

Values, Goals, and Desire  
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Values play a supersized role in life and in ACT (Acceptance and Commitment therapy). Our values inform our intentions and our behavior. They influence what we do, how we dress, what we eat and how we speak.

For example, if we value animal rights we might avoid wearing leather and eating meat. We might write letters to newspapers and to governmental representative in support of animal rights. We might make donations to animal rights organizations or to support the local SPCA.

So what are values? Values are about what gives meaning to life and what we want our life to stand for. Values both influence how a person behaves and are reflected in behavior. Values give our lives a general direction. When we act in ways that are consistent with what we value there is an intrinsic sense of fulfillment, gratification and satisfaction.

From this perspective values are different than what things or people are important to you. Saying that my parent, spouse, child dog or car is important to me or that I value them is significant but it does not tell us much about the kind of parent, child, spouse, or pet owner one wants to be. Being a loving, compassionate, and caring person describes specific values that will influence broad patterns of a person's behavior.

Values are distinct from goals. Goals refer to things that may be attained. People set goals for completing college, saving for retirement, buying a house or getting a promotion. Goals often reflect values such as being an educated person, having financial security. Once a goal has been attained we are finished with it. Values are never attained; they continue to influence our behavior throughout our lives.

Values are also distinct from desires and wants. This distinction sometimes becomes hard to understand. For example, most of us want to be loved or respected. In this context love and respect are objects of desire not values. Values refer to terms that influence our own behavior. We are responsible for choosing our values and acting in ways that are consistent with those values. Desire refers to something that can be obtained or achieved. For example, wanting respect from another is a desire. We have no control over whether or not another person will respect us even though our behavior may influence that outcome. Even if we act in a very dignified and respectful manner (perhaps reflecting what we value in terms of who we are), we may not be able to bring another person to respect us. Perhaps the other person has a bias or prejudice. Perhaps we remind the other of someone who has harmed them. These influences are beyond our control. There is little that can be done other than to continue to act in a way consistent with one's values.

The dark side of desire is that it often leads to sadness, grief, hurt and other forms of suffering. When desire is focused on something that we cannot control or that we cannot attain we set ourselves up for frustration, disappointment and suffering. In Buddhist psychology we are taught that the source of stress and suffering is the arising of such desires and the continuing pursuit of desire. We deal with desire by learning how to observe the desiring self in action as we go through our day. By bringing mindful attention to our needs and wants we learn to see how we nurture desire and create mind states that are places of emotional suffering. Too often we struggle with our desires. Instead of understanding desire we struggle to relieve our suffering, seeking solutions that may bring temporary relief, but not a long term solution. While renunciation of desire is an important element in achieving 'enlightenment' in Buddhist thought, this is both radical and difficult. I propose that we learn to understand and manage our desires in ways that are consistent with our values. We do our best to determine when desires are in line with values and when they are not. Desires that reflect needs can be fulfilled in many ways, but not all of them will be consistent with values. Desires that depend on the behavior of another person can be dealt with in both constructive and destructive ways. Demanding respect from someone is unlikely to result in the desired end. Respectfully asking to work together on improving a relationship might be a way to express a positive influence, although results are never guaranteed.

Some Definitions of Values:

1. Valuing occurs when one or more individuals track ongoing, dynamic, evolving behavioral patterns that are positively reinforced by verbal constructions that augment predominant reinforcers intrinsic to tracked behavioral patterns. Hank Robb
2. "Values are freely chosen, verbally constructed consequences of ongoing, dynamic, evolving patterns of activity, which establish predominant reinforcers for that activity that are intrinsic in the engagement in the valued behavioral pattern itself." [The Art & Science of Valuing in Psychotherapy, p. 34]  
[My translation of these two definitions: valuing occurs when a person notices certain behavioral patterns and tracks the consequences of those actions which are positively reinforced by verbiage that promotes and encourages life directions that are intrinsic in the behaviors.]
3. Values are about what we want our life to stand for.
4. "In ACT, we define values as ...verbally constructed, global, desired and chosen life directions. *Values can be instantiated in behavior but never obtained as an object.* Contributing to the well-being of other is never finished; creating a loving environment for others is never done; building intimate, loving, committed relationships for others is a never ending task." [JoAnne Dahl, et. Al. Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Chronic Pain., p.61]
5. Values are chosen freely from alternatives after weighing the consequences of each alternative, prized and cherished, shared and publicly affirmed, acted on repeatedly and consistently. Thus, valuing is a process. [Leland & Martha Howe, Personalizing Education: Values Clarification and Beyond, 1975, p. 19]