Solved Episode 01

Your Values Guide

Solved

with Mark Manson

Introduction

Eight years ago, I wrote a book called *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach to Living a Good Life.*

The book was a Trojan horse. It promised profanity-laced calm and relief, but in actuality it was a book about values. What do you give an "F" about? What *is worth* giving an "F" about?

The book struck a nerve. It's sold over 17 million copies, reached #1 in thirteen different countries, and spent over 320 weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

And I believe it broke through all the noise for a simple reason. No, not the F-Bombs (most of the translations did not have profanity in the title and it still reached #1 in those countries). The book broke through because it addressed the central existential question of the 21st century:

> ***In a world of infinite information and opportunity, knowing what to give an 'F' about — that is, what to value or prioritize — is potentially more difficult than it's ever been before.***

And this is a huge problem. Because, as we'll see in this episode, living up to your own values is possibly the most important component of stable mental health and sustained happiness in life. When you lack clarity on what's important, or feel as though you are constantly being forced to split attention between what's important and what's not, then you feel stuck — as though movement in any direction leads to the same place: drowning in stimulation, all of which seems both life-and-death important, and completely banal, all at once.

Introduction

The goal of this guide (and podcast episode) is to help you navigate through the sea of noise to find what truly matters to you, and then dedicate your life to it in a healthy way.

And should you do this, it will have massive benefits in your day-to-day existence. Decades of research demonstrate that people who discover and embody their values experience:

- **Less Stress, More Peace:** Living true to your values reduces internal conflict and stress, leading to better mental health and even a calmer physiological stress response.[1]
- **Greater Resilience and Emotional Stability:** Your values provide an emotional anchor, making you more resilient in the face of adversity and contributing to a more stable, balanced emotional life.[2]
- **Meaningful Happiness:** Following your values boosts life satisfaction by infusing your life with meaning and purpose. You're happier when you pursue what *you* find meaningful, rather than external definitions of success.[3]
- **Mental Clarity:** When your actions match your beliefs, you experience less mental friction. This cognitive alignment leads to clearer thinking and more confident decision-making, without the

[1] Creswell JD, Welch WT, Taylor SE, Sherman DK, Gruenewald TL, Mann T. Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses. Psychol Sci. 2005 Nov;16(11):846-51
[2] Ceary, Chris & Donahue, John & Shaffer, Katharine. (2019). The Strength of Pursuing Your Values: Valued Living as a Path to Resilience among College Students. Stress and Health. 35.
[3] Bayly B, Bumpus MF. Predictors and Implications of Values Clarity in First-Year College Students. Coll Stud J. 2020 Mar 15;53(4):397-404.

fog of regret or self-doubt.

- **Better Relationships:** Living authentically according to your values fosters trust and understanding in relationships. It encourages healthy interactions and attracts people who respect you for who you are, leading to stronger social connections.[4]

- **More Motivation and Drive:** Values give you a powerful why. They ignite your internal motivation and help you stick to your goals, making it more likely that you'll achieve outcomes that truly satisfy you.

Ultimately, our values matter because we all feel torn between our own desires and needs and the expectations placed upon us by society. Getting clarity on our values and aligning ourselves to them is the easiest way to resolve this anxiety and live in a meaningful and impactful way within the world.

[4] Gómez-López, M., Viejo, C., & Ortega-Ruiz, R. (2019). Well-being and romantic relationships: A systematic review in adolescence and emerging adulthood. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *16*(13), Article 2415.

Introduction

This PDF is meant as a companion to the Solved Podcast episode on Values. For elaboration, discussion, and examples of the concepts here, please listen to the episode in its entirety. And, if you'd like a set of daily actions you can take to implement these concepts — that's exactly what we do inside ***The Solved Membership***.

You can learn more about it here.

There is a lot to digest here. But if you take the time to work through it and integrate it into your life, it can be utterly transformative.

But I have to warn you, there is a lot of difficult introspection that comes along with this. No one got clear on their deepest core values under a beach umbrella. Chances are, you will have to ask yourself some uncomfortable questions.

But that's good. That discomfort is how you know you are growing.

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Why Your Values Matter

Why all this navel-gazing about values? What's the point?

Most people believe they are trying to be happy — which usually means feeling good all of the time. This is a trap. It's a trap because most of what we think of as happiness is quick-hit dopamine fixes and highs derived from exciting or validating experiences.

Basically... what we experience as "happiness" is largely superficial and short-lived. Not a great way to live your life.

The truth is, most people aren't unhappy because they're doing the wrong thing — **they're unhappy because they're doing it for the wrong reasons.**

This is why values are foundational to living a meaningful and well-directed life. Modern psychology has increasingly recognized that **well-being is not just about feeling good or being happy, but about living in line with one's values and purpose**.[5]

To live an enriching and fulfilling life, you need to live out what you care about, which demands that you sometimes give up your own pleasure and happiness for what you value.

This is where you get the paradox that a true deep sense of happiness requires some degree of struggle and sacrifice. *And deciding what you're willing to struggle and sacrifice for is determined by your values.*

[5] Klussman K, Curtin N, Langer J, Nichols AL. The Importance of Awareness, Acceptance, and Alignment With the Self: A Framework for Understanding Self-Connection. Eur J Psychol. 2022 Feb 25;18(1):120-131.

By contrast, when you don't know what value you're suffering for, then suffering feels meaningless.

Life feels pointless, even cruel. *All this suffering — and for what?*

Beyond Happiness

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics,* wrote that there were two "forms" of happiness — *hedonia* and *eudaimonia.*[6]

Hedonia can be loosely thought of as pleasure — a nice cold beer on a hot day, a back rub, watching your favorite sports team win a big match. It's nice but it's transitory. Hedonic pleasure is usually rooted in lower values — dopamine hits and status boosts and temporary moments of satisfaction that are gone just as quickly as they arrive.

Aristotle's second form of happiness, *eudaimonia*, was what we would consider as something like "fulfillment" or "meaning." *Eudaimonia* not only cannot be easily accessed, but in some cases, you *need* to sacrifice something to achieve it. Another way to think about it is that *eudaimonia* is living within your higher values by sacrificing your lower values. These include the sacrifices you make for your friends, the time and effort you put into a project you care about, or the willingness to help a family member in a tough spot. These experiences aren't pleasurable, but they are the sorts of things that we look back afterward and feel a sense of pride and satisfaction in ourselves that no bout of pleasure could ever give us.

[6] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *The complete works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), X.1, 1172a.

Up until the 1980s, traditional psychology typically measured happiness in terms of what Aristotle would call *hedonia* — the presence and quantity of positive emotions.

But in the 1980s, psychologist **Carol Ryff** brought the Aristotelian view back. In a landmark study, Ryff found that prevailing measures of happiness neglected crucial aspects of positive functioning.[7]

Ryff showed that someone could have positive emotions yet lack purpose or personal growth — which means they might be "happy" in a shallow sense but not truly fulfilled.[8] Her research demonstrated that *living according to one's deeper values is critical for well-being*, even if it doesn't always make you "happy" in the short term. *Eudaimonia*, as it turns out, really is more important to happiness.

In everyday life, this means that aligning your actions with your values can provide a stable form of long-term satisfaction. For example, if one of your core values is *family*, investing time in your family relationships will likely bring a deep sense of fulfillment, even if it's sometimes challenging or doesn't make you happy every moment. If another value is *creativity*, pursuing a creative project may involve stress or effort, but ultimately leads to feeling alive and true to yourself. Ryff's insight is that these value-driven pursuits contribute hugely to psychological well-being, often more than transient pleasures do.

Another famous psychologist, Roy Baumeister, also began researching values and their importance for long-term happiness around the same time. In Baumeister's words, people need to feel their life fits into some

[7] Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being.
[8] Ryff C. D. (2014). Psychological well-being revisited: advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia. Psychotherapy and psychosomatics, 83(1), 10–28.

broader purpose — that their actions are serving what they believe is right.[9]

For instance, a person might endure hardship at a job because they value **helping others** and believe their work as a nurse or teacher matters morally. This sense of serving a value gives their life meaning, even if the day-to-day work is hard. Baumeister found that those who align their lives with personal or societal values — whether it's religious faith, humanitarian ideals, or personal principles — tend to report higher meaning in life. In contrast, if someone's life feels out of sync with their values (say, working in a corrupt industry while valuing honesty), they often experience emptiness or distress despite material comforts.

Baumeister also highlighted how values guide **self-regulation** and long-term fulfillment. According to self-regulation theory, having clear values is the first step in controlling one's behavior.[10]

Since then, psychology has found that aligning our actions and values is one of the most important components of mental health, period. Living according to your values can act like a built-in stress reducer for your mind and body. When you make choices that honor your core beliefs, you experience **less internal conflict**.[11]

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[9] Baumeister, R. F. (1991). Meanings of life. Guilford Press.
[10] Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2016). Strength model of self-regulation as limited resource: Assessment, controversies, update. In M. P. Zanna & J. Olson (Eds.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 54, pp. 67–127). Academic Press.
[11] Creswell JD, Welch WT, Taylor SE, Sherman DK, Gruenewald TL, Mann T. Affirmation of personal values buffers neuroendocrine and psychological stress responses. Psychol Sci. 2005 Nov;16(11):846-51.

Research has found that when people pursue goals or activities that reflect their true values, they tend to experience **fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression** over time.[12]

When your actions match your beliefs, you experience less mental friction. This cognitive alignment leads to clearer thinking and more confident decision-making, without the fog of regret or self-doubt.

Also, living authentically according to your values fosters trust and understanding in relationships. It encourages healthy interactions and attracts people who respect you for who you are, leading to stronger social connections.[13]

And if that wasn't enough, values give you a powerful *why*. They ignite your internal motivation and help you stick to your goals, making it more likely that you'll achieve outcomes that truly satisfy you.

In summary, values are like the North Star for meaning and self-control: they help answer *"What's it all for?"* and thereby empower us to manage our lives more effectively.

Three Common Problems Related to Values

While values are clearly important, many of us struggle with them in practice. Three common problems are:

[12] Ceary, Chris & Donahue, John & Shaffer, Katharine. (2019). The strength of pursuing your values: Valued living as a path to resilience among college students. Stress and Health. 35.
[13] Bayly B, Bumpus MF. Predictors and Implications of values clarity in first-year college students. Coll Stud J. 2020 Mar 15;53(4):397-404.

1. **Lack of Clarity about One's Values:** It's not unusual to go through life without ever explicitly identifying what your core values are. You might feel vaguely unsatisfied or directionless, drifting through life like a plastic bag in the breeze, not realizing that you haven't articulated what truly matters to you.

   Psychology calls this a lack of **values clarity**. Research shows that low values clarity is associated with a sense of aimlessness and lack of motivation. In contrast, gaining clarity about your values often provides direction and motivation.[14]

2. **Failure to Live Up to One's Values:** Another common issue is knowing your values, but struggling to live by them consistently. For example, you might strongly value *honesty*, but find yourself telling lies at work because of pressure, and then feel guilty. Or you value *kindness*, but lose your temper and hurt loved ones.

   Persistent failure to live up to values can harm self-esteem and well-being, leading to feelings of guilt, shame, or inadequacy. It's important to remember that *everyone slips up at times*. Building skills in self-regulation and emotional management (discussed in later sections) can help you better live by your values and minimize these painful gaps between ideals and actions.

3. **Overinvestment in One Value at the Expense of Others:** A more subtle problem is when a person holds one particular value so tightly that other important values get neglected. Values do not exist in isolation — each of us has a **set of values**, and life often

[14] Eccles, J. S., & Wigfield, A. (2002). Motivational beliefs, values, and goals. Annual Review of Psychology, 53(1), 109–132.

requires balancing them. If one value grows extreme or rigid, it can become destructive.

In moral philosophy, Aristotle warned of this when he described virtue as a **golden mean** between extremes: too much or too little of any good quality becomes a vice.[15]

Balance is crucial. A person who values *generosity* also needs *prudence* so they don't give beyond their means. A society that values *freedom* must also care about *justice* to remain stable and secure.

Later, we will discuss Aristotle's and Schwartz's frameworks more, but the takeaway here is: a well-rounded value system is healthier than an obsessive focus on only one value. If you find that one priority in your life (e.g., career success) is eclipsing everything else you care about, well, then it may be time to step back and reevaluate.

In summary, values matter profoundly because they are tied to our sense of self, meaning, and well-being. Research by Ryff, and Baumeister, and others, shows that a life aligned with personal values is psychologically richer and more satisfying.

But the question then becomes, what are our values? And how do we figure them out?

[15] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. W. D. Ross, in The Complete Works of Aristotle, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), II.5, 1106b

What Are Values?

At first glance, defining "values" seems straightforward — we might say *"family is a value of mine"* or *"I value loyalty."*

But in psychology, it's important to distinguish values from other concepts like **needs** or **preferences**. So let's take a minute to get really clear on what exactly a value is. And why it matters.

