

Values

What are values?

The decisions we make everyday are driven by our personal values - like an internal compass that tells us which direction to head. As we grow up we observe the values of others (e.g., family, friends, school, society) and decide which ones to accept as our own (e.g., compassion, freedom, adventure) and which ones are not as important to us (e.g., routine, competition, tradition).

Why are values important?

Values are a motivating force and the source of wellbeing. Understanding what people stand for in life is an incredibly powerful behaviour change agent. For example, a socially phobic client is more likely to enter into a social situation, despite their uncomfortable feelings, if it is in service of a core value, such as building connection and intimacy with important people in their life.

Living a life that is in congruence with your values (i.e., when your behaviour or actions match your core values) leads to greater sense of autonomy, happiness and wellbeing. When you act in ways that do not match your core values you often feel uncomfortable or dissatisfied.

Knowing your values can also help guide your decision making and life choices. Knowing what is most important to you helps you make small everyday decisions as well as bigger life choices. Like, which charity to donate to or which job to take.

Identifying your own values

Often people skip the process of active recognition and sorting of personal values, and just accept those values that were ingrained in them by parents, peers or society.

Or they do not realise that their values have changed in priority over time, especially after major life transitions e.g., divorce, parenting, retirement. This can lead to thinking and acting in ways that are ultimately dissatisfying.

Defining your own personal values requires self-reflection and exploration. Values are subjective, making it difficult to provide a definitive list. Your own interpretation of a value is what gives them their power, and helps you decide how to act in ways that best reflect them.

There are multiple methods to help people identify their values. It starts by having your own values vocabulary. Shifting our values from the implicit to the explicit, from the sensed to the know. Check out the resource section for tools to help get you started.

Goals versus Values

While values underpin our goals and drive our behaviour, they are not the same thing. Goals have an end point, whereas values are always with us and require constant polishing. Your goal may be to finish your Uni degree, the underpinning value that drives this may be achievement or curiosity or security (or a combination). One day you will achieve your goal, and replace it with a new one. While goals come and go, our values stay fairly constant and are with us for life.

Just because you haven't achieved a particular goal just yet, doesn't mean you are not living a values congruent life. As long as you are taking small steps each day toward your values.

Whose values are these?

A crucial consideration in your values exploration is that sometimes we unintentionally adopt peer, family or community values and live them without reflection. Now if these values truly reflect your own, then you are in luck. However, living another person's values in the long term leads to distress and dissatisfaction. So, worth checking in with yourself - whose values are you living?

Do values change?

While our values remain relatively constant in adulthood, moments of transition (e.g., leaving home, marriage, parenthood, divorce, job change, retirement) can also prompt a shift in values or values priority. Consequently it is helpful to regularly (e.g., every 6 months) consciously reflect on your values, and especially during times of change, transition or ongoing dissatisfaction in your life.

Social behaviour and trust

Once you have a values vocabulary it becomes easier to both spot values in yourself, as well as spot values incongruence - when your espoused values are not matched by your actions. This is important for our own wellbeing but also our social functioning. At the social level, relationships with others are bound and coordinated by the values we endorse. Knowing others' values aids in easier social interaction by allowing a sense of predictability, which reduces group tension or conflict. We know that people who act in ways which support others' values obtain increased trust (Devos, Spini, & Schwartz, 2002).

Just Do It

The concept of feeling bad, but still doing good is reflected in one of the world's most successful marketing campaigns - Just Do It. The team behind this Nike campaign know that humans struggle with thoughts and feelings that steer them away from their health and fitness behaviour - feeling unmotivated and thinking "I can't be bothered; it's cold out there; I will do it tomorrow." They use "Just Do It" as a values-based call to action. They ask you to unhook from these common human thoughts and feelings and stay committed to your health values.

Mindfulness and values

Research by Brown and Ryan (2003) found that individuals who experience mindfulness were more likely to act in ways that were congruent with their actual values and interests. Their research highlighted how our happiness is improved as a result of this process.

By practicing mindfulness we not only learn about ourselves, including what we value and what provides meaning in our lives, we also develop the skills to live more consciously and act in ways that align with our values.

RESOURCES

Mobile Apps

Values Ink. A free interactive card sorting task that helps you identify and explore your core life values.

ACT Companion. The acceptance and commitment therapy companion app that has a section exploring life values.

Books

The Happiness Trap: Stop struggling and start living, by Dr Russ Harris.

ACT with Love, by Russ Harris, explores values as they relate to relationships.

Websites

www.lifevaluesinventory.org
www.actmindfully.com.au
www.workonwellbeing.com

"Values are not just words, values are what we live by. They are about the causes that we champion and the people we fight for." Senator John Kerry