

Values

How would you define your values? Before you answer this question, you need to know what, in general, values are.

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. This can be a real source of unhappiness.

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

How Values Help You

If you value family, but you must work 70-hour weeks in your job, will you feel internal stress and conflict? And if you don't value competition, and you work in a highly competitive sales environment, are you likely to be satisfied with your job?

In these types of situations, understanding your values can really help. When you know your own values, you can use them to make decisions about how to live your life, and you can answer questions like these:

- What job should I pursue?
- Should I accept this promotion?
- Should I start my own business?
- Should I compromise, or be firm with my position?
- Should I follow tradition, or travel down a new path?

Tip:

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 later, work-life balance may be what you value more.

As your definition of success changes, so do your personal values. Therefore, 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.

As you go through the exercise below, bear in mind that values that were important in the past may not be relevant now.

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

Step 5: Prioritise 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 visualise 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.

Step 6: Reaffirm your values

Check your top-priority values, and make sure that 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 and proud to tell your values to people you respect and admire?
- Do these values represent things you would support, even if your choice isn't popular, and it puts you in the minority?

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.