Values are *"beliefs about trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or group."*[16]

In simpler terms, a value is a belief that something is good or desirable and worth striving for, regardless of context or circumstance.

Values tend to be general and abstract (e.g., *freedom, justice, compassion, security*). They serve as criteria or standards for judging actions — both our own and others'.[17] If you value honesty, you will feel that people should be honest and you will try to act accordingly, regardless of whether you're at work, at home, with friends, or with strangers.

Needs typically refer to innate or fundamental requirements for survival or well-being. For example, the need for food, water, and sleep (physiological needs), or the need for belonging and respect (psychological needs). Needs are often based on deprivation — if a need

[16] Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the schwartz theory of basic values.Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1).
[17] *Understanding values: Schwartz theory of basic values*. (2022, May 16). Integration and implementation insights.

isn't met, we experience discomfort or drive until it is satisfied. Values, on the other hand, are more about what we *ideally* desire or find important, not necessarily tied to biological or psychological deprivation. You can value honesty, but if you lack honesty in your life, while you might be miserable, you will still be able to function.

Needs are just that: necessary. Without them, your brain falls apart. Values are what you care about once your needs are met, and they often dictate *how* you go about meeting your needs. You need to have relationships and you value honesty — therefore, you seek out honest relationships.

One way to think about it is that *our values are strategies to consistently meet our needs.* And depending on our personality traits, physical traits, environment, and upbringing, we will naturally devise different strategies to meet the same universal needs.

Someone who is introverted and has obscure interests may satisfy their need for belonging by highly valuing *loyalty* to a small group of long-term friends. Whereas someone who is highly extroverted with a wide range of friends and interests may value *adventure* instead.

Values are, at some level, chosen. Needs are not. Values can change. Needs cannot. Values answer the question, "Who am I and who do I want to become?" Needs answer the question, "What do I need to survive?"

While all needs are values, not all values are needs.

Preferences are lighter and more interchangeable than values. A preference is a liking for one option rather than another in a specific

context: *“I prefer tea over coffee”*, or *“I prefer working in the morning rather than at night.”*

Preferences often refer to matters of taste or convenience, and they can change relatively easily or be situation-dependent. In contrast, values are deeply held and not easily changed (people don’t usually flip their stance on equality or justice overnight).

Another difference: preferences typically carry little moral weight. Preferring tea over coffee isn’t about right or wrong — it’s a personal choice with no ethical implication.

Values, however, *do* carry a sense of moral or personal importance. They involve judgments about what is good, right, or important in life. If you “prefer” honesty, that’s actually more than a preference — it’s a value, because you likely feel that honesty is the right way to be.

To put it all together imagine you need to make a career decision. You might have a **need** for financial security, a **preference** for living in a big city, and a **value** of autonomy. All three could factor into your career choice. Needs might push you toward a stable job offer, preferences might make you lean toward the job in your favorite city, but your core value of autonomy might draw you to a job that allows you some freedom to operate without a large corporate hierarchy. Understanding these differences can help clarify why we often feel internally conflicted about major life decisions. Part of personal growth is learning to prioritize and reconcile these aspects and sort through them as we go through life (more on that in the Practical Wisdom section below).

Defining Values: Six Characteristics

Values have been a central concept in sociology and related fields since the early 20th century. Classic sociologists like Émile Durkheim and Max Weber viewed values as crucial for explaining social order and change. By mid-century, psychologists Gordon Allport and Philip Vernon (1931) introduced values into personality theory, seeing them as fundamental motivations or "dominating forces" in a person's life.[18]

But the most prominent framework for values in psychology came from Shalom Schwartz in the 1980s and 90s. In his framework, he said values have six characteristics:[19]

1. **Are linked to emotion.** People feel strongly about what they value. When a value is activated, it is infused with feeling. For instance, someone who values independence will feel anxious if their freedom is threatened, helpless if they cannot protect it, and happy when they can fully exercise it. In this sense, our values are, in many ways, extensions of ourselves (more on that below).

2. **Motivate action**. Values inspire not only your goals, but the pursuit of them, as well. Those who prioritize social order, justice, or helpfulness are motivated to act in ways that promote these ideals.

3. **Apply across contexts.** Unlike preferences or norms, which are tied to specific situations, values remain relevant in various settings. For

[18] Cieciuch, J., & Schwartz, S. H. (2017). *Values*. In Springer eBooks (pp. 1–5).
[19] Schwartz, S. H. (2012). An overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values. Online Readings in Psychology and Culture, 2(1).

example, if you value loyalty, then you likely value it everywhere in your life: in the workplace, in politics, in business, and in your personal relationships.

4. **Serve as standards for judgment.** They guide how people evaluate actions, policies, individuals, and events. They help determine what is good or bad, justified or illegitimate, worth doing or avoiding. While values often operate in the background of your mind, they come into awareness when you face decisions with significant or conflicting implications.

5. **Are ranked in importance.** People do not hold all values equally — they prioritize some over others. One person may value achievement more than justice, while another may place greater importance on tradition over novelty. This ordering of values helps define individuals and their choices.

6. **Involve trade-offs.** Pursuing some values often means sacrificing others. For example, honesty might be sacrificed to uphold loyalty, striving for personal success might conflict with helping others. These trade-offs are central to Schwartz's theory — behavior results from balancing compatible values and managing conflicts between competing ones.

Trying On New Values

At this point, you're probably starting to get a vague idea of what your core values might be. You might also have a sense of where in your life you're failing to live out your values.

Let's take the next step and make it more concrete. Luckily for us, psychologists have come up with various frameworks that we can use as a starting point in determining which values to pursue in our lives.

The Values Wheel

Shalom Schwartz conducted extensive cross-cultural research to identify common human values. He found that across many cultures, people consistently mention about ten broad categories of values. These are often visualized in a circular diagram or “Values Wheel,” illustrating how some values are compatible and some are in tension. The ten basic values Schwartz identified, each with a defining goal, are:

Self-transcendence

- **Benevolence:** Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact.
- **Universalism:** Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of *all* people and of nature.

Conservation

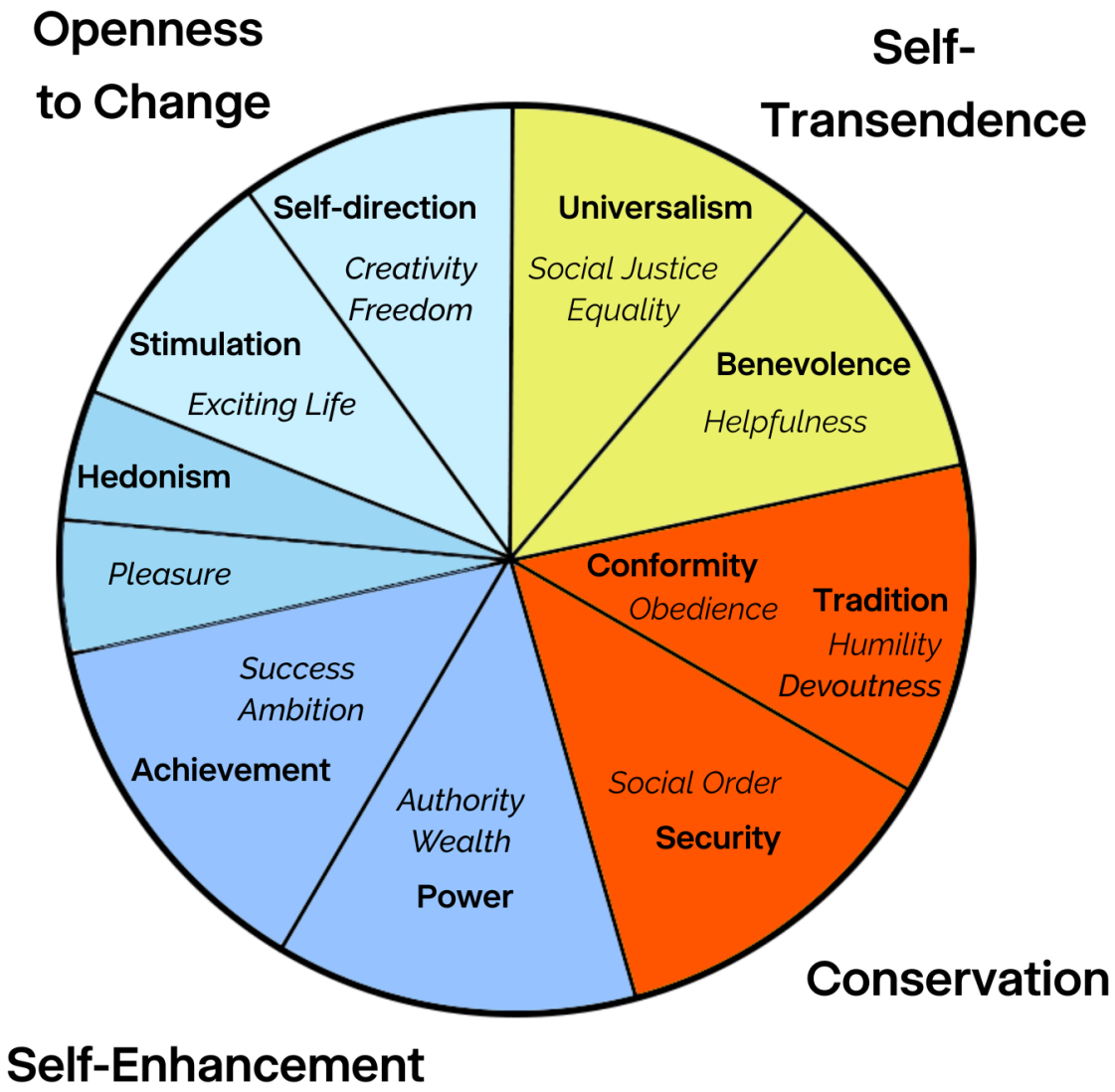
- **Conformity:** The restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses that are likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms (self-discipline, obedience, politeness).
- **Tradition:** Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provides (honoring tradition, cultural or religious norms).
- **Security:** Safety, harmony, and stability of society, relationships, and self (valuing social order, stability, and personal and national security).

Self-enhancement

- **Power:** Control or dominance over people and resources (seeking authority, influence, wealth).
- **Achievement:** Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards (ambition to achieve and be competent).

Openness to change

- **Stimulation:** Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life (a desire for a varied, stimulating life and new experiences).
- **Self-Direction:** Independent thought and action, choosing, creating, and exploring (valuing freedom, creativity)
- **Hedonism:** Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself (seeking enjoyment and indulgence).



Adapted from Schwartz, S. H. (2006,) Basic Human Values: An Overview.

In this model, values that sit next to each other share similar motivations and can be pursued together, while values on opposite sides tend to conflict.

For example, Stimulation (seeking excitement) and Self-Direction (valuing independence) are closely related, as both emphasize openness to change. However, **Stimulation is directly opposed to Security** (seeking stability and safety), meaning that situations that encourage excitement often undermine feelings of comfort.

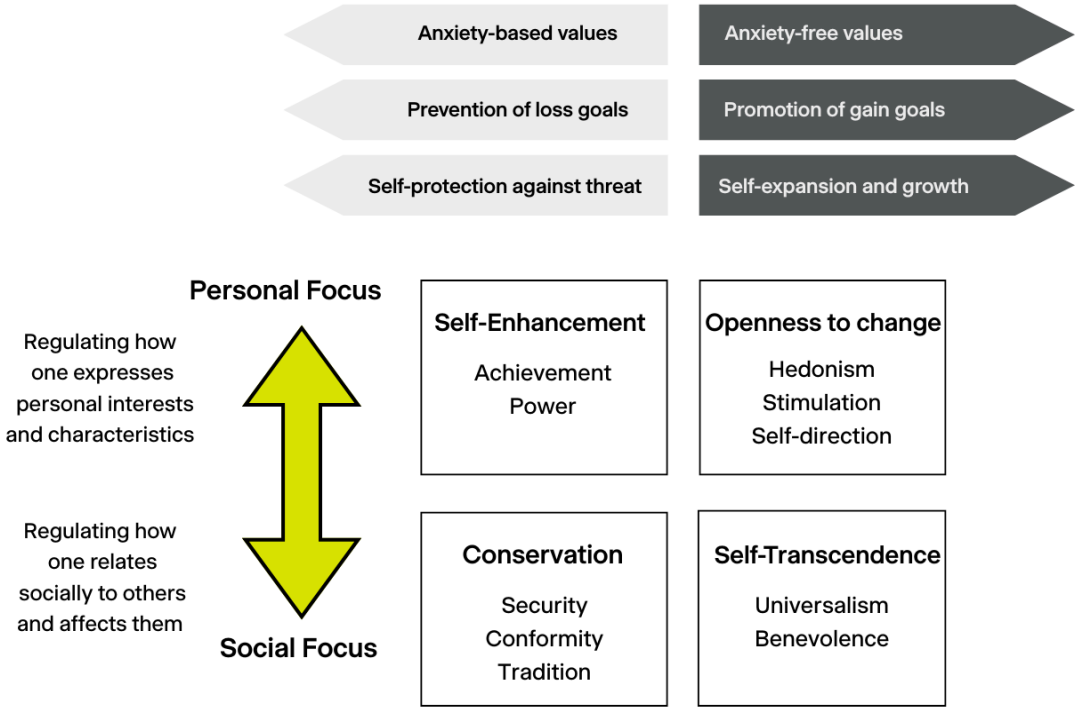
This circular arrangement reveals an important aspect: human values are not just a list, but a system shaped by tensions and alignments, much like colors blending into each other on a color wheel. Values that are closely located to one another reinforce each other. Values that are far away from each other discourage one another. The Values Wheel highlights why we often feel *internal conflict*: our values themselves conflict. As we will see later on in this guide, this is not a bug of human psychology, but a feature.

