

VALUES EXERCISE

Values

Having values is like having a North Star, even if you occasionally get caught in a storm, you'll soon find yourself pointed in the right direction. Having values means that disappointments, regrets, conflicts, losses, and surprises in your life don't take away your life's greater meaning and purpose.

Being guided by values, as opposed to goals, allows you to look back on your life with a sense of fulfillment and pride. You would be able to tell a story of who you were, and what you were about. Think of a compelling biography you've read. Was it a list of tasks accomplished, or a story of someone exploring something they believed in?

Your North Star. Something you believe in to offer a greater direction for your life. Some people value social cohesion, some value knowledge, or creative productivity, or service to others, or connection to nature, or any number of things that provide a philosophy and guide the things they do. Your North Star represents your life's values.

How do I figure out what my values are?

Knowing your values is easier said than done. Many of us have never even given thought to our values, much less made a systematic effort to define them. The great thing about values is that they're evergreen. They're also flexible, changing with you as you get older and wiser and more self-aware.

But it's never too late. The great thing about values is that they're evergreen. They're also flexible, changing with you as you get older and wiser and more self-aware. This means you can and should revisit your values at any age. And it means "no pressure!"

Defining your values isn't a riddle with only one right answer—there are many answers, and you get to decide what they are. Here's how to get started.

Step 1: Do a values card sort

It's often easiest to start when you have some inspiration. To reflect on our values, I love this values exercise. It's a deck of 100 printable cards, each with a value on it. You can also add your own if a value you have doesn't appear on the list.

The exercise is to shuffle the cards, and then go through the deck. For each value, you place it under the category of either “Not important to me,” “Somewhat important to me,” “Important to me,” “Very important to me,” or “Most important to me.” Remember, there are no wrong answers. Be honest and take your time.

https://www.motivationalinterviewing.org/sites/default/files/valuescardsort_0.pdf

Values Card Sort Link

Step 2: Make sure what you’ve identified really are values, not goals or obligations

It’s easy to revert to making goals or to-do lists—that’s what we’re all taught to do to make progress in our lives. So make sure any values you’ve brainstormed are really values. Here are some quick checks:

- **Values are usually single words (or occasionally a two-word phrase).** Values are, by nature, more abstract and vague. If your “value” is a whole phrase or includes specific details (like “Donate X number of dollars to charity”), then it is a goal, not a value.
- **Values cannot be reached as a milestone.** If an item could conceivably be marked with “mission accomplished” (like “Run a marathon”), then it’s a goal, not a value.
- **Values come from within.** Your upbringing and culture shape your values, but ultimately, your values are your own. Look at each value in your “Very important” and “Most important” piles and ask yourself where it comes from. Does it pluck a chord deep within, or is it more something you feel you *should* have as a value?

Step 3: Rate each value’s importance versus your current alignment with it

Once you have a handful of solid values identified, rate the importance of each on a scale from one to ten, with one being the least important and ten being the most important. It’s okay for all of them to be high on the scale—after all, you’ve already whittled them down from a list of 100 or more. But try to be very thoughtful and honest with your ratings.

Then, set everything aside for a day or two and come back to your list of values with fresh eyes. Without looking at your ratings of how important they are, now you will rate yourself on how well aligned you are with each value on the same scale. For example, if you value curiosity, but you know you haven’t read any new books, looked into new hobbies, or explored anything new for a while, rate yourself modestly. But if you’ve been

getting your hands on everything related to space exploration because you've been curious about it, rate yourself highly.

The moment of truth—and the beginning of growth—is when you compare the importance and alignment ratings side by side. Look for big discrepancies in both directions. Perhaps you value friendship at a ten, but your alignment rating is a five because you've been too busy to keep in touch. This is a value you want to work on.

It's also possible that you're working harder than you should on a value. If you rated academic achievement at a six but you've been studying at a ten to the detriment of other activities, then it's time to relax and decrease your effort on this value.

<https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/health-fitness/mental-health/meaningful-life-values>