connection between action and valued outcomes.

The present article therefore proposes a recursive model: need frustration increases perceived uncontrollability, defensive self-protection, and social disconnection; these processes promote withdrawal; withdrawal then reduces opportunities for mastery, meaningful choice, and supportive interaction; and the resulting deprivation intensifies need frustration. This model explains why simple exhortation often fails. The student's problem is not necessarily a lack of awareness that effort is socially desirable. Rather, the motivational conditions required for effort to feel possible, self-endorsed, and worthwhile have deteriorated.

3. Practical Difficulties in Counselor Intervention

3.1 The Mismatch Between Grand Narratives and Current Motivational Capacity

University education frequently relies on ideals, role models, long-term career planning, and narratives of social responsibility. These approaches can be valuable when students possess sufficient psychological resources to identify with the goals being presented. For students experiencing competence and autonomy frustration, however, highly ambitious messages may widen the perceived gap between their current state and the expected standard. A message intended to inspire may instead communicate inadequacy. Repetition of abstract expectations without addressing students' immediate sense of helplessness can therefore produce a motivational discontinuity between institutional goals and personal action.

The problem is not the presence of long-term ideals but their timing and mode of communication. Students in a withdrawn state often require proximal, credible, and personally meaningful entry points before they can engage with distant goals. When counselors begin with persuasion rather than assessment, they may overestimate the student's readiness for change and underestimate the role of need frustration.

3.2 Defensive Resistance and Weak Helping Alliances

Students who protect self-worth through withdrawal may interpret assistance as evidence that they are being judged, monitored, or treated as a problem. As a result, they may minimize difficulties, provide socially desirable answers, or agree verbally without behavioral follow-through. This resistance should not automatically be interpreted as disrespect or unwillingness. It may be a strategy for controlling exposure in a relationship where the student anticipates criticism.

Counselors also face structural obstacles. Large caseloads, administrative demands, and short contact windows encourage problem-focused conversations that move quickly toward advice. Yet trust is especially important when a student's relatedness need has been frustrated. Without a credible sense of respect and confidentiality, techniques such as goal setting or cognitive reframing may be experienced as additional pressure rather than support.

3.3 Outcome-Dominated Evaluation and the Absence of Proximal Reinforcement

Many university evaluation systems privilege visible outcomes such as grade point average, awards, leadership positions, certificates, and employment offers. These indicators are useful for some purposes, but they are poorly suited to detecting early recovery from motivational withdrawal. A student may make meaningful progress by attending class consistently, initiating one conversation, revising part of a résumé, or completing a modest weekly plan. If these changes are invisible within the formal evaluation system, the student receives little evidence that effort is producing movement.

The exclusive use of distal outcomes can also recreate the conditions that produced competence frustration. Effective support requires process-sensitive indicators and feedback loops that make incremental change observable. Goal-setting research emphasizes that specific goals and feedback can improve performance, but goals must be accepted, appropriately challenging, and connected to workable strategies (Locke & Latham, 2002). For withdrawn students, excessively difficult goals may confirm helplessness rather than build competence.

4. An SDT-Informed Counselor Intervention Framework

4.1 Restoring Relational Safety and Supporting Relatedness

The first task is not to correct behavior but to create a relationship in which the student can discuss behavior without humiliation. Counselors should adopt a nonjudgmental, curiosity-based stance and avoid labels that imply moral failure. Questions such as “Why have you given up?” are likely to intensify defensiveness. More effective alternatives include “What has recently felt most difficult to manage?” or “When did you begin to feel that effort was no longer worthwhile?” These formulations invite contextual information and communicate that withdrawal may have understandable antecedents.

Relational support should be consistent rather than crisis-dependent. Brief, predictable, low-pressure contact can be more effective than a single intensive conversation. Counselors can also strengthen supportive microenvironments within classes and residence halls by developing low-competition, interest-based, and cooperative activities. The purpose is not to compel sociability but to create accessible opportunities for reciprocal participation. Peer support should be voluntary, bounded, and supervised to prevent labeling or unwanted disclosure.

Relatedness support also requires accurate listening. Validation does not mean endorsing permanent withdrawal or agreeing that change is impossible. It means acknowledging the student's subjective experience before proposing alternatives. This distinction allows counselors to combine acceptance with developmental expectations.

4.2 Rebuilding Competence Through Graded Mastery and Process Feedback

Competence is rebuilt through successful interaction, not through reassurance alone. Counselors should work with students to convert distant goals into manageable actions that are specific enough to complete and meaningful enough to matter. A broad objective such as "prepare for employment" might be reduced to reviewing one job description, identifying two required skills, or revising one paragraph of a résumé. The appropriate size of a task depends on the student's current functioning; the goal should be challenging enough to produce a sense of accomplishment but not so difficult that failure is highly probable.

Feedback should focus on observable strategy, effort, and change rather than global praise. Statements such as "You completed the two actions you selected despite feeling uncertain" provide information about agency and persistence. By contrast, vague praise may feel insincere, and excessive rewards may shift attention back toward external control. A simple progress record can help students see patterns across time, but it should be jointly designed and used as a reflective tool rather than a compliance ledger.

