

Know and Live your Values: Exercises

“Who are you?”

Your answer to this question might be your name, your job or field of study, and perhaps some details about your family, nationality, background, ethnicity, or identity.

These are all relevant aspects of who we are. And yet, truly knowing who we are means going deeper than the external markers. It means getting clear on what drives us. What matters to us. The things that make life worth living for us.

Getting clear on your values is a key tool for increasing your self-knowledge. That’s what these exercises are all about.

What Are Values?

Values are the **fundamental beliefs and ideas you have that guide your attitudes and actions**. Values reflect your unique, individual spark and help you decide what in life is important to you, and what is not.

Your values are your guides along the path of life. Guided by your values, you can trust the steps you take forward.

When you consistently honor your values, you are more likely to feel fulfilled. When you don’t, it becomes easier to disconnect from yourself and feel like you’re faking it. You might find yourself pulled to escape into unhelpful habits or behaviors, rather than the growth, change and acceptance that leads to contentment.

“Values reflect our unique, individual essence.”

Your values are entirely your own. Sure, they probably didn’t come out of thin air: they might be influenced by your upbringing and education, your family, friends or role models, and the norms and traditions in the society in which you grew up.

Sometimes it helps to ask our friends for input as to what our values might be. Their objectivity and generosity can be valuable. And yet, ultimately the only person who can accurately define your values is you.

Becoming clear on your values helps you:

- Act with self-respect
- Get clear on what you want
- Ease decision making
- Balance competing interests

- Be better equipped to handle difficult situations
- Create clearer boundaries
- Feel more empowered and authentic in your life
- Let go of what does not matter to you
- Increase self-awareness and self-confidence
- Find (and re-find) focus and motivation when working towards goals

Exercise: Learn your Values

Before we delve in to getting clear on your values, let's set the stage for great results.

1. Take time

These are your values, not the kind of food you are ordering for dinner, so honor their importance by taking some time. Block an hour or two and find a place that feels both inspiring and relaxing. Grab a notebook and a pen and put your phone on flight mode.

2. Commit to the process

The list of values you'll find below is long and might seem daunting — and that's exactly the point. Think about what each of these words represents to you, and whether it aligns with who you really are. It's easy to get overwhelmed and distracted. Persist.

3. Share the process with friends (optional)

It doesn't work for everyone, but many people benefit from doing this exercise together with a friend or in a small group. You might get together over coffee in person or online. You go through the inspirational questions, then each formulate your own list of values. Afterwards, you share your values in this safe, connected space. Often, discussing your values with others helps you articulate your values more clearly.

4. Approach mindfully

This means two things: not overthinking, while also being discerning. For example, Hailey told me that she really wanted to put "environmentalism" on her list, because she loves the outdoors and believes in environmental activism. But when she checked in with whether this was a core value of hers, she realized it was not. "I *like* a lot of the values that didn't end up on my list. But my core values reflect who I am and what matters to me. They feel deeply authentic, like they are part of my soul."

Step 1: Get inspired

Reflecting on these questions will get you in the right zone to accurately identify your values. Writing down your answers helps a lot, so jot some notes.

1. Think of three or four people you admire. They can be famous or not, dead or alive. What are the **qualities** that you admire in those people? Write down a few for each person.
2. What are the **peak moments** in your life? What was it about these experiences that made them so meaningful for you?
3. Which activities make you feel like you are in **flow**, lost in the moment, where time becomes irrelevant? (They can be something you do regularly, or something you did once, maybe even long ago.)
4. Which **conversation topics** make your heart sing? What are the subjects of the **online articles** you always click on? What are the topics of the **books or magazines** you are drawn to?
5. What are your most important **possessions**? What do they mean to you?
6. What did you love to do as a little kid? What fascinated you? Which **talents, skills and abilities** have always come naturally to you?
7. You're at a café and you overhear the person next to you describing their life. It sounds so incredible that you feel **envious**. What is that person saying: how are they describing their life? Which specific aspects of their life prick your ears most? What is it about their life that sounds most amazing to you?

Step 2: Select your values

at the list below. Write down each of the values that really matter to you. If any are missing, add them as well.

You might note that family, friends, and other relationships are not included on the list. These are basic human needs, so they will be important for pretty much everyone. In your list of values, you're focusing on aspects of life that are important to you beyond specific relationships.