At the basis of this model are two key value conflicts that take place within us:

- **Openness to Change vs. Conservation —** Values that encourage independence, curiosity, and new experiences (Self-Direction, Stimulation, and parts of Hedonism) stand in contrast to values that emphasize stability, tradition, and self-restraint (Security, Conformity, and Tradition).

- **Self-Enhancement vs. Self-Transcendence** — Values centered on personal success and self-interest (Power, Achievement, and Hedonism) conflict with those that prioritize the well-being of others and a broader sense of purpose (Universalism and Benevolence).

Trying On New Values



Adapted from Schwartz, S. H. (2009). Basic Human Values. Sociologie.

Understanding Schwartz's values framework can help you identify where your own values fall and what tensions you may be struggling with. Are you more inclined toward "self-transcendence" (universalism, benevolence) or "self-enhancement" (achievement, power)? Do you prioritize "openness to change" (stimulation, self-direction) or "conservation" (security, tradition)?

Recognizing that this is normal can help us strive for balance, rather than judging ourselves or feeling we must choose one or the other absolutely.

Terminal vs. Instrumental Values

In the 1970s, a pioneering values researcher named *Milton Rokeach* introduced a useful distinction between two types of values: **terminal values** and **instrumental values**.[20]

- **Terminal values** are the *end goals* of life — the desirable end-states we hope to achieve. These are values about *what we want to get or experience in the long run*.

  Examples of terminal values include: *Freedom, Equality, Comfortable Life, World Peace, Family Security, Happiness, Wisdom, Self-Respect*, etc. They are like the destinations on life's journey.

- **Instrumental values** are the *means* to achieve those end goals — the desirable ways of behaving or qualities we cultivate to reach terminal values. They are values about *how we live and act*.

  Examples of instrumental values include: *Honesty, Responsibility, Courage, Politeness, Ambition, Independence, Helpfulness, Self-Control*. These are more like character traits or modes of conduct. For instance, to achieve the terminal value "self-respect," one might value the instrumental qualities of "**honesty**" and "**hard work**" as the means that lead to self-respect.[21]

Rokeach's value system suggests that each person holds **a structured hierarchy of values**, with some values ranked as more important than others. This hierarchy forms an individual's *value system*.

[20] Rokeach, M. *The Nature of Human Values*; Free Press: London, UK, 1973.
[21] Rokeach, M. (1973). Values List of Milton Rokeach

Trying On New Values

Terminal values tend to occupy the top goals in this hierarchy, while instrumental values serve as guiding principles or tools to achieve those goals. For example, someone might highly value the terminal goal of “family security” and thus also value the instrumental qualities of “responsibility” and “hard work” as the means to secure and care for their family.

Another person might prioritize “social recognition” (a terminal value) and therefore emphasize “ambition” and “competitiveness” (instrumental values) in their behavior. In this way, the two categories work in tandem to shape one’s priorities and actions.

What Are Good Values?

Not all values are created equal. We can probably agree that valuing **compassion** or **honesty** is “better” (for oneself and society) than valuing **cruelty** or **greed**. But drawing the line between good and bad values can sometimes be surprisingly tricky and subjective.

What makes a value “good”? And how do we identify values that could potentially be hurting us?

Values and Psychological Well-Being

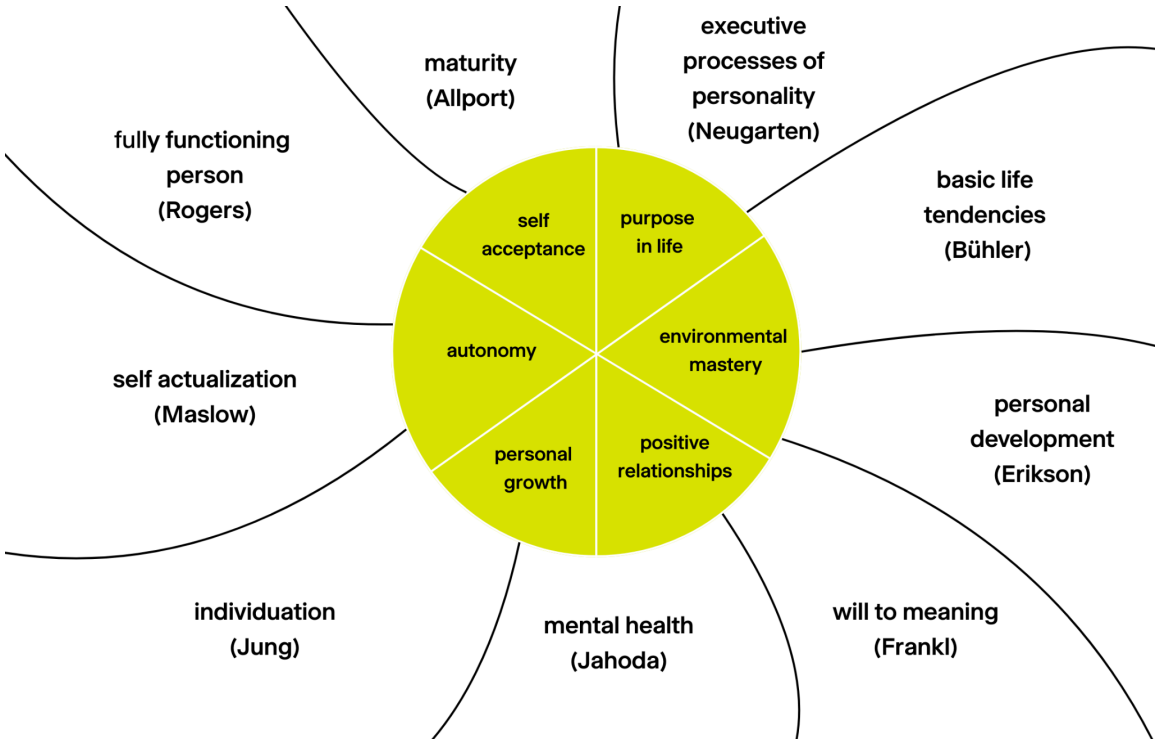
Well, it turns out a number of brilliant researchers dedicated most of their careers to figuring out what the “best” values were. In her work, Carol Ryff synthesized insights from multiple psychological traditions, including developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and classical theories of self-actualization and individuation. Her work drew heavily from Aristotle’s concept of eudaimonia — the idea that the highest human good is achieved not through fleeting pleasures but through virtue and realizing one's full potential, or in her words, *“striving to achieve the best that is within us.”*

Her model also incorporated perspectives from influential theorists such as Marie Jahoda (positive mental health), Abraham Maslow (self-actualization), and Erik Erikson (lifespan development). These diverse influences converged into a framework outlining six key dimensions of psychological well-being.

Through her work, Ryff redefined well-being as **psychological well-being (PWB),** emphasizing optimal human functioning rather than

just emotional pleasure. Within a decade, her distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being became a central theme in positive psychology, influencing research on personal growth, resilience, and mental health across various disciplines.[22]

Her six key dimensions of psychological well-being are listed below — these could be seen as the universal "positive values" that drive human flourishing.



Adapted from Ryff, C. D. (2014). Psychological Well-Being Revisited: Advances in the Science and Practice of Eudaimonia. Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics.

[22] Ryff C. D. (2014). Psychological well-being revisited: advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia. *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*, *83*(1), 10–28.

Autonomy

High scorer	Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behavior from within; evaluates self by personal standards
Low scorer	Is concerned about the expectations and evaluations of others; relies on judgments of others to make important decisions; conforms to social pressures to think and act in certain ways

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Environmental mastery

High scorer	Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values
Low scorer	Has difficulty managing everyday affairs; feels unable to change or improve surrounding context; is unaware of surrounding opportunities; lacks sense of control over external world

Personal growth

High scorer	Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realizing his or her potential; sees improvement in self and behavior over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness
Low scorer	Has a sense of personal stagnation; lacks sense of improvement or expansion over time; feels bored and uninterested with life; feels unable to develop new attitudes or behaviors

Positive relations with others

High scorer	Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affection, and intimacy; understands give and take of human relationships

Low scorer	Has few close, trusting relationships with others; finds it difficult to be warm, open, concerned about others; is isolated and frustrated in interpersonal relationships; not willing to make compromises to sustain important ties with others

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Purpose in life

High scorer	Has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; holds beliefs that give life purpose; has aims and objectives for living
Low scorer	Lacks a sense of meaning in life; has few goals or aims, lacks sense of direction; does not see purpose in past life; has no outlooks or beliefs that give life meaning

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Self-acceptance

High scorer	Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self

	including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life
Low scorer	Feels dissatisfied with self; is disappointed with what has occurred in past life; is troubled about certain personal qualities; wishes to be different than what he or she is.

Aristotle's Theory of Virtue and Balance

But, before we get too excited, it's worth revisiting Aristotle one more time. Aristotle once wrote, "A virtue is the golden mean between two vices." What he meant by that is that every virtue or positive value is in balance between two negative values.

For example, too little courage is cowardice. Too much is recklessness. Another example: too little generosity is stinginess, too much might be wastefulness. Honesty: too little is deceit, too much might be cruel or tactless. Self-confidence: too little is self-loathing, too much is arrogance.

Aristotle's Golden Mean is true in the case of Ryff's PWB dimensions as well. Too much autonomy is isolation. Too little is codependence. Too much personal growth is self-absorption. Too little is stagnation.

The Aristotelian view is timeless and has two key implications for *good values* that we must not forget:

What Are Good Values?

1. **Good values are in the middle ground between extremes.** This means that even values that sound "good" can become problematic if taken to an extreme without regard to context.

2. **Virtues work as a set; harmony among values is key.** Do not forget Schwartz's Value Wheel. All Values are only as useful when they are in balance with other values.

Aristotle argued a person considered virtuous has, in a way, *all* the virtues, because without the ability to balance courage with generosity, or personal growth with relationships, your life will still fall out of balance and into vice.

Virtues reinforce each other rather than operate in isolation. *Justice* keeps *courage* from becoming reckless. *Self-control* ensures that *kindness* doesn't turn into enabling harmful behavior.

Aristotle also emphasized **habit and practice**: virtues are not innate — we cultivate them by practice, like building a skill. One becomes just by doing just acts, tempered by practicing moderation, and so on. This aligns with the idea that while you may have certain value tendencies, *living* them consistently (especially under pressure) takes development and mindfulness.

In today's terms, if we talk about "good values," we often mean those that generally benefit oneself *and* others, contribute to personal growth or moral behavior, and are widely affirmed as positive. From this perspective, we can argue that the "bad values" are bad because they are zero-sum and destructive towards one another. *Courage* or *Wisdom* make achieving other values easier. But *Greed* or *Hedonism* make achieving other values more difficult.

This leads to a very important but subtle truth: good values are self-reinforcing. Adopting one good value makes adopting others easier. Adopting one bad value makes adopting other bad values easier.

Which brings us to the next question: how do you actually change your values? How do you get yourself to stop prioritizing something you wish you didn't prioritize?

One helpful tool is social reinforcement. In other words, leveraging our natural instinct to meet and exceed the standards of those around us, to culturally belong. Surrounding ourselves with like-minded people, who have similar values or goals, offers a kind of “rocket fuel” for making the changes we want to make.

This is one of the reasons I created ***The Solved Membership*** — a community and course membership built around the idea that small actions outperform big goals every single time. Inside, you’ll not only get a supportive community, you’ll also get a vault of action-based courses, all consisting of simple daily action steps that help you build the life you want.

There’s even a Values, Solved Course with exercises to get you clear on your values and confidently designing your life around them.

Learn more about The Solved Membership and how you can join here.

