

Discovering your Core Values

Many of us don't know our own core values. Instead, we function with the values given to us by our parents, our society, our culture, the media we consume etc. The truth is, we don't really understand what is important to us. If you were asked, you could probably list a few but would these be your true core values? It is easy to speculate and idealise what you should value. Knowing and accepting what you really value takes effort.

What follows is a path of 7 steps which will help you to discover and define your core values. Once you've defined them, you can reflect on whether you are living those values in your daily life. When we honour our core values consistently, we experience fulfilment. When we don't, we are incongruent and are more likely to escape into bad habits and regress.

Step One: Start with a Beginner's Mind

Let go of the assumption that you already know the answer. Open your mind to the possibility that there are alternative answers that you have not yet discovered. If you adopt a child's attitude of curiosity, and the mind of a beginner who is ready to learn everything from scratch, you will be able to access inner truths of which your conscious mind is not yet aware.

Take a deep breath, empty your mind and remember that your conscious mind does not have all the answers. Create a mental space in which new insights and revelations can arise.

Step Two: Create your Personal List of Values

There are lots of lists of values pre-created online. However, the problem with these predetermined lists is that we are tempted to "select" them – like a shopping list. We subconsciously evaluate which ones are "better" than others. Additionally, the words may not sit properly with us because they are not written in our personal language – i.e. you may say Intelligence when someone else says Cleverness, but the latter may have negative connotations for you i.e. someone trying to be "too clever".

If you are completely stuck, then feel free to scan a list of values so you can get the idea of what options there are. Here is a short list of values beginning with A for example:

Acceptance	Accomplishment	Acknowledgement
Adventure	Aesthetics	Autonomy
Accountability	Accuracy	Achievement
Adaptability	Affection	Agility
Assertiveness	Attentiveness	Awareness
Appreciation	Analytical	Abundance
Advocacy	Attractiveness	Altruism

Here are three activities you can do to help you uncover your core values:

1) Meaningful Experiences

Reflect back on a key and meaningful experience in your life – one that really stands out for you as a positive or defining moment and consider the following:

- What was happening?
- How did it make you feel?
- What values were you honouring in that moment?

Repeat the process until you have a list of values from the most meaningful experiences in your life.

2) Suppressed Values

Now, approach from an opposite viewpoint. Reflect back on a time when you got angry, frustrated or upset and consider the following:

- What was happening?
- How did it make you feel? What were your thoughts?
- What values were being suppressed in that moment? (For example, if you felt it was “unfair” then the value of “Fairness” was being suppressed and this may be an important one for you.)

Repeat the process until you have a list of values from these challenging moments.

3) Survive and Thrive

Stop to think about the things that are most important in your life. Beyond your basic human needs, what do you need in your life to experience fulfilment and to feel you are thriving? Is your freedom to work in your own way important? (Autonomy) Is it Creative self-expression? Do you need a sense of Adventure and Discovery? Does the ability to do good things for other people make you feel fulfilled? (Altruism) Do you like the things around you to look good? (Aesthetics)

What are the values you must honour so your sense of self doesn't suffer?

Step Three: Group your Values into Related Themes

Once you have gathered a list of values from doing these activities, your next step is to group them under related themes. Here are some examples of groups of related values:

- Intimacy, Connection, Belonging, Togetherness, Closeness
- Learning, Growth, Development
- Accomplishment, Achievement, Success
- Honesty, Transparency, Integrity, Truth, Authenticity, Candour

Step Four: Highlight the Central Theme of each Value Group

Look at the list of values in each group and select a word that best represents that group (note this is the best word for you not what others think). For example, if you look at the last list of values in the examples above, you may feel the word Integrity best represents them.

Use this as your Key value but list the others in brackets afterwards to help with context e.g.

Integrity (*Honesty, Transparency, Truth, Authenticity, Candour*)

You will use these later in Step Six.

Step Five: Determine Your Top Core Values

This is one of the hardest parts. You may still have a large list of values even after completing step four. Here are a few questions to help you whittle your list down:

- What values are essential to your life?
- What values represent your primary way of being?
- What values are essential to supporting your inner self?

Whilst the number of core values differs for each person, a good range seems to be between 5 and 10. Too few and you won't capture all the unique dimensions of your being. Too many and you'll forget them or won't take advantage of them.

The next step is to rank them in order of importance. It may take some time as this can be challenging. It's a good idea to rank them and then sleep on it and come back to the list the next day to see if it sits comfortably with you.

Step Six: Give Your Core Values a Richer Context

Now you are going to turn each core value into a memorable phrase or sentence. This helps you to articulate the meaning behind each value and gives you the opportunity to make it more emotional and inspiring.

Tips and guidelines:

- ✓ Use inspiring words and vocabulary. Our brains are quick to delete or ignore the mundane and commonplace.
- ✓ Find words that evoke and trigger emotional responses as these will be more impactful and memorable.
- ✓ Play to your strengths in crafting your values.
- ✓ Make your value statements meaningful to you so they inspire you to uphold them.
- ✓ Make use of the other words from the value groupings in your sentence (see Step Three).

As an example, let's say you've identified Health as a core value and this also represents other values like energy and vitality. Your value statement might be:

"Health: to live with full vitality, wellbeing and energy every day."

Step Seven: Test the Integrity of Each Value

Once you've completed your list of core value statements, let them sit with you for a day or two. When you revisit them, use the following questions to help you review their integrity:

- How do they make you feel?
- Do they feel consistent with who you are?
- Are they personal to you?
- Do you see any values which feel inconsistent with your identity? Do they sound more like they belong to someone else – an authority figure or society – rather than you?
- Check your priority ranking. Do you feel like your values are in the right order of importance?

Remember, it's okay to make tweaks and changes – nothing is final.

Are you Living your Core Values?

Assess how well you are honouring each core value by scoring each one on a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 equals living the value to an optimum level.

It is worth recording these scores on a spreadsheet and repeating once per month or quarter to assess your progress.

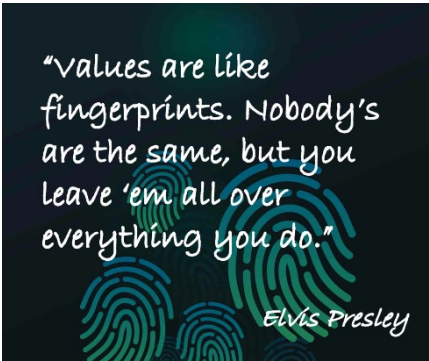
If you score below a 7 in a particular value, ask yourself what changes you need to make. What has to happen for you to further honour this value? Define a goal. Create a plan. Actualise it! Then check back with your value score and notice if you feel a difference in your level of fulfilment in life.

Using your Core Values to Make Decisions

Knowing your core values and their order of priority can help you with making difficult decisions.

For example, say you've been offered a new job but you don't know if you should take it. Start by scoring your values as before. Then, imagine your life several months (or years) from now having made your decision (in this case, taken the job). Bring the picture to life with sound, colour and movement, and step into it as much as you can. Keeping this vision alive in your mind, score your values again. Are your scores elevated, the same or lower? Does it cause friction with one of your higher values?

This process should help bring a new level of clarity to your decision-making process.



"Values are like fingerprints. Nobody's are the same, but you leave 'em all over everything you do."

Elvis Presley