

What Matters Most? Exploring Your Values

What are my values?

Values come from our true selves. They are the answers that come from asking ourselves “What matters most to me?” Values may be carried with us throughout our lives, or they may change over time. Values are deeply personal and vary from person to person. Some values may be more abstract, like loyalty or honesty, while others are more concrete, such as spending time with my family or committing to daily prayer. Sometimes it is easy to stay true to our values. However, sometimes events happen in our lives that cause us to shift our focus away from our values.

This handout is about ways to identify your values, recognize challenges in living from your values, and explore how best to match up your life and values.

How do I know what matters most to me?

Consider doing one or more of the following exercises:

1) “The Sweet Spot” Exercise:¹

Think of a time when you felt the “sweetness” of life. Perhaps you felt a real appreciation for a loved one. Perhaps you noticed a connection with your community or environment. Call to mind this moment as if it were going on right now. Notice specific sounds, smells, colors, etc, as you think about it.

What does your experience of this moment say about what matters most to you?

In this moment, what was your relationship to yourself, those around you, and/or your environment?

How would you live your life in the future based on this moment?

2) The 90th Birthday Exercise:

Imagine yourself at your 90th birthday party. All around you are the people your life has touched.

What would you like people to say about you? What would people say about the life you led? How would you like to be remembered? (In this exercise, there is no limit to what people may remember about you. People may say words that you would like to hear about yourself, even if you feel that you have not yet lived out the values that would make them say that.)

3) Values in Different Areas of Life:

Consider the following areas of your life. Write down what matters most to you about it and/or what you value in each area. Notice if you sense resistance when doing this exercise. If the resistance is too much, you may choose to skip to another “area of life.” If it feels okay for you, perhaps consider the resistance as an opportunity to be curious about that particular “area of life.”

1. Family relationships



2. Health

3. Community

4. Friends/Social Relationships

5. Couples/Romantic Relationships

6. Work/Career



7. Personal Growth and Development

8. Spirituality/Faith/Religion

9. Recreation/Leisure Time

Being aware of my values sounds great, but it is really hard to keep them in mind during my everyday life!

Consider the next exercise as a way of learning about the challenges to your values. Note that challenges may be both external (things that come from your surroundings, like lack of time, work demands, family obligations, or financial concerns) and internal (things that come from inside you, like fear, stress, or self-doubt). Also notice if a value may be present in one area of your life, but not in another.

List 5 values that you may have written down in the earlier exercises. To the right of each value, write down the challenges that keep you from living out that particular value. See if you can be kind to yourself as you reflect on the challenges.

Value

Challenges

(1) _____



(2) _____

(3) _____

(4) _____

(5) _____

How do I work with the challenges?

Often the way we live our lives does not match up with our values. The following “Values Conflict” exercise introduces a way of working with the challenges.²

1. Think of a value that matters to you most. This value may or may not have been one you wrote down earlier in this handout. Write down this value below:

Value #1: _____

2. Describe a real life situation in which you acted in a way that was against this value.

3. When that happened, what was another value that ended up being more important to you? Write down this value below:

Value #2: _____

4. In this situation, what did you gain by choosing Value #2 over Value #1?



5. What did you NOT gain?

6. In the future, is there a way to honor BOTH values?
If yes, how?

If no, why not?

7. Is one of these two values more important than the other? Write your thoughts below.

How do I honor these values in my life more often?

We have spent time figuring out our values and the challenges to living them out. It takes practice to bring these values into our lives more fully. If we set goals for a certain value, it is more likely to become a part of our lives. To start, practice setting goals and taking action to reach these goals using this worksheet.³ An example is provided.

Value: Time to connect with family and friends
Goal: Spend more time with family and friends
Behavior #1: Take my children to the zoo once a month
Behavior #2: Call my parents twice per week
Behavior #3: Have dinner once per week with a friend

Value: _____

Goal: _____

Behavior #1: _____

Behavior #2: _____

Behavior #3: _____



Value: _____
Goal: _____
Behavior #1: _____
Behavior #2: _____
Behavior #3: _____

Value: _____
Goal: _____
Behavior #1: _____
Behavior #2: _____
Behavior #3: _____

For you to consider:

- When was the last time you reflected on your values?
- What values are most important in your life right now?
- What may or may not be preventing your values from matching up with your recent behaviors?
- How might living by your values affect your overall health and well-being?
- Is it possible to be kind towards yourself even when you do not follow your values as much as you would like?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Carnegie Mellon University	Exercises for exploring personal values	https://www.cmu.edu/career/documents/my-career-path-activities/values-exercise.pdf
Values.com	Inspirational quotes related to common human values	https://www.values.com/teaching-values

This handout was adapted for the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program from the original written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation (OPCC&CT)) by Vincent Minichiello, MD, Assistant Professor and Integrative Health Physician, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on the document for clinicians, "Values," written by Shilagh A. Mirgain, PhD, and by Janice Singles, PsyD.

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References

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2. Harris R. *ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications; 2009.
3. Vowles KE, Sorrell JR. Life with chronic pain: an acceptance-based approach. Therapist Guide and Patient Workbook. 2008. http://contextualscience.org/files/CP_Acceptance_Manual_09.2008.pdf. Accessed March 15, 2014.