Values and Your Relationships

When it comes to relationships, most of us focus on chemistry, compatibility, shared interests, or how much fun we have together. But beneath all of that — beneath the sparks, the sex, the romantic Spotify playlists — is one thing that quietly determines whether a relationship will survive: yep, values.

A relationship rarely falls apart because someone liked different music or forgot an anniversary. It falls apart because our struggles serve different values.

Now, you don't need to have identical values to build a great relationship. You do, however, need to have compatible values — or at the very least, be willing to respect and negotiate each other's differences.

Below are a few observations about values in relationships.

Having Shared Values Doesn't Necessarily Mean Having Identical Values

A lot of people get hung up on needing their partner to mirror their worldview. But that's not the goal. The goal is alignment, not sameness.

You don't need a partner who values everything you value. You need one who respects what you value, and who's willing to support it — even when they don't share it. Conflict comes not from differences, but from invalidation.

What matters is how your values interact. Do they complement each other? Do they clash? Can they coexist under the same roof?

Values are What You're Actually Arguing About

Think back to the last big fight you had in a relationship. Was it really about the dishes? The calendar? The tone of voice?

Probably not.

It was about what those things represented. Every surface-level argument conceals a deeper clash of values:

- "You never plan date night" might really mean "I value intentionality, and I don't feel prioritized."
- "Why do you always work late?" might actually mean "I value connection, and I feel alone in this."

The sooner you can decode the value underneath the complaint, the faster you can get to the root issue — and the less likely you are to blow up over stupid shit again.

The Relationship Values Hierarchy

Spoiler alert: In relationships, you can't have it all.

Relationships force you to rank your values in a series of trade-offs you're willing to make.

Do you value honesty more than harmony? Do you prioritize ambition over presence? Are you willing to trade some freedom for deeper intimacy?

Healthy relationships aren't built on finding someone who matches you perfectly. They're built on clear-eyed negotiation of your values.

Try this: Each partner ranks their top 5 values. Then you each share one you're willing to compromise on, and one that's a hard non-negotiable.

Then talk.

You'll learn more in that hour than most couples do in a year.

Your Relationship Reveals What You Really Value

You say you value honesty — but you hide things to avoid a fight. You say you value independence — but you collapse into your partner's moods every time they're upset.

So what do you actually value?

This is one of the harshest truths in life: your relationship is a mirror for your real values — not the ones you post about, but the ones you live. The stuff you're willing to fight for, sacrifice for, walk away for. That's your actual code.

Values Drift (And Why People Grow Apart)

People evolve. And when values change — but communication doesn't — that's when relationships silently fracture.

Most long-term breakups don't happen because of one big event. They happen because no one noticed the drift. What mattered most five years ago isn't what matters now. But no one talked about it. So now you're two people, living two lives, with two value systems — and a silent roommate in between.

Schedule a "values check-in" like you schedule a date night. Ask each other: "What's been mattering most to you lately?" and "Is there anything I've stopped seeing or supporting in you?"

The good news and the flipside to this is that your values can also grow closer together. But that does require a mutual respect for each other's values.

Speaking of respect...

Love Is Empty Without Respect

This might sound crazy, but you can love someone and still treat them like shit.

You can love someone and violate their boundaries. You can love someone and gaslight them. You can love someone and slowly hollow them out by ignoring what matters to them.

Respect is what makes love safe. It's the value that protects all other values. And if you can't respect each other's values, the love will rot.

In the end, relationships don't succeed because two people are "compatible." They succeed because they value each other's values — and are willing to sacrifice for them.

Not all values can be bridged. But they can always be revealed.

And when they are, they tell you exactly what kind of love you're building — or whether it's time to stop building at all.

Where Do Our Values Come From?

Margaret Mead arrived in Samoa in 1925 at just twenty-three. Settling among thatched huts under swaying palms, she carefully observed village life: children at play, girls learning to weave mats, evening gatherings filled with songs and dance. To her surprise, Samoan youths exhibited far less turmoil than their American counterparts, embracing a relaxed transition into adulthood. There was less pressure on them to perform social roles, and fewer taboos around things like sex or intimacy.

She concluded that values are arbitrary and relative. There is nothing inherently better or worse about prudence, or cleanliness, or modesty, as defined by Western morals. These things are relative, she argued, and completely made up.[23]

Her reports caused a furor.

But she was not deterred. A few years later, Mead went to New Guinea, where she studied the Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli tribes. Trudging through mud-soaked jungle paths and paddling canoes along winding rivers, she documented wildly different temperaments. Some tribes valued cooperation among both men and women, while others praised aggression for all. In Tchambuli villages, she watched women oversee trade and governance, with men devoting themselves to ritual adornment. These observations formed the basis of her book “Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies,” challenging Western notions

[23] Mead, M. (1928). Coming of age in Samoa: A psychological study of primitive youth for Western civilisation. William Morrow.

of gender and becoming one of the early seminal works of modern feminism.[24]

Throughout her life, Mead argued that culture molds individuals in ways once assumed to be fixed by nature — values are relative, socially constructed, and imposed from without. From the sunlit beaches of Samoa to the dense forests of New Guinea, she revealed that the world is a tapestry of human possibilities, demonstrating that understanding unfamiliar ways of life can help us grasp our own.

For example, Mead observed that Samoan society had a very relaxed approach to adolescent sexuality compared to the puritanical norms of American society at that time.

The result? Samoan teenagers, according to her research, did not experience the same storm and stress during puberty as American teens did. They seemed happier, less stressed and more at ease with themselves.

Cultural relativism does not mean that all values are equally beneficial in every sense, it means that we should *understand values within a broader cultural context*. Mead believed that before passing judgment, one should ask: *What function does this value serve in this culture and its environment?*

A ritual or norm that seems strange from outside may have an internal logic to it.

Mead's ideas were quite radical in an era when a lot of people thought Western civilization's values were morally supreme. She asserted that

[24] Mead, M. (1935). Sex and temperament in three primitive societies. New York, NY: William Morrow.

so-called “primitive” cultures had rich lessons for the modern world. This idea was unheard of at the time.

In practical terms, **cultural relativism** teaches us that had we been born elsewhere or in a different era, we would probably hold very different core values.

Mead’s work was the introduction of the idea that we should reflect **on which values are truly ours vs. those merely absorbed from our culture**. Sometimes we carry values only because everyone around us does, not because we consciously opted into them.

Travel or exposure to different communities can reveal this — you might find, for example, that you resonate more with a different set of values than those you were raised with.

However, cultural relativism also raises complicated questions: Are there any universal values (like basic human rights, freedom from harm) that transcend culture? Anthropologists including Mead engaged in those debates, especially when encountering practices like severe gender oppression or violence which might be culturally sanctioned. Mead’s position evolved to acknowledging some universal ethical principles, but her starting point was always understanding context first.

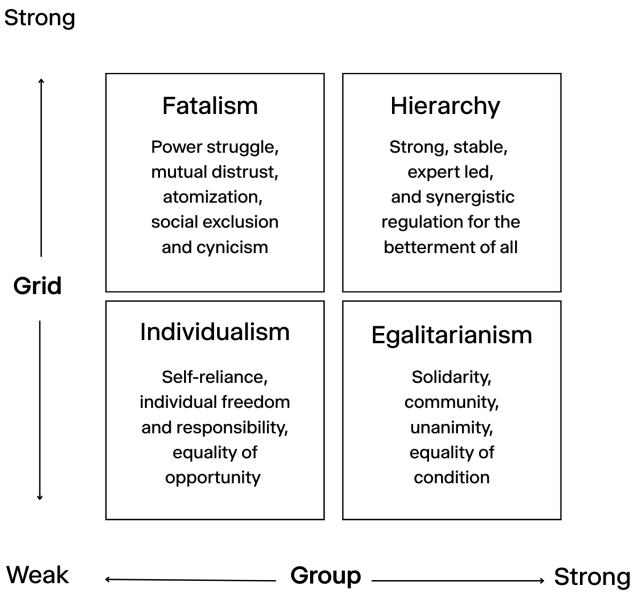
The Grid-Group Framework: Four Types of Social Values

Building upon Margaret Mead’s work, the anthropologist **Mary Douglas** provided a framework known as *“Grid-Group Cultural Theory”* to categorize cultures by their values and social organization. She

proposed two dimensions for classifying a society's ways of life — the **Group** and the **Grid**.[25]

Grid (Regulation) → This refers to how much a society imposes rules, roles, and restrictions on individuals. A high-grid society has strict rules and social roles, while a low-grid society allows for more personal freedom.

Group (Integration) → This refers to how strongly individuals feel connected to a larger social unit (like a family, community, or nation). A high-group society prioritizes collective identity, while a low-group society values individual autonomy.



Adapted from Caulkins, D. D. (1999). Is Mary Douglas's Grid/Group Analysis Useful for Cross-Cultural Research? Cross-Cultural Research

[25] Douglas, M. 1999. Four cultures: the evolution of a parsimonious model. Geojournal 47:411-415.

Where Do Our Values Come From?

By assigning high and low values to grid and group, Douglas identified four ways of organizing, perceiving, and justifying social relations (called “ways of life” or “social solidarities”).

Individualism (Low Grid / Low Group)

- Few rules or restrictions (low grid)
- Weak group identity (low group)
- Emphasizes personal freedom, competition, and self-reliance.
  Example: Free-market capitalism, libertarianism.

Egalitarianism (Low Grid / High Group)

- Few formal rules (low grid)
- Strong group identity (high group)
- Emphasizes equality, cooperation, and collective decision-making.
  Example: Small activist groups, communal living.

Hierarchy (High Grid / High Group)

- Many rules and strong social roles (high grid)
- Strong group identity (high group)
- Emphasizes order, authority, and tradition.
  Example: Religious institutions, military, bureaucracies.

Fatalism (High Grid / Low Group)

- Many rules and restrictions (high grid)
- Weak group identity (low group)
- People feel powerless and believe that life is unpredictable.
  Example: Some marginalized or oppressed communities.

Douglas theorized that each type of social structure fosters its own typical "culture" — a set of beliefs, values, and biases that feel naturally right to its members.[26]

People "accept what makes sense to them, and what makes sense to them depends in large part on their social environment," Douglas explained.[27] This framework, though abstract, bridges anthropology and sociology by suggesting patterned ways that social context influences psychology: our perceptions of risk, morality, or reality itself are filtered through the lens our community provides.

Furthermore, Douglas was attentive to how values might change when the underlying social conditions change. She noted that when societies undergo shifts — say, modernization, secularization, or changes in social structure — their value systems and rituals adjust accordingly. One clear example she gave is the shift in European societies from religious-based purity rules to scientific/hygiene-based rules. As germ theory and secularism grew, Europeans stopped viewing cleanliness as about spiritual purity and more about health — yet, as she pointed out, *the habit of separating "clean" from "dirty" remained*, only now with new rationale.

Ultimately, Douglas's work reveals that **what a society deems impure or dangerous reflects what it most values**. Just like individuals, societies have their own value hierarchies with moralities wrapped around whatever prioritizations rise to the top.[28]

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[26] *Grid-group cultural theory*.(n.d.-b).
[27] Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge. (Original work published 1966)
[28] Gray, K., DiMaggio, N., Schein, C., & Kachanoff, F. (2023). The Problem of Purity in Moral Psychology. *Personality and social psychology review : an official journal of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, Inc*, *27*(3), 272–308.

The value of Douglas's theory is in explaining **why people often misunderstand each other across groups and societies:** they come from different cultural bias types. An egalitarian type sees a hierarchical type as oppressive or elitist; a hierarchical person sees an egalitarian group as disorderly and unrealistic; an individualist sees both as infringing on personal freedom; the others see individualists as selfish, and so on.

In fact, Douglas argued that each type tends to accuse the others of moral failure, because they prioritize different values. For instance, a strongly hierarchical person values respect and duty, and might see individualists as lacking loyalty, and egalitarians as lacking respect for proper authority. An egalitarian values equality and inclusion, and might see individualists as greedy, and hierarchs as cruel or rigid.

Balancing these cultural values is challenging, but societies benefit from having a mix. Mary Douglas and later scholars suggested that each way of life has *blind spots* and that a pluralistic society needs multiple perspectives to be resilient.[29]

Again, the same way we need counter-balancing values in our personal life to maintain mental health and psychological well-being, a society must maintain a balance of conflicting cultural values to achieve the same results. For example, hierarchy gives stability but can become oppressive if unchecked by egalitarian calls for justice. Individualism brings innovation, but needs some communal or hierarchical structure to not devolve into chaos. Egalitarian groups pursue noble causes but can become insular or impractical without some individual initiative or formal organization.

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[29] Clemens, E. S. (1991). Review of *Cultural Theory*., by M. Thompson, R. Ellis, & A. Wildavsky. *American Journal of Sociology*, *96*(6), 1571–1573.

Understanding this framework, you might identify your own leanings. Do you personally value *individual freedom over rules*? Or do you prefer *clear structure and authority*?

