

What Are Your Values? Deciding What's Important in Life

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How do you define your values?

Your values are the things that you believe ***are important in the way you live and work***. They (should) determine your priorities, and, deep down, they're probably the measures you use to tell if your life is turning out the way you want it to.

When the things that you do and the way you behave match your values, life is usually good – you're satisfied and content. But when these don't align with your personal values, that's when things feel ... wrong, out of step. This can be a real source of unhappiness.

This is why making a conscious effort to identify your values is so important.

How Values Help You

Values exist, whether you recognize them or not. Life can be much easier when you acknowledge your values – and when you make plans and decisions that honour them.

If you value **Family**, but you have to work 70-hour weeks in your job or work away a lot, you will feel internal stress and conflict. If making money is not especially important to you then think about what is.

When you understand your own values, you can use them to make decisions about how to live your life, and you can answer questions like:

- What job should I pursue?
- Should I accept a promotion if it will mean being far away from family/friends?
- Should I start my own business?
- Should I compromise or stick firmly to my principles?
- Should I follow tradition, do what my parents want me to do or behave as my friends and family have always done or should I travel down a new path?

So, take the time to understand your priorities in life and it may help you to determine the best direction for you and your life goals

Tip: Values are usually fairly stable but they are not fixed and do not have strict limits or boundaries. As you move through life your values may change. For example, when you start your career, success - measured by money and status - might be a top priority. But after you have a family, work-life balance may be what you value more.

As your definition of success changes, so do your personal values. This is why keeping in touch with your values is a lifelong exercise. You should continuously revisit this, especially if you start to feel unbalanced ... and you can't quite figure out why.

Values that were important in the past may not be relevant now.

Defining Your Values

When you define your personal values, you discover what's truly important to you. A good way of starting to do this is to look back on your life – to identify when you felt really good, and really confident that you were making good choices.

Step 1: Identify the times when you were happiest

Find examples from both your career and personal life. This will ensure some balance in your answers.

- What were you doing?
- Were you with other people? Who?
- What other factors contributed to your happiness?

Step 2: Identify the times when you were most proud

Use examples from your career and personal life.

- Why were you proud?
- Did other people share your pride? Who?
- What other factors contributed to your feelings of pride?

Step 3: Identify the times when you were most fulfilled and satisfied

Again, use both work and personal examples.

- What need or desire was fulfilled?
- How and why did the experience give your life meaning?
- What other factors contributed to your feelings of fulfillment?

Step 4: Determine your top values, based on your experiences of happiness, pride and fulfillment

Why is each experience truly important and memorable? Use the following list of common personal values to help you get started – and aim for about 10 top values. (As you work through, you may find that some of these naturally combine. For instance, if you value philanthropy, community, and generosity, you might say that service to others is one of your top values.)

| | | |
|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Accountability | Equality | My Family |
| Accuracy | Excellence | My Faith/Religion |
| Achievement | Excitement | Perfection |
| Adventurousness | Expertise | Piety |
| Altruism | Exploration | Positivity |
| Ambition | Expressiveness | Practicality |
| Assertiveness | Fairness | Preparedness |
| Balance | Faith | Professionalism |
| Being the best | Fidelity | Prudence |
| Belonging | Fitness | Quality-orientation |
| Boldness | Fluency | Reliability |
| Calmness | Focus | Resourcefulness |
| Carefulness | Freedom | Restraint |
| Challenge | Fun | Results-oriented |
| Cheerfulness | Generosity | Rigor |
| Clear-mindedness | Goodness | Security |
| Commitment | Grace | Self-actualization |
| Community | Growth | Self-control |
| Compassion | Happiness | Selflessness |
| Competitiveness | Hard Work | Self-reliance |
| Consistency | Health | Sensitivity |
| Contentment | Helping Society | Serenity |
| Continuous Improvement | Honesty | Service |
| Contribution | Honor | Shrewdness |
| Control | Humility | Simplicity |
| Cooperation | Independence | Soundness |
| Correctness | Ingenuity | Speed |
| Courtesy | Inner Harmony | Spontaneity |
| Creativity | Inquisitiveness | Stability |
| Curiosity | Insightfulness | Strategic |
| Decisiveness | Intelligence | Strength |
| Democracy | Intellectual Status | Structure |
| Dependability | Intuition | Success |
| Determination | Joy | Support |
| Devoutness | Justice | Teamwork |
| Diligence | Leadership | Temperance |
| Discipline | Legacy | Thankfulness |
| Discretion | Love | Thoroughness |
| Diversity | Loyalty | Thoughtfulness |
| Dynamism | Making a difference | Timeliness |
| Economy | Mastery | Tolerance |
| Effectiveness | Merit | Traditionalism |
| Efficiency | Obedience | Trustworthiness |
| Elegance | Openness | Truth-seeking |
| Empathy | Order | Understanding |
| Enjoyment | | Uniqueness |

Enthusiasm
Equality

Originality
Patriotism

Unity
Usefulness
Vision
Vitality

Step 5: Prioritize your top values

This step is probably the most difficult, because you'll have to look deep inside yourself. It's also the most important step, because, when making a decision, you'll have to choose between solutions that may satisfy different values. This is when you must know which value is more important to you.

- Write down your top values, not in any particular order.
- Look at the first two values and ask yourself, "If I could satisfy only one of these, which would I choose?" It might help to visualize a situation in which you would have to make that choice. For example, if you compare the values of service and stability, imagine that you must decide whether to sell your house and move to another country to do valuable foreign aid work, or keep your house and volunteer to do charity work closer to home.
- Keep working through the list, by comparing each value with each other value, until your list is in the correct order.

Tip:

If you have a tough time identifying what is most important to you, ***you may wish to put a score (say out of ten) against the values that appeal to you.*** Since it is so important to identify and prioritize your values, investing your time in this step is definitely worth it.

Step 6: Reaffirm your values

Check your top-priority values; make sure they fit with your life and your vision for yourself.

- Do these values make you feel good about yourself?
- Are you proud of your top three values?
- Would you be comfortable/proud telling your values to people you respect and admire?
- Do these values represent things you would support, even if your choice isn't popular?

When you it comes then to making decisions you can be sure to keep your sense of integrity and what you know is right, and approach decisions with confidence and clarity. You'll also know that what you're doing feels right for you. Making value-based choices may not always be easy. However, making a choice that you know is right is a lot less difficult in the long run.

Key Points

Identifying and understanding your values is a challenging and important exercise. Your personal values are a central part of who you are – and who you want to be. By becoming more aware of these important factors in your life, you can use them as a guide to make the best choice in any situation.

Some of life's decisions are really about determining what you value most. When many options seem reasonable, it's helpful and comforting to rely on your values – and use them as a strong guiding force to point you in the right direction.