Abundance	Fitness	Peace
Adventure	Flexibility	Personal Growth
Advocacy	Flow	Playfulness
Ambition	Food	Politics
Animals	Freedom	Popularity
Anti-racism	Fun	Positivity
Art	Generosity	Power
Authenticity	Goodness	Practicality

Autonomy	Grace	Productivity
Balance	Gratitude	Professionalism
Beauty	Growth	Progress
Being outdoors	Happiness	Purpose
Being the best	Having influence	Recognition
Challenge	Health (mental / physical)	Reliability
Charity	Helping Others	Religion
Communication	Honesty	Resilience
Community	Humility	Respect
Compassion	Humor	Risk taking
Connection	Impact	Security
Contentedness	Imagination	Self-awareness
Contribution	Inclusivity	Self-improvement
Courage	Independence	Service
Creativity	Indigenous rights	Sharing knowledge
Critical thinking	Innovation	Simplicity
Culture	Inspiration	Solitude
Curiosity	Integrity	Spirituality
Dedication	Intelligence	Spontaneity
Design	Intuition	Sport
Determination	Joy	Stability
Discipline	Justice	Standing out
Discovery	Kindness	Status
Diversity	Leadership	Sustainability
Education	Learning	Tolerance
Efficiency	LGBTQIA+ rights	Tradition
Empathy	Logic	Transparency
Empowerment	Love	Travel
Environmentalism	Loyalty	Trust
Equity	Making a difference	Uniqueness
Ethics	Management	Variety
Excellence	Mindfulness	Vision
Excitement	Money	Volunteering
Exercise	Motivation	Wealth
Experience	Multiculturalism	Winning
Exploring	Music	Wisdom
Fairness	Nature	Wonder
Faith	Nutrition	Working alone
Fame	Open-mindedness	Working with different cultures
Fearlessness	Optimism	Working with others
Feminism	Originality	Working with people in need
Financial stability	Passion	

Fig. 1. Master list of values and priorities.

Great! Now you have your **values shortlist**.

Step 3: Cull

Scan your shortlist and remove any that are not essential. They might fall in the category 'nice to have', but not qualify as key. Don't spend too long on this — just weed out the obvious excess.

Step 4: Chunk

Look at your list, and you'll soon notice that some of the terms are related to one another. For example, for me, the values *adventure*, *freedom* and *independence* felt similar, as if they were buddies. Group your terms together, into three to five (no more than five!) key groups.

Step 5: Name Your Values

Now, give each of the groups a name that covers the theme — make the words you use imaginative, evocative, and personally inspiring to you. For example, I named the group I mentioned above *Freedom* because that felt like a neat summary of the vibe of those terms.

And that's it! That's your list of values! Yay!

Write the list down separately, in large print, and take a few moments to absorb your values. Pop them on a post-it and stick it to your fridge or bathroom mirror, or maybe save the list as your phone's screensaver so you get a frequent reminder of what your values are.

Exercise: How you live your values today

Your values are not lofty, idealistic concepts. In fact, you are already living your values in some way, shape or form. This exercise is designed to get you clear on how you are living your values as we speak.

For each of your values write down at least one way you are currently living, or have recently lived, that value.

It does not need to be something you actively do every day. It's about seeing signs that even before you had named your values, they were already guiding you in some way.

Perhaps you helped someone reach something on the top shelf at the grocery store yesterday (helping others, kindness), you explained a math equation to your nephew (education, knowledge), you go for a walk in a park near your house each weekend with a friend (being in nature, fun, connection), or you recently handled a difficult situation with aplomb (grace, courage).

Often, your values have been cropping up in your life, without you even being aware.

Exercise: How you live your values tomorrow

Now let's look at how you want to live your values into the future. Grab a pen and paper and take some time to reflect. The less distractions, the deeper and fuller your responses will be, so keep that phone on flight mode.

1. What will life **look like** in a year or two from now, when you are living in strong alignment with your values?

2. Jot down a **goal** you have — something that relates to one of your values — and the timeframe in which you want to achieve it. Pick a goal that excites you and doesn't overwhelm you.
3. **Imagine** how it will feel when you have achieved your goal. Be as specific and visual as you can. What will have changed? What will *not* have changed?
4. What needs to happen for you to achieve that goal in that timeframe? If you have a goal you want to manifest in six months, **map out** what needs to happen in five months, four, three, two months and one month from now. What are the steps you need to take towards your goal, and when?
5. What can you do today, and commit to doing **daily**, that will set this goal in motion? Who can you enlist to help you along the path? How can you create **accountability** for yourself, to help with motivation in the tougher moments?

Your most important relationship is with yourself

Knowing your values, seeing how you already live your values, and working towards goals that align with your values, is a great start to building your self-knowledge.

While there are aspects of who you are that will feel fairly fundamental and unchanging, as humans we can also go through intense periods of change. Times of uncertainty, sorrow or joy can prompt us to reassess what matters to us. There might be times where you strongly sense that one or more of your values have changed. This is totally okay. Your values are yours.

Remind yourself frequently of what your values are (I like to make sure I can always recite mine on demand!). And check in with your values every six months or so. Do they still resonate for you? Is it time to revisit the list, and see if one or more of your values wants to be replaced? If they still feel right, that's great, too.

As humans we are constantly changing, which makes self-knowledge a life-long process. It's also one of the most interesting and rewarding processes I can imagine.

Knowing your values can give you a strong sense of what matters to you, and what does not. This is helpful, if not essential, for setting and keeping healthy boundaries, making decisions, and living authentically. It also enables you to protect that precious, unique spark of yours.

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