And more importantly, can you live among people with opposing values?

The Nature Argument: Moral Foundations Theory

While Mead and Douglas popularized the influence of culture on value formation, it is impossible to discuss a major psychological phenomena without at least addressing the genetic question. There is no major psychological trait that I know of that isn't at least partially heritable through one's parents, and it appears that values are no different.[30]

Today, social psychologist **Jonathan Haidt** is most famous for his work around social media and its effect on mental health. But before he was a celebrity academic, he quietly began his research studying morality and values from a social and evolutionary perspective.

Jonathan Haidt's interest in moral judgment began during his graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was exposed to cross-cultural research on ethics. After earning his PhD in 1992, he did fieldwork in India, where he observed how cultural context shapes moral priorities. This cross-cultural perspective, combined with his reading of evolutionary theory and anthropological studies, laid the groundwork for what would become **Moral Foundations Theory**.[31]

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[30] Pinker, S. (2002). *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. Viking.
[31] Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. Pantheon Books.

In collaboration with colleagues, Haidt synthesized insights from multiple disciplines to propose that humans share several innate "moral taste buds." This theory would eventually shape significant debates in psychology, political science, and beyond.

Haidt's **Moral Foundations Theory (MFT)** suggests that all humans share a handful of basic moral intuitions — sort of like "taste buds" for morality — and that cultures build their unique moralities on top of these foundations. According to Haidt, the six moral foundations are:

1. **Care/Harm:** sensitivity to others' suffering, valuing kindness and compassion vs. despising cruelty.
2. **Fairness/Cheating:** focus on justice, rights, and fairness.[32]
3. **Loyalty/Betrayal (Ingroup loyalty):** valuing loyalty to one's group, family, or nation, and despising traitors.
4. **Authority/Subversion:** valuing respect for tradition, legitimate authority, and order, vs. disdain for those who flout rules or roles.
5. **Sanctity/Degradation (Purity):** valuing purity and sanctity of body and soul, vs. revulsion towards disgusting or degrading things.
6. **Liberty/Oppression**: a drive for freedom and resentment of domination.[33]

[32] A 2023 paper found that this can actually be divided into two foundations reflecting fairness as equality and fairness as proportionality (equity).
[33] While this is widely accepted as a 6th foundation, there is still some debate about whether or not it's universal or more of a WEIRD cultural foundation. That said, it's sometimes included in a "6+" model with fairness being split into two foundations: equality and proportionality.

At this point, this list will sound familiar. It is strikingly similar to Carol Ryff's Six Dimensions of Well-Being, as well as Shalom Schwartz's Ten Universal Values.

The difference lies in the fact that twin studies have shown that moral attitudes and values are, to some extent, heritable.[34] What's most striking, however, is how closely these moral foundations align with political orientation.

Haidt found that, broadly speaking, politically liberal people tend to focus heavily on Care and Fairness, whereas conservative people tend to value Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity more. This can explain, for instance, why two groups both think they are "moral," yet still disagree: they are prioritizing different innate moral intuitions. A liberal might say "The highest morality is caring for the vulnerable and being fair", a conservative might say "Those are important, but so is taking care of your family, respecting tradition, and upholding morality."

Each side believes the other is neglecting key values. These political tendencies are shaped in part by temperament and early influences, and while they can shift over a person's lifetime, they tend to change only slowly and gradually — if at all.[35]

Evolutionary Origins: According to this theory, these moral foundations evolved to solve different social challenges. Care to raise vulnerable children, Fairness to reap benefits of cooperation, Loyalty to form cohesive groups for defense, Authority to maintain order and reap

[34] Lewis, G. J., & Bates, T. C. (2011). Genetic evidence for multiple biological mechanisms underlying ingroup favoritism. *Psychological Science, 22*(10), 1253–1258.
[35] Wajzer, M., & Dragan, W. Ł. (2021). It Is Not Only the Environment That Matters: A Short Introduction to Research on the Heritability of Political Attitudes. Political Studies Review, 21(1), 144-161.

benefit of leadership, Sanctity to avoid disease and perhaps bind groups with shared sacred values. So, they are part of "human nature" in a loose sense. **How they become actual expressed values depends on culture**. Culture can amplify or dampen certain foundations.

For example, a culture historically exposed to high levels of pathogens might develop strict purity norms — such as food taboos — elevating Sanctity as a central value, whereas a culture with lower exposure may place far less emphasis on it. Similarly, a culture under constant threat of war might place huge value on Loyalty and Authority (to survive through unity), while an isolated individualistic environment might let those values recede in favor of personal freedom.

What this means for you: Knowing about moral foundations can help you understand why you personally feel moral emotions in certain situations.

For example, if you feel extreme disgust or anger at someone burning a national flag, that indicates your *Loyalty* and possibly *Sanctity* foundations are triggered — you value respect for national symbols. Or if you get very upset at unfairness (like someone cutting a line), that's your *Fairness* foundation working. If blood or cruelty in a movie deeply disturbs you, that's *Care/Harm* (empathy) reacting.

The importance here is that there is no ultimate right or wrong: all of these intuitions are valid — and they are also likely immovable. It is unlikely that you will ever convince someone who is disturbed by violence to feel otherwise. Similarly, if you find disrespect for a national symbol upsetting, there's likely nothing anyone can say to change your mind about that. It's something deeply unconscious within you.

Haidt's theory says moral judgments arise from intuition first, then reason justifies them later. But unlike cognitive dissonance and motivated reason, your moral foundations are likely lodged in place.

Over time, these moral foundations form the basis for our highest values and principles.

This, of course, doesn't mean we are slaves to our biology. We get to *interpret* our moral intuitions however we see fit. Our reason, with effort, can override or recalibrate these intuitions or point them in a different direction.

In summary, Haidt's research indicates that part of *where values come from* is an **innate moral disposition** — a handful of instinctual sensitivities. Different cultures then build different "ethical cuisines" with these flavor profiles.

The goal of this is two-sided: better understanding yourself and accepting who you are, but also better understanding others and accepting who they are.

Someone with different moral foundations from you isn't necessarily "brainwashed," or a "hack," or a "shill." They are tuned to different moral intuitions that likely exist in you too, but simply to a lesser degree.

Balancing Cultural Values at the Societal Level — Plato's Republic Revisited

Chances are you've heard the famous story of Rosa Parks — tired seamstress, refuses to give up her seat, sparks the modern American civil rights movement. But what most people don't realize is that her

refusal to give her bus seat to a white man wasn't spontaneous. It was deliberate. It was values-driven.

Rosa Parks had spent years quietly organizing, learning, and watching. And when the moment came — when she was told to stand up and move to the back of the bus — she didn't just say no to a bus driver. She said no to an entire value system. In a moment of social leverage, she took her value and inserted it into the wider system around her, causing an ongoing chain reaction that would shift the entire cultural value system around her.

Her decision wasn't about rebellion for rebellion's sake. It was about alignment. About saying, "This is where I stand. This is who I am. And I'm not getting up." Her courage didn't come from rage. It came from clarity. From a deep, immovable sense that justice, dignity, and equality were non-negotiable.

That's what it looks like when someone lives their values in real time. It's not grand. It's not loud. It's not a Hollywood speech. Sometimes it's just sitting still — and refusing to move.

Just as an individual must balance their values, a society and a culture must balance their values as well. And when the society's values drift out of balance, it's up to bold, strong people to stand up and pull them back.

You may find this notion of "balancing" cultural values via activism or politics to be strange. But it is, in fact, the underlying idea behind western political philosophy.

Plato's *The Republic* is the exploration of society as a fractal instantiation of the individual's psychology and vice-versa. For example,

just as an individual must balance virtues within herself to maintain healthy balance and psychological well-being, a society must balance various values culturally to thrive and remain healthy.

Just as an individual must cultivate wisdom and self-awareness to govern and question these values within herself, so must a society have the ability to address its own shortcomings, flaws, and overreaches.

Justice for Plato was essentially *each part of society valuing its appropriate role and not infringing on others'* — a harmony or balance among different value spheres. He warned that injustice occurs when one set of values consumes and overthrows the other values. Just as the tyranny of one dominating value can destroy society, so can the certainty or obsession of one value destroy an individual.[36]

In modern terms, one could say a good society finds a *mix of liberty (individualist values), equality (egalitarian values), and order (hierarchical values)* — reminiscent of the French motto "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité." **Politics, then, is essentially the argument over which values should be prioritized and how to structure them.**

Plato believed the solution was to have these classes integrated under wise rule, with everyone accepting a common value of justice.

On the individual level, that "wise rule" that we seek is what psychologists often refer to as *self-regulation*. But Aristotle called it "practical wisdom."

If the game of life is a balancing act of value against value, then the balancer must have wisdom to evaluate what is worth caring about and

[36] Plato. (1991). *The Republic of Plato: Second Edition* (A. Bloom, Trans.; 2nd ed.). Basic Books. (Original work published ca. 380 B.C.E.) Book IV, Section 2.

what is not worth caring about, and then the practicality to alter her actions accordingly. Practical wisdom is so important that Aristotle went as far as to imply that you could consider it the *only virtue*, as no other virtue was possible without it.[37]

Thus, we close this guide on values with a breakdown of practical wisdom (or self-regulation, in modern terms), how to achieve it and how to cultivate more of it.

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[37] Aristotle. (1984). *Nicomachean ethics* (W. D. Ross, Trans.). In J. Barnes (Ed.), *The complete works of Aristotle* (Vol. 2, pp. 1729–1867). Princeton University Press. (Original work published ca. 350 BCE)

Determining Your Core Values

Imagine you are stranded on a desert island. This island is abundant and you have access to everything you could ever possibly desire. What do you spend your time doing?

Another way to think about it — if you could pursue something with no fear of shame, embarrassment or failure, what would you pursue?

These sorts of mental exercises are useful because they help clarify what we actually value and care about. Our values often get muted or hidden from us by the pressures and expectations put on us by the people around us. So one way to gather clarity is to imagine a life without that expectation and without that pressure.

Another way to think about it is, ideally, how do you want to show up for the world around you? What do you want to be known for? Like Mandela, what mission or cause or idea are you willing to withstand ridicule and judgment?

Below are a few powerful exercises that can start giving you clues around what matters most.

And, if you'd like more exercises to try, you'll get one simple action step for each day of the month to help you clarify, assess, and build your life around your values inside *The Solved Membership*. You can learn more and join us here.

"The daily exercises take me 15 minutes at most, but even with such a small time expenditure, I see significant results already." – Ryan

The Desert Island Exercise

Imagine you were stranded on a desert island all alone, but the island is full of everything you could need or want — total abundance. Not only are your basic needs covered, but you also have access to anything you could want to explore your hobbies and interests, dreams and desires.

What would you spend your time doing? Would you read a bunch of books? Watch a bunch of movies? Listen to new music? Work on your favorite hobbies? Write that novel? Write poetry? Build out that business idea? Study astrophysics? Work on those bicep curls?

- **Make your list:** List the top 3-5 things you would spend most of your time doing. These are huge clues to some of your most important core values.
- **Identify the gap:** Compare this to the way you currently spend your time. How big of a gap can you identify here? Obviously, there are some things we just have to do in life whether we want to or not.

> But ideally, you want your real life to reflect this hypothetical life to the greatest extent possible.

The value of this exercise is found in taking away all the outside social pressure to conform to the values of others. It's just you and you alone. A large gap between your desert island self and your real-life self probably means you're allowing other people to define your values for you.

Example: When Maya did the Desert Island Exercise, she pictured her days filled with sketching, writing stories, and studying philosophy — things she barely touched in her corporate job. She realized creativity, self-expression, and lifelong learning were core values she'd been neglecting. The gap was clear: her real life was all deadlines and meetings. So, she started carving out time for creative projects and enrolled in a philosophy course — not to change careers, but to better align her life with what mattered most.

The Eulogy Perspective

Now let's take the opposite approach and remove you from the equation. What do you want to be known for?

Picture yourself at the end of a long, fulfilling life. A close friend stands up to deliver your eulogy — what do you hope they'll say about you?

- **List the qualities**: Think of three to five words or phrases you'd want to hear — maybe "always supportive," "never afraid to speak the truth," or "relentlessly curious."

- **Ask why**: Each of those phrases hints at a deeper value. "Supportive" might reflect compassion or loyalty. "Honesty" can be about integrity or authenticity.
- **Notice your emotions**: If a particular quality stirs up excitement, comfort, or resolve, it's likely tapping a significant value.

Example: Ravi was surprised to realize he wanted people to remember him for his open-mindedness and self-expression. From there, he identified creativity as a core value and began pursuing more artistic outlets.

Frustration as a Clue

Sometimes the things that irritate us are signposts for the values we hold dearest. For instance, if laziness in coworkers drives you up the wall, you might prize diligence or competence. If dishonesty makes you see red, integrity could be at the heart of your moral compass.

