

Defining Your Values

When you define your values, you discover what's truly important to you. A good way of starting to do this is to look back on your life—to identify when you felt really good, and really confident that you were making good choices.

Step 1: Identify the times when you were happiest

Find examples from your school, work, and/or 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?
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Step 2: Identify the times when you were most proud

Use examples from your school, work, and/or personal life.

- Why were you proud?
 - Did other people share your pride? Who?
 - What other factors contributed to your feelings of pride?
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Step 3: Identify the times when you were most fulfilled and satisfied

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

Step 5: Prioritize 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 visualize 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.

Tip:

If you have a tough time doing this, consider using [Paired Comparison Analysis \(http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_02.htm\)](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_02.htm) to help you. With this method, you decide which of two options is most important, and then assign a score to show how much more important it is. Since it's so important to identify and prioritize your values, investing your time in this step is definitely worth it.

Step 6: Reaffirm your values

Check your top-priority values, and make sure 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?
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When you consider your values in decision making, you can be sure to keep your sense of integrity and what you know is right, and approach decisions with confidence and clarity. You'll also know that what you're doing is best for your current and future happiness and satisfaction.

Making value-based choices may not always be easy. However, making a choice that you know is right is a lot less difficult in the long run.

Key Points

Identifying and understanding your values is a challenging and important exercise. Your 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.

Reproduced from “What are Your Values? Deciding What’s Important in Life” by Mind Tools (http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_85.htm).