Counselors should also normalize revision. A missed task is data about task difficulty, environmental barriers, or planning quality, not proof of personal incapacity. Reviewing why a plan failed and adjusting its scale can restore perceived controllability. Over time, repeated mastery experiences can strengthen self-efficacy and weaken the expectation that effort is futile (Bandura, 1997).

4.3 Supporting Autonomy Through Choice, Rationale, and Attributional Reframing

Autonomy-supportive intervention does not mean withdrawing guidance. Research in educational settings indicates that autonomy support and structure are complementary: students benefit when adults recognize their perspectives and provide meaningful choice while also communicating clear expectations, guidance, and feedback (Jang et al., 2010). Intervention should therefore offer bounded options rather than either coercion or complete ambiguity. For example, a student might choose between two forms of class participation, several time points for follow-up, or different pathways toward the same developmental objective.

When requirements cannot be changed, counselors should provide a credible rationale and acknowledge possible negative feelings. Explaining why a task matters, how it connects to the student's own values, and what flexibility remains can facilitate internalization. A large body of intervention research indicates that autonomy-supportive practices are learnable and can improve educationally relevant outcomes (Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Attributional reframing is also important. Counselors can help students separate a specific outcome from a global judgment of worth and examine controllable contributors such as preparation method, timing, information access, task selection, or help-seeking. The aim is not to insist that every outcome is individually controllable; structural constraints should be acknowledged realistically. Instead, the counselor and student identify the portion of the situation that remains open to influence. This preserves realism while preventing totalized helplessness.

4.4 A Stepped Implementation Process and Professional Boundaries

A practical intervention can be organized into five steps. First, identify the pattern and its functional impact without assuming a single cause. Second, formulate which psychological needs appear to be frustrated and in which contexts. Third, co-design one or

two low-burden actions that support relatedness, competence, or autonomy. Fourth, review progress using process indicators, including participation, task initiation, help-seeking, and perceived controllability. Fifth, revise the plan or coordinate additional services when the student's difficulties exceed the counselor's role.

Counselors should distinguish educational and motivational support from professional mental health treatment. Persistent functional impairment, severe emotional distress, or other significant clinical concerns require assessment and referral through appropriate university or community services. Referral should be framed as an expansion of support rather than a transfer of responsibility. The counselor may continue to provide practical and relational support while qualified professionals address clinical needs.

Intervention effectiveness should also be evaluated multidimensionally. Academic outcomes matter, but exclusive reliance on grades can conceal meaningful developmental change. Additional indicators may include basic psychological need satisfaction and frustration, autonomous motivation, engagement, help-seeking willingness, self-efficacy, goal completion, social connection, and subjective well-being. This broader evaluation system aligns the assessment of intervention with its theoretical mechanism.

5. Discussion

An SDT perspective changes the central question from "How can counselors make students stop lying flat?" to "What motivational conditions have made purposeful action difficult, and how can those conditions be repaired?" This shift does not excuse avoidance or eliminate expectations. It locates responsibility within an interaction between the student and the educational environment. Students remain active participants in change, while institutions and counselors are responsible for examining whether their practices support autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The framework also clarifies why isolated techniques may fail. Micro-goals without autonomy can become another checklist imposed by adults. Choice without structure can overwhelm students who already feel ineffective. Emotional acceptance without opportunities for mastery may provide comfort but leave helplessness unchanged. Effective intervention therefore requires coordinated support for all three needs, with emphasis adjusted to the student's primary pattern of frustration.

Several limitations should be noted. First, "psychological lying flat" is a culturally embedded and evolving expression rather than a standardized psychological construct. Its boundaries overlap with academic disengagement, amotivation, burnout, avoidance coping, and identity-related uncertainty. Future research should develop and validate measures that distinguish attitudes, behaviors, duration, context, and functional impairment. Second, the proposed recursive model is conceptual and should be tested using longitudinal and experience-sampling designs. Third, students are unlikely to form a homogeneous group. Person-centered research may identify profiles characterized by different combinations of competence, autonomy, and relatedness frustration. Finally, counselor-led programs should be evaluated through pilot studies that assess implementation fidelity, student acceptability, unintended effects, and longer-term outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the framework offers a practical advantage: it translates a broad social label into assessable motivational processes. This allows counselors to avoid both moral condemnation and indiscriminate pathologization. It also creates specific intervention targets that can be observed, discussed, and revised.

6. Conclusion

Psychological lying flat among university students can be understood as a defensive pattern of withdrawal that emerges when action no longer feels effective, self-endorsed, or relationally supported. From the perspective of self-determination theory, frustration of

competence, autonomy, and relatedness may generate helplessness, controlled motivation, self-worth protection, and social disconnection. These mechanisms can reinforce one another and make conventional exhortation ineffective.

University counselors can respond more effectively by moving from behavioral correction toward motivational reconstruction. Nonjudgmental relationship-building supports relatedness; graded mastery and process feedback restore competence; and meaningful choice, rationale, and shared decision-making support autonomy. When combined with clear structure, multidimensional evaluation, and appropriate professional referral, these strategies provide a realistic pathway for helping students recover agency and rebuild engagement with university life and personal development.

Declarations

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