- **List your pet peeves**: It could be lateness, dishonesty, disorganization — whatever reliably sets you on edge.
- **Identify the opposite**: Suppose you wrote down "people missing deadlines." The flip side might be respect for others' time, accountability, and thorough follow-through.
- **Link to your value**: Pinpoint the positive quality you crave in those annoying situations. "I hate when people don't follow through" might translate to "I value dependability."

Example: Dara noticed that anytime a friend told even a small fib, she felt disproportionately upset. Realizing her frustration pointed to

honesty as a core value, she resolved to practice it more transparently in her own life, and gently let others know it mattered to her.

By identifying what frustrates you, you reveal the virtues you think are worth protecting. That newly discovered value could lead you toward choices, activities, or relationships that honor it — and away from those that don't.

Ranking and Prioritizing

Take your words from the above exercises — maybe you have eight or ten. Now, force yourself to pick the top four. This can feel challenging, but it clarifies which values take priority when resources (like time or energy) are limited.

- **Compare them**: Ask, "If I had to choose between X and Y in a tough situation, which one would I honor?" The one you choose probably ranks higher.
- **Refine**: Some values might overlap — e.g., "connection" and "family." Decide which label resonates more strongly.

Example: John found both "adventure" and "security" on his list. After ranking them, he realized that he'd choose a spontaneous road trip over staying in his comfort zone, which helped him see that he values exploration more than absolute stability.

Practicing these exercises won't magically solve every problem, but they'll point you toward the deeper principles that give shape to your life. With your values in view, you'll discover a steadier sense of

direction — and perhaps feel a little closer to living the life you genuinely want.

Some of the content in this guide can feel abstract, so keep these values in mind as you go through it. This can help you make the ideas more concrete and understand how they show up in your real life. And remember, if you want to go deeper and continue this process of understanding and clarifying your values, then make an action plan to build your life around them — you can always jump into *The Solved Membership*.

*"**The Solved Membership** gives extremely specific, tangible, and manageable action tools that aren't too overwhelming or time-consuming, and create an immediate sense of accomplishment and self-efficacy and help propel me forward."* – Gabby

The Value Hierarchy

At its core, my book *The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck* argues that it's impossible to not care about anything — *you always give a fuck about something*. The real issue is whether you're intentional about *what* you care about.

This is where value hierarchy comes in: the book is essentially a wake-up call to evaluate, prioritize, and consciously choose your values rather than absorb them passively from culture, family, or ego-driven impulses.

You already have a value hierarchy, whether you're aware of it or not. Most people's values are inherited or reactive — they care about being liked, looking good, avoiding discomfort, achieving arbitrary success metrics, etc.

In the book, I made the point that, "Not giving a fuck does not mean being indifferent; it means being comfortable with being different." This is a call to question the default values that drive our behavior. It's about recognizing that caring less about socially conditioned values frees you to care more about what actually matters to you.

But you also must choose what you value wisely — because there are good values, and there are, well, shitty values.

Shitty values are things like:

- Being right
- Feeling good all the time
- Always being positive

- Being admired
- Never being wrong or failing

These are low-quality values because they are:

- External
- Emotionally reactive
- In conflict with real growth

The value hierarchy needs pruning. These superficial, comfort-oriented values often sit at the top of people's lives. The whole point of the book was to help you see how shitty these kinds of values are and to seek better ones.

So what do good values look like? Well, I argued that good values are:

- Reality-based
- Socially constructive
- Immediate and controllable

These include:

- Responsibility over blame
- Curiosity over certainty
- Honesty over image
- Resilience over comfort
- Growth over pleasure

These values sit at the top of a better hierarchy because they generate long-term fulfillment, not just short-term gratification.

And a foundational concept I've pushed for years now is this: *every value you choose demands sacrifice*. If you choose honesty, you sacrifice

approval. If you value depth, you give up simplicity. You can't avoid trade-offs, only choose better ones.

A value hierarchy isn't about more, it's about *choosing what you're willing to give up.*

Choosing Your Struggle

It's a simple fact: You don't get to avoid struggle in life. You only get to choose *what* you struggle for. And this becomes glaringly obvious when you start to question your values.

Values don't just compete with one another — they come at the *cost of one* another.

Each value, when chosen, has an associated cost. A person who chooses stability may have to forgo novelty. A person who values independence may be forced to endure loneliness. A person who values mastery must embrace repetition, boredom, and delay. The question is not whether you suffer, but whether your suffering is *in service to* something that actually matters to you.

Most people drift through these tradeoffs unconsciously. They suffer without context. They work long hours for success but feel emotionally hollow because their relationships are neglected. They chase comfort at the expense of their health, then wonder why they feel listless and anxious. When you don't know what value your struggle is serving, the suffering starts to feel meaningless.

Choosing your values, then, is also choosing your pain. You're not just identifying ideals you admire — you're implicitly saying, "This is the kind

of discomfort I'm willing to endure." Because *every* meaningful pursuit comes with discomfort. This is the trade-off behind what Aristotle called *eudaimonia* — a fulfillment built not through pleasure, but through purposeful sacrifice.

Think about your current problems — your stressors, your inner conflicts, your persistent frustrations. Many of them aren't mistakes or flaws; they're the side effects of a value hierarchy that may be misaligned or unconscious. You might be chasing approval but sacrificing honesty. You might be seeking novelty but feeling unsafe. You might be striving for freedom, yet overwhelmed by isolation.

When you consciously define your values — and own the discomfort they require — you start to reclaim your agency. You begin to move through life not as a person avoiding pain, but as someone choosing which pain is *worth it*.

So, the next time you feel overwhelmed or conflicted, ask yourself: What value am I struggling for right now? Is it worth the price I'm paying?

That question — simple as it sounds — can radically change how you experience your suffering. It turns pain into purpose, effort into meaning, and failure into growth. Because, ultimately, your values are not what you *believe*.

They are what you're willing to *bleed for*.

Socrates Chose Death

At the end of his life, Socrates was dragged into court and given a brutal choice: stop teaching what he believed, stop challenging people's ideas, stop asking uncomfortable questions — or die.

Socrates chose death.

Why? Because to him, living without truth was no life at all. He famously said, "the unexamined life is not worth living." And not only did he believe it, did he *value* it, but he was willing to die for it.

Because integrity mattered to him more than comfort. Because the soul, he believed, was nourished not by safety or success or status — but by the pursuit of wisdom and the courage to live it, even when it costs you everything.

He had a chance to run. His friends begged him to escape. But he refused.

Not all values are created equal. We clearly prioritize some over others, forming what we might call a **value hierarchy.** Each of us carries an internal structure — an implicit ranking of what matters most. This prioritization guides much of our decision-making, just as it did for Socrates.

Philosophers have wrestled with this question for millennia. A relatively recent perspective, however, views values as structured within a hierarchy. The idea is that the mind unconsciously arranges values in an internal order of priority — from the most important, or terminal values, to the less central, instrumental ones.

The Value Hierarchy

This concept of a value hierarchy originated with the German philosopher Max Scheler (1874-1928) and was followed up by the philosopher Nicolai Hartmann (1882-1950). Many of their ideas have not aged well, but there are some interesting principles that are still relevant today:

- **Higher values tend to be timeless abstract principles. Lower values tend to be more temporary, concrete and specific.** We likely prioritize our values partly based on how ever-present they are in our decision-making. The more abstract the principle, the more applicable it is across human experiences, and the more consistently we can pursue it. Honesty can be pursued in each and every context, whereas something more concrete and material like, "a nice car" can only be pursued in specific circumstances, therefore making it a lower value.[38]

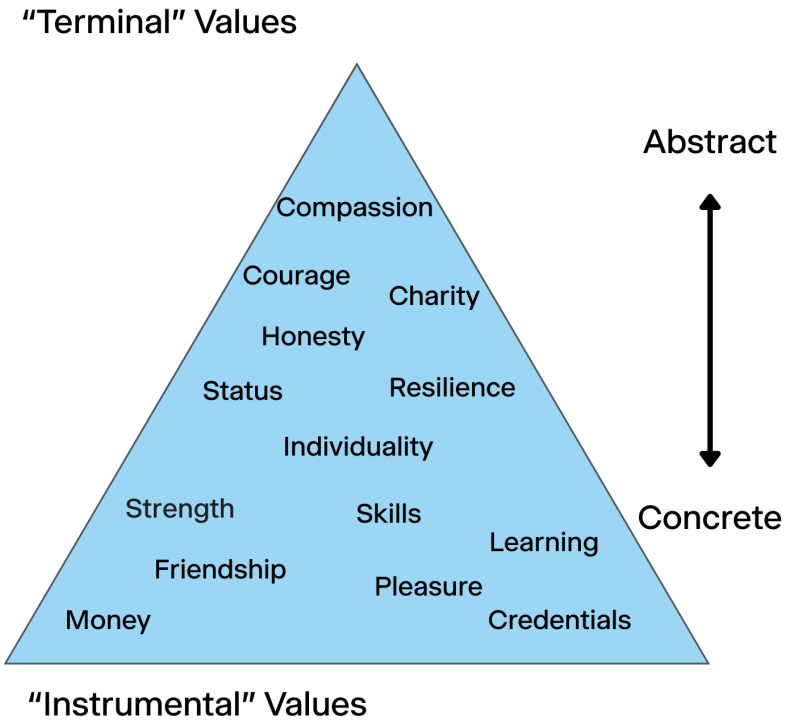
- **Higher values become the moral lenses by which we see everything else.** You and I may both value physical fitness. But if your higher value is *vanity and impressing others*, while my higher value is *health and longevity*, we will approach fitness differently, experience it differently, and have different emotions or perspectives about it.

- **We default to our lower values. Only with effort or creativity do we prioritize our higher values.** Generally speaking, our instinct is to choose pleasure over discipline, indulgence over patience, self-absorption over charity, etc. It's only with a certain amount of effort, incentive or creativity that we're able to devise ways to get

[38] Max Scheler - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2024, January 9).

us to pursue our higher spiritual values.

- **Morality is when we sacrifice our lower values for higher values. Immorality is when we sacrifice our higher values for lower ones.** We look at people who are able to sacrifice their money, pleasure, or reputation for some greater cause or purpose as deeply moral. We look at people who sacrifice their honesty, compassion, or integrity in pursuit of a bit more status or pleasure as immoral. Ultimately, our value hierarchy — and our willingness to sacrifice up or down that hierarchy — shapes our moral standing.[39]



Adapted from Rokeach, M. (1973). The Nature of Human Values. Free Press.

[39] 20th WCP: A study on the hierarchy of Values. (n.d.).

These Value Hierarchies are at the core of our personality and identity. They are the central determinants of our beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, self-worth, and sense of purpose.

Rokeach and others [40] noted that values carry an *"imperative to action"* — unlike mere opinions, deeply held **values *demand* that our actions are consistent with them.** Our failure to live up to our values thus causes us to suffer, to experience feelings of shame and guilt, and to feel as though we are being inauthentic.

Thus, values motivate behavior: a person who truly values compassion will strive to be compassionate even when it is difficult, and someone who values health will be driven to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Consequently, conflicts between values can create internal stress (e.g. valuing both *ambition* and *family* might create work–life balance issues), whereas clarity about one's values can lead to more consistent and authentic behavior.

It is also important to note that we can easily *lie to ourselves* about our own values. Perhaps you say and even believe that you value compassion — but if your actions are not compassionate, then it is hard to argue that you actually do. We will come back to this discrepancy between belief and action much later — it is important!

In sum, values serve as guiding principles that shape our beliefs about what is right or wrong, influence our everyday choices, and ultimately contribute to the construction of our identity and decision-making when we are presented with multiple options.

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[40] Jadaszewski, Stefan (2018) Milton Rokeach's Experimental Modification of Values: Navigating Relevance, Ethics and Politics in Social Psychological Research. *Psychology from the Margins*: Vol. 1, Article 2.

The Real Test of Values

Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison — most of them on Robben Island, confined to a tiny cell, forced into hard labor, with no end in sight. He was offered early release multiple times. And each time, all he had to do was publicly renounce his political beliefs — to say apartheid was justified. To say the system was right. That's it.

But he refused. Every single time.

Why? Because what mattered to him wasn't just getting out — it was getting out right. His value wasn't freedom at any cost. It was justice. Dignity. The belief that all people, regardless of color, deserve equal treatment under the law. He was willing to sacrifice decades of his preferences to uphold that value — he didn't eat the food he wanted to eat, or talk to the people he wanted to talk to.

He also deprived himself for decades of his own needs. He struggled, suffered and endured the physical and psychological tolls of that suffering.

But his values remained steadfast through to the end. And that's why we respect him so much, that simple unwillingness to give in to basic needs and preference for the sake of his values. This is, in many ways, how we understand morality, and define a "good life."

