

Values Education - Part I

INTRODUCTION

If you have been to therapy or treatment, you've likely heard the term 'values' thrown around. Values are an integral part of leading a happy and meaningful life, but many of us walk through life without knowing our values, or even understanding what values actually are. Without reading on, take a moment to try to create your own definition of a value.

...

Surprisingly difficult, no?

This is actually one of the more common pitfalls of therapy: we have a lot of words that are understood semantically, but don't really mean anything until we define them in context. Linguistically, we might refer to these words as "High-level Abstractions" - they are simple words to describe complex concepts, and they can bear little meaning unless we define them in a social context.

So, in the context of therapy, let's start by defining what values are **not**.

VALUES ARE NOT...

1. Values are not Feelings

You don't have to feel brave to value bravery. You can value connection even when you feel lonely. Feelings are temporary and do not inform our identity. Values are about action even when feelings are challenging.

2. Values are not goals.

A Goal is an outcome. Getting an A on the test, landing a big client, or finding a loving partner don't necessarily have anything to do with values, nor might they have anything to do with long-term happiness and fulfillment. Goals are typically concrete, external things that we can check off a list.

While goals are an important part of leading a meaningful life, the reward from completing a goal is fleeting and there's no guarantee that we will achieve the goal. Many people struggle to find long-term happiness and fulfillment because they focus only on achieving their goals, which feels great when that goal is achieved, but ultimately leads to feeling empty and needing to search for the next thing to achieve. *The reward is the completion of the goal, not necessarily in the actions to get there.*

3. Values are not ideals.

Ideals are prescriptive: they are a set of culturally defined expectations for the "ideal" type of person. In the US, working hard or being independent are common ideals. This is probably the biggest misunderstanding about values: they are not what we think they *should* be. Living only in alignment with ideals is a fantastic recipe for a life of internal disappointment and strife because they are often unattainable and determined externally as a standard for which people should strive.

Values and ideals are not mutually exclusive, but many individuals confuse their values with ideals because it can be deeply uncomfortable to accept that what is important to them may go against the ideals instilled in them by their culture, family, friends, workplace, etc. *The reward for living by ideals*

comes from external validation. This may lead individuals to perform the ideals for others to seek validation, but validation is not guaranteed and performing ideals for others tends to look and feel disingenuous.

Examples:

The Ideal Partner/Spouse values self-sacrifice: "I should always put my partner's needs before my own" or "We should never argue if we truly love each other."

The Ideal Man values strength: "Real men don't cry" or "A man should be able to protect his family."

The Ideal Self-Reliant Person values independence: "I should be able to handle all my problems alone without asking for help."

The Ideal Well-mannered Person values gratitude: "I must send a thank-you note every time someone gives me a gift."

4. Values are not principals.

Principals are directives for how a person should behave. They can be informed by a culture's values and ideals or individually chosen. Principles often take the form of "if-then" rules for behavior.

If I value *Integrity*, then my principle might be: "When I make a mistake, I will acknowledge it honestly to myself and the affected person as soon as I am able."

If I value *Attention*, then my principle might be: "When I meet new people, I will tell them that I went to Harvard."

If I value *Compassion*, then my principle might be: "When I notice negative self-talk, I will speak to myself as I would to a close friend who is struggling."

So what are values?

VALUES ARE...

Values are the qualities of character that an individual holds as important. Cultures try to pass down values by building them into institutions (like families, schools, religions, recovery communities, etc), but these things only *influence* the individual's values.

One of the greatest challenges of identifying personal values is separating what *should be* important to us vs. what is *actually* important to us. This is especially true when what is important to us might not be socially favorable. For example, someone might tell people that they value work ethic or providing for my family, but what they actually value (or what they value more) is getting attention for having nice things. They may hold the values of Work Ethic and Providing, but the value of Attention is what motivates their behavior.

QUALITIES OF VALUES

The following are important qualities of values that underscore their importance:

1. Values are Chosen Freely

They are yours, not what you were told you should care about by family, culture, or past relationships. In this way, values empower us to become unique individuals and motivate us to shape our identity. This is also what separates values from ideals.

2. Values are Intrinsic & Rewarding

Living by our values feels meaningful and rich, even when it's difficult. In some eastern spiritual practices, happiness is defined as living in alignment with my values. Most importantly, in the context of happiness, *the reward is in the action itself*.

3. Values are Active

Values are best described as how you want to behave on an ongoing basis. "It is important to me that I be loving, act with integrity, show up as reliable, etc." Values remain present even if I am behaving out of alignment with them. If reliability is a value for me, then missing deadlines, ignoring texts, or showing up late will not feel good. This is another reason why naming and expressing emotions is **so important**, emotions communicate to us that we are or are not living in alignment with what is important to us. Listening to them can help us to behave in a way that makes us happy.

4. Values are Never Finished

Unlike goals, values are never finished and cannot be crossed off of a list. You never "achieve" honesty, you practice it moment by moment, choice by choice, internally and externally. It is important to note that the reward from these behaviors is significantly less intense than the reward we experience when we complete a goal. This is another reason while goals alone don't lead to happiness and fulfillment: they are a one-off reward. Behaving in alignment with our values, contrarily, provides a small but significant reward for each behavior, especially when we notice these behaviors.

5. Values are Guides

Values act as a compass to provide meaning, motivation, and direction, helping you take committed actions toward a rich life, even when facing discomfort, by clarifying what truly matters beyond temporary feelings or goals. They help you build a life aligned with your authentic self, improving resilience, reducing stress, and guiding decisions.

In summary

A *Value* is what's actually important to me - kindness, loyalty, respect, compassion

An *Ideal* is the perfect model - The Best Boss, The Perfect Student, The Ideal Girlfriend

A *Principle* is the rule to follow - As a good parent, I should take my kids to school

A *Feeling* is an emotion - joy, sadness, excitement, frustration