

Things That Really Matter: Discovering Personal Values

For many people, the beginning of a new year is a time of reflection on one's current direction in life. Many of us make resolutions to do something for ourselves that we have been neglecting to do in the hectic months behind us. While there are myriad reasons we may fail to keep our resolutions, one possibility may be that the goals we set are not really our own. By exploring our values, we can do something this year that is truly meaningful to us.

Some of you may be thinking, "I know my values. Why question them?" Sometimes values are so ingrained, so automatic that we have never before considered giving them a second thought. Taking time to explore our values doesn't mean they must be wrong or that we should replace them. It simply means taking the time to clarify exactly why or how something is important to us.

Adhering to values without thinking about how to apply them to our lives leaves little room for a sense of control. There will always be demands placed on us by family, peers, employers, or professors. A desire to gain approval or retain love may motivate us to comply with these demands. By clarifying our values, it is possible to make decisions from a well grounded, self-aware position. Rather than being acted upon, or reacting to situations, we have the ability to be proactive and choose the best alternative for us. We can then feel comfortable in our decisions because we are honoring what is truly important to us.

Edward Colozzi, a career/life counselor who has spent much of his career interested in values, has found that when people feel confused or lack clarity regarding their beliefs or purpose, it is because they are not aligned with their true values. In other words, some values are picked up from society, friends, family, the media, and another set of values is unique to you. In order to sort through and determine which values you are currently living by, and are truly the most meaningful to you, try the following exercise.

Take a look at the list of values on the next page. For each value, determine whether it is *very important*, *important*, or *not important* to you. Then, see if you can go through those values you marked as Very Important and narrow them down to those that are the most important to you and spend some time reflecting on what makes those particular values so indispensable to you. You can try the original card sort version of the exercise that includes brief definitions of each value by going to www.motivationalinterview.org/library/valuescardsort.pdf.

As you go through this values clarification process you may notice certain themes emerge. It can be helpful to condense these into one cohesive statement that can serve as a daily reminder of what you are working toward. Some people call these personal mission statements. A simple internet search for "personal mission statement" will produce many tools you can use to create your own.

Once you have fully explored and identified your most important values, and begun to consciously live in alignment with them, feelings of confusion or lack of clarity can diminish. Perhaps you can use your values to help determine which major or career is right for you, or whether a certain relationship is giving you what you need.

We all encounter challenging situations throughout our lives. When this happens, wouldn't you rather face the situation from a foundation of knowing who you are, what you stand for and what you desire than one of, "This is happening to me, what now?"

Finally, keep in mind that aligning yourself with your values is an ongoing, lifelong process. Perhaps reviewing your values could be a new alternative to the traditional New Year's resolutions you've never quite managed to stick with.