Morality, across cultures and continents, is often seen as the ability to surrender your lower values for higher ones, your selfish interests for society's good, and your present desires for the future's well-being.

These moral judgments appear to be hardwired into us — just as much as our impulse to resist them. Because living by them is hard. It's hard to

give up ourselves for society. It's hard to delay gratification in the present for the future. And it's hard to forgo our lower, pleasurable values, for our higher, abstract, principled values.

In this sense, sticking to our values — resisting the easy status and satisfaction of indulging a lower value — is a skill. It takes work and practice. It is something that must be taught and trained among young people.

This is also important because we can often delude ourselves into believing that we're living up to our higher values, even when we're not. We tell ourselves we're acting for the greater good, when really, we're enriching ourselves. We claim to be planning for the future, when in fact, we're indulging the present.

This is also part of the skill of living a values-based life. Honesty. Being honest with your own actions and motivations — knowing when you're full of shit.

Because, as we'll see, the human mind has an endless capacity to trick itself in order to get what it wants. Generally, your mind wants what's easy, tangible and immediate — it wants its lower values...

Unless you change them.

How Do You Change Your Values?

While teaching at the University of Minnesota, Leon Festinger and two of his colleagues — Henry Riecken and Stanley Schachter — came upon a newspaper story about a small apocalyptic cult led by a woman pseudonymously called “Marian Keech.” Keech claimed she received messages from extraterrestrials on the planet “Clarion,” predicting a catastrophic flood would destroy much of the Earth on a specific date in December 1954. Keech and a group of followers believed they would be rescued by flying saucers.

Festinger was intrigued by how strongly people held onto a belief in the face of skepticism and ridicule.

He hypothesized that when the prophecy failed, the group members would be forced to reconcile their devout conviction with the undeniable reality that the predicted end had not come. This was the perfect setup to observe how people handle competing cognitions — i.e., a belief (“We will be saved by aliens when the world ends”) versus the contradictory evidence (“The world did not end, and aliens did not appear”).

So Festinger and his colleagues arranged for researchers to infiltrate the group and observe its behavior from the inside. When the prophesied date came and went without incident, many outsiders assumed the group would fall apart. But the opposite happened: its members became even more committed, and the group grew stronger.

They rationalized the failed prediction by concluding that their faith had “saved the world” from destruction. Instead of dropping their belief, they **doubled down on it** and maintained their sense of purpose and mission.

Cognitive Dissonance

This paradoxical outcome — people becoming more committed after being proven wrong — inspired Festinger to study it further. And it would lead to one of the most seminal discoveries in the history of psychology: cognitive dissonance.[41]

Cognitive dissonance is the uncomfortable feeling we get when we hold two conflicting cognitions (ideas, beliefs, values) or when the world contradicts our values/beliefs.[42] Research shows this discomfort isn't just subjective: **it can produce measurable physiological discomfort**.[43] The greater the magnitude of dissonance, the greater the pressure for the individual to reduce it.[44]

Cognitive dissonance emerges in countless scenarios, often pushing individuals to justify, change, or minimize inconsistencies to restore mental balance.[45]

One example comes from one of Festinger's early experiments: participants completed a *very* boring task and were then asked to tell the next person it had been enjoyable. Some were paid $20 (a good reward) to lie, others only $1 (a trivial reward).

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[41] Festinger, L., Riecken, H. W., & Schachter, S. (1956). *When prophecy fails: A social and psychological study of a modern group that predicted the end of the world.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
[42] Festinger, L. (1962). Cognitive Dissonance. Scientific American, 207(4), 93–106
[43] Croyle, R. T., & Cooper, J. (1983). Dissonance arousal: Physiological evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 45*(4), 782–791.
[44] Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (2019). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In E. Harmon-Jones (Ed.), *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 3–24). American Psychological Association.
[45] Oshikawa, S. (1969). Can Cognitive Dissonance Theory Explain Consumer Behavior?. *Journal of Marketing, 33(4), 44–49.*

Surprisingly, later the $1 group reported actually felt more guilt about lying than the $20 group.

Why?

Because the $20 liars had enough external justification ("I lied because I got paid well") so their value of honesty remained unchanged — they felt no internal conflict.

The $1 liars, however, experienced dissonance: "I'm a person who values honesty, yet I lied for only $1 — *why* would I do that?"

Unable to attribute it to the money, they subconsciously changed their attitude to resolve the conflict: *"Actually, the task wasn't that bad, maybe I did kind of enjoy it"*. By believing the task was fun, they no longer saw themselves as having lied — restoring a sense of internal consistency.

This phenomenon shows how **behavior can lead to value/attitude change** when we can't otherwise justify the behavior.

Put another way, **our values follow our behaviors... even if we don't like the behaviors.**

If someone finds themselves acting against their professed value without strong external reason, they may *change the value* to match the action, because it's psychologically easier than admitting the wrongdoing. For example, a person who cheats on a test, while believing in honesty, might start thinking "Well, everyone cheats a little, honesty is overrated in a cut-throat environment" — essentially downgrading the value of honesty to reduce their cognitive dissonance.

How Do You Change Your Values?

Cognitive dissonance is a double-edged sword: we can use it to justify bad behaviors, or we can use it to nudge us into adopting good values. Psychologist Milton Rokeach, whom we covered earlier, did experiments of exactly that. He used a technique he called *self-confrontation*, which deliberately induced dissonance to change values like prejudice.

For example, Rokeach would have subjects write essays or answer questions that revealed inconsistencies in their own beliefs — thereby making them uncomfortable with their own stated ideas.

In one study, people who ranked **freedom** as more important than **equality** were gently confronted with the idea that civil rights activism for equality was, in actuality, a fight for universal freedom across the population. Not only did the people shift their attitudes about the word "equality," but the change persisted weeks afterward. Rokeach concluded that *"significant long-term changes in values can be brought about by inducing feelings of self-dissatisfaction about contradictions within one's value-attitude system."* [46]

In plain terms, if we realize *"I'm not living up to the kind of person I thought I was,"* we're motivated to change either our self-perception or our values to remove that conflict.

For personal growth, this suggests a subtle but important strategy: the action comes first, the value second. Not the other way around.

It also suggests that the discomfort of cognitive dissonance is simply a necessary part of the process. This is what I have always meant when I've written, "You cannot feel good until you get comfortable feeling bad."

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[46] Rokeach, M. (1973). Self-confrontation and confrontation with another as determinants of long-term value change. *In The nature of human values.* Free Press.

Cognitive dissonance essentially provides a mechanism for self-correction: either the value or the behavior must shift to restore internal consistency. Being aware of this process can help you steer the direction of change — ideally toward better values or a more aligned way of living.

But the story of the cult and Marian Keech is a warning: if we are in cognitive dissonance and *don't* take the opportunity to change, we are likely to cement ourselves even further into our old values and behaviors.

Self-Confrontation

The lesson here is that **values can change when we force ourselves into the discomfort of acting them out.** But that change can only happen if we are honest with ourselves in a way that might be uncomfortable.

Rokeach developed a method around this introspection to change one's values. He called it "self-confrontation" and there are a few ways to do it.

One way is to honestly rank your values and then reflect if your behaviors match your ideal of who you want to be. If you place **"achievement"** and **"wealth"** at the very top of your values pyramid and **"benevolence"** or **"family"** much lower, yet you spend your life taking care of your family and no time on your own goals, this dissonance means one of two things: either you value family more than you thought, *or* you're avoiding or ignoring what you truly value.

Another approach: write out what you spend your time on and also write a short "eulogy" or "mission statement" of how you want to be

remembered. Compare the two lists — any inconsistencies? If your eulogy says “She was generous and always there for others” but your values list didn’t mention helping others once, that might create cognitive dissonance, encouraging you to nurture generosity as a value moving forward.

In therapy or coaching, a facilitator might serve as that mirror — but much of this introspection can also be done solo or with a trusted friend. The key is an honest self-audit. Rokeach’s studies underscore that we can intentionally reshape our value hierarchy — especially when we recognize that a particular value has been neglected or overemphasized relative to what we truly aspire to.

The Impact of Trauma and Tragedy on Values

In the aftermath of World War II, much of the western world breathed a huge collective sigh of relief. After witnessing and then overcoming some of the worst atrocities ever committed by humanity, academics were eager to focus more on human flourishing.

As the dark tragedies of the human condition were behind us, it was time for a more positive outlook on human nature. How could we become more productive, more fulfilled, more self-actualized?

But this never fully sat right with one psychologist in particular — a voice that would go unheard for decades.

Kazimierz Dąbrowski was a Polish psychologist who lived through some of the 20th century’s darkest moments — World Wars, political repression, and massive cultural trauma. But what makes him unique isn’t just his story — it’s how he understood suffering.

He believed that personal growth often feels like breaking down. Not building up.

He called this “positive disintegration.”

While the aim of most psychology and philosophy in the mid-20th century was to cultivate greater productivity, confidence, and success, Dąbrowski, observing from behind the Iron Curtain, saw things differently: to truly become yourself, he realized, often requires falling apart first.

According to his view, emotional crises aren’t setbacks — they’re signals that your old identity has become too small for who you’re becoming. Anxiety, identity loss, even depression — these aren’t just afflictions; they’re the growing pains of expanding your psychological complexity.

It’s the inner chaos before you find deeper selfhood.

This turns everything we’ve been taught upside down. Most people think mental pain means something’s wrong. Dąbrowski believed it might mean something is finally right — that you’re beginning to break free from what was never truly you.

You might stop chasing status. You might question your values. You might feel totally lost!

That’s not regression. That’s transformation.

Dabrowski understood the inherent sacrifices we had to make in order to grow. You want clarity? You have to let go of certainty first. You want growth? You have to dismantle the fake identities that used to keep you safe. You want to evolve? You will feel worse before you feel better.

Dabrowski's ideas languished behind the Iron Curtain for a few decades before they were rediscovered by scholars. Today, his work is largely recognized as the predecessor of a fascinating theory called

Post-Traumatic Growth.

Sometimes, values change not through gentle reflection but through seismic life events. People who go through major trauma, loss, or life-threatening experiences often report a significant shift in what they value in life.

A classic example: someone survives a serious illness or accident and afterward they say *"I have a whole new outlook. I realize what's truly important now."*

Common value shifts after trauma include: greater appreciation for life, changed priorities like valuing relationships over material success, and strengthened spirituality or personal convictions.

In other words, surviving something awful can make previously overlooked values come to the forefront.

This isn't to romanticize trauma or make light of it — no one *needs* trauma to clarify values. But it is noteworthy how often people, in hindsight, say things like *"Cancer was a wake-up call that made me realize I was taking things for granted. Now I value each day and my relationships like never before."*

Tragedies can abruptly reorder our values hierarchy — essentially forcing a confrontation with mortality that asks, "What really matters if life is short and unpredictable?"

How Do You Change Your Values?

Even less extreme life transitions — like becoming a parent — can cause value shifts. New parents often report their priorities change overnight, valuing things like *security, family,* and *responsibility* more, and perhaps *adventure or personal freedom* less.

Another key dimension is **loss**. Losing someone dear can deepen one's value on connection or legacy — for example, finding meaning in carrying forward that person's values. Surviving adversity with others — whether as soldiers in combat or communities recovering from disaster — can strengthen values like loyalty, camaraderie, and community.

But trauma can also fracture the value system. Someone who has been betrayed might begin to devalue trust, becoming more guarded, cynical, or distrusting.

Researchers Tedeschi and Calhoun, who coined Post-Traumatic Growth, note that deliberate reflection on trauma, often through therapy or journaling, facilitates growth. People rebuild their assumptive world and often conclude with stronger value commitments.[47]

If you've been through a difficult experience, it might be worth exploring if your values have shifted. Sometimes we change but don't consciously acknowledge it — you might find that something that used to motivate you no longer does, or vice versa. It can be helpful to take stock: *"After going through X, what do I care about most now? What do I care about less?"*

[47] Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (2006). The Foundations of Posttraumatic Growth: An Expanded Framework. *Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth*. Routledge.

You might need to realign your life with these updated values. And in many cases, this value realignment is part of the healing process itself.

Charlie Munger's Maxim

Storied investor and business partner of Warren Buffett, Charlie Munger, was a modern-day philosopher. And perhaps his most insightful observation was the simple maxim: "Show me the incentive and I'll show you the behavior."

The unfortunate truth of human psychology is that we tend to justify what we are rewarded for. It is part of our hardwiring to adapt to our ever-changing environment. So if there is an opportunity in the environment, our beliefs and values may begin to adjust to better leverage that fact.

But incentives can backfire. In fact, if we feel as though we are being manipulated or coerced into valuing something, it can actually cause us to value it less.[48]

For example, children who once loved drawing — and then began receiving prizes for it — later showed less interest in drawing when the rewards were removed, **as if the external incentives had "crowded out" their intrinsic motivation for creativity.** The philosopher Max Scheler, the originator of the concept of the value hierarchy, argued that higher values must only be pursued for their own sake. If we take our highest values and make them means to an end, then we corrupt them and ruin them.

[48] Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 25(1), 54–67.

This is particularly relevant for workplaces and organizations. Employees often feel compelled to espouse whatever values are endorsed by leadership — whether it's competition, diversity, autonomy, or whatever.

Deep down, they will come to resent that value, because they will feel as though it is violating their autonomy. The pre-eminent theory on motivation, Self-Determination Theory, finds that people *only* internalize values if they feel autonomy and understand the importance. For instance, one might start recycling to avoid a fine (an external motivator), but gradually adopt environmentalism as a personal value — after becoming accustomed to the behavior and witnessing its positive impact.

Interestingly, **small incentives** or mild social pressure can actually facilitate internal value change more than large incentives. If I volunteer just because my company requires it, I might not take it as my value. But if I volunteer on my own accord or with a gentle nudge, I may start valuing altruism more, because I see myself doing it freely.

Festinger's $1 vs $20 study is, again, an illustrative example: the paltry $1 reward led people to change their attitude far more than the greater reward did. Large external incentives potentially give *too much* justification for the behavior, so the person has no need to change their internal values or attitudes.

Another incentive is **social norms and peer influence**. The anthropologist Margaret Mead noted that many values people have are absorbed through their social environment and peers — often without consciously realizing it. Moving to a different city, culture, or group can

shift someone's values over the years, as they adapt and see merit in the local norms.

But ultimately, external influences can only create the opportunity for value-change through new behaviors. It's only once we've experienced the new value, rationalized it and been emotionally rewarded for it, that we truly internalize it and have felt ourselves grow or change.

Overbearing rewards or punishments might change what you *do* in the short-term, but unless your beliefs and attitudes follow suit, your values will remain the same.

If you want to change your own values or someone else's, this suggests gentle persuasion works better than brute force. Engaging someone's sense of choice and reason — giving small challenges that encourage them to embrace a value — is more effective than large bribes or threats to "force" a value change. Lean into their cognitive dissonance. Meet them on their terms, not yours.

For your own self, if you want to adopt a new value — say you want to value health more — you might start with small self-challenges that are meaningful (e.g., run a 5K charity race) rather than extreme overhauls that you resent. That way, you build positive associations and intrinsic reasons for the value.

Finally, values can also change through **education and awareness** — learning new information can sometimes incite that feeling of positive cognitive dissonance — the misalignment between our knowledge and behaviors, and therefore shift what we value.

How Do You Change Your Values?

Education and awareness, combined with the social influence, leads us into a massive topic that we still have not touched on yet: culture and the influence of society.

Our culture is a sea of values that we grow up swimming in. And in many cases, it's only by leaving our culture that we're able to examine it with any objectivity.

How to Develop Practical Wisdom

In Greek mythology, Odysseus was the king of Ithaca, a war hero of Troy, and the poster child for human cunning. His journey home from the Trojan War is a masterclass in endurance and failure, brilliance and blindness. One of the most telling moments — one that still punches through 3,000 years later — is when he was confronted by the Sirens.

The Sirens were mythological creatures from Greek legend — part woman, part bird — who lived on a rocky island and sang songs so hauntingly beautiful and seductive that no sailor who heard them could resist.

But the Sirens weren't just beautiful voices. They were voices that spoke exactly to your ego, your fantasies, your deepest desires. They didn't just sing — they knew you. And every man who ever heard their song would steer straight into the rocks. That's what makes them dangerous. They didn't kill you — they made you kill yourself.

Odysseus knew this. He knew he was smart. He knew he was brave. But he also knew that none of that would matter. When the world seduces you with what you want to hear, you become powerless.

So what did he do? He didn't try to out-muscle temptation. He didn't pretend he'll be the exception. He prepared for failure. He made his men plug their ears with wax — and then he had them tie him to the mast.

And the moment came. He heard the song. He lost his mind. He begged to be let loose. But he couldn't move. Because past-him didn't trust future-him. And that's the point.

How to Develop Practical Wisdom

The world will try to seduce you with promises and stories and riches that don't align with who you actually are. You will be tempted to give yourself up, to give your values up, to destroy yourself among the rocky shores of life, to get these quick rewards. And this is the way of self-destruction.

Therefore, like Odysseus, many times the smartest thing you can do is tie yourself to the mast of your own values before the music starts.

Up to now, we've discussed understanding values — identifying them, knowing their origins, balancing them. But *knowing* your values is one thing; *living* by them day-to-day is another challenge entirely.

Practical wisdom is essentially the ability to make the right decisions in real situations, aligning your actions with your values while considering the complex trade-offs of life. It's "practical" because it's about action in context, and "wisdom" because it requires more than just following the crowd — it's about judgment, self-awareness, and balance.

In this section, we'll explore ways to cultivate that kind of wisdom in your own life so that your values aren't just abstract ideals but guides to your behavior. We'll focus on four interrelated skills:

1. Self-awareness
2. Emotional regulation
3. Strong relationships and
4. Non-judgmental acceptance

If you'd like to work through these lessons using simple daily action steps and exercises alongside a supportive community, check out ***The Solved Membership***. Inside you'll find a non-judgmental space to share your takeaways on values — and on living by them — with like-minded people. I think you'll love it as much as Debbie does:

"I have been craving a community like this. A community that dives deep and doesn't cause stress. A community of people who are looking to improve in similar areas as I am." – Debbie

Self-Awareness: Aligning Behavior with Values

You cannot improve upon something until you are aware of the problem. Therefore, **self-awareness** is the starting point of any form of personal growth.

Self-awareness is being mindful of your own thoughts, feelings, and motives — essentially knowing *what you are doing and why*. Without self-awareness, you could violate your values without even realizing it, or you could carry unexamined values that aren't truly yours.

Developing self-awareness involves regular reflection on questions like: *"What do I truly care about? Does this matter? Are my actions today in line with those values? If not, why did I diverge?"*

One helpful practice is keeping a journal or doing a nightly review. For example, you might write about a situation where you felt uneasy and ask, "Did I act against a value of mine? What was going on internally?" Perhaps you snapped at a friend — upon reflection you realize it conflicts with your value of kindness, and the real reason was you were stressed about something else. That awareness then gives you the chance to apologize or handle stress differently next time.

Psychologists have noted that simply monitoring one's behavior relative to goals increases the likelihood of change.[49]

To develop wisdom, you need to *notice* value incongruences in real time, as they are happening. This is a skill you develop through practice, like anything else.

[49] Baumeister, R. F., & Vohs, K. D. (2007). Self-regulation, ego depletion, and motivation. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 1(1), 115–128.

Another method is to set an intention each morning: “Today I will practice my value of patience whenever I feel frustrated.” Then in a moment when you feel irritation rising, self-awareness kicks in: *“Ah, here is that frustration. I value patience and kindness, so how do I choose to act right now?”*

This mindful pause can be transformative. It’s the difference between slipping into a fit of road rage and quietly changing to one of your favorite songs and relaxing.

Self-awareness also means understanding your triggers and blind spots. Maybe you realize you tend to abandon your value of honesty when you’re afraid of conflict — so you tell white lies. By recognizing that pattern, you can work on tolerating conflict better or finding tactful honesty strategies.

It’s very much like the earlier idea of cognitive dissonance: you *bring to awareness* the discrepancy between value and action, which then motivates you to resolve it.

A helpful technique from Action and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is to identify your core values and then regularly ask for each, *“On a scale of 1-10, how much did my actions today align with this value?”* If low, what specific actions can you take tomorrow to improve? This can help foster both awareness and a plan.

And finally, find someone in your life who can (and will) call you on your BS. It’s hard to find, but if there is a trusted friend, family member, or therapist you can go to and ask for their perspective on your behavior, you might be surprised at the gap between how other people see your behavior and how you see yourself.

Ultimately, self-awareness drives everything. Without it, there is little to no progress in anything else.[50]

So, practice introspection. Pick up a journaling habit, a meditation practice, a trusted confidant, and open the space for further growth to emerge.

Emotional Regulation: Keeping Emotions Aligned with Values

Why do we fail to live by our values even when we know them? Often, it's because strong emotions pull us off course.Anger, fear, jealousy, stress, lust — these feelings can be overwhelming, and they sometimes drive us to act in ways we later regret or that violate our deeper principles. Developing *emotional regulation* skills is thus a cornerstone of living according to your values.

Emotional regulation doesn't mean suppressing emotions or not feeling them. It means managing them in a healthy way — recognizing them, understanding them, and choosing your response rather than being impulsive. A wise person can feel anger yet still choose to respond calmly, valuing respect more than the fleeting release of screaming. An unwise person, by contrast, becomes captured by their anger and "loses themselves" in it. That experience of losing yourself in the emotion is the feeling of subverting a higher value (respect) for a lower one (indulgence) — and afterward, you probably feel awful for it.

[50]Klussman, K., Curtin, N., Langer, J., & Nichols, A. L. (2022). The importance of awareness, acceptance, and alignment with the self: A framework for understanding self-connection. *European Journal of Psychology*, *18*(1), 120-131.

Psychologist Albert Ellis used to say, between an event and our reaction is our interpretation, which we can control.[51] We can apply that: If someone insults you and your immediate emotion is rage, *practical wisdom* would have you pause (self-awareness: "I am very angry now") and recall your values ("I value dignity and I don't want to escalate to cruelty") before responding. Techniques like deep breathing, or excusing yourself for a moment can help in these heated times. By calming the physiological storm, you give your value-driven mind a chance to step back in.

One component of emotional regulation is *"cognitive reappraisal"* — reframing a situation to change its emotional impact. Say your value is compassion but you feel a flash of anger at someone's mistake. You can reappraise: "They didn't do it to annoy me; maybe they're having a tough day." This reframing can change anger to empathy. It's a skill that can be learned: next time you feel a strong negative emotion toward someone, try to think of at least one other interpretation of their behavior that is less offensive to you. This often quickly reduces harsh emotions and allows you to act more in line with values of understanding or patience.

Another key component is developing a tolerance for discomfort. Sometimes, living your values is hard — or even painful. Standing up for the truth can be terrifying. Showing kindness when someone is being rude can feel nearly impossible.In these moments, you must accept and manage the negative emotions that arise — for the sake of the higher value.

[51] Ellis, A. (1991). The revised ABC's of rational-emotive therapy (RET). *J Rational-Emot Cognitive-Behav Ther* 9, 139–172.

The discomfort itself isn't the real problem; it's our refusal to accept it that is the problem. If we can accept that living by our values often demands discomfort, we are far better prepared to uphold them in the moments that matter.

One technique: remind yourself *why* the value matters — "I'm going through this discomfort because I value doing the right thing." That can give you courage and resolve, turning the emotion into determination. Another is simply *breathing through* the emotion — acknowledging it ("I'm feeling anxious but that's okay") and proceeding anyway. Over time, doing so builds emotional resilience; you prove to yourself that you can survive emotional discomfort, which lessens its power.

Emotional regulation, paired with self-awareness, leads to acting from your values rather than from your transient mood. It's a hallmark of someone with integrity and consistency.[52]

Strong Relationships: The Social Pressure of Higher Wisdom

Earlier we discussed the power of incentives on shaping our values. It's easy to talk about money or material gains, but the strongest incentives are not financial, they are social.

Humans are inherently social beings. We thrive when we feel connected, validated, and supported by others.[53] We suffer when we feel

[52] Bayly, B., & Bumpus, M. F. (2020). Predictors and implications of values clarity in first-year college students. *College student journal*, *53*(4), 397–404.
[53] Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychological Bulletin, 117(3), 497–529.

ostracized, belittled or ignored. This social grounding has several implications for cultivating practical wisdom:

- **Co-Regulation of Emotions**: Psychologists use the term *co-regulation* to describe how partners, friends, and family members help each other manage stress or emotional upheaval.[54] A calm or empathetic response from a loved one can diffuse anger or anxiety, making it easier for you to return to a balanced state where you can act according to your values.

- **Moral and Values Feedback**: Trusted friends and family can serve as sounding boards for moral dilemmas.[55] By discussing conflicts or uncertainties with someone you respect, you can see your choices from fresh angles. These honest conversations help illuminate blind spots and prevent self-deception. If you've strayed from a core value like honesty or compassion, a compassionate friend can reflect that back to you gently, creating an opportunity for self-correction.

- **Motivation and Accountability**: When you are part of a group or partnership that prizes growth and integrity, you tend to hold each other accountable. It might be as simple as friends reminding one another of their health goals, or as profound as a spouse encouraging you to speak up for yourself at work because they know you wish to value assertiveness. Accountability partners can

[54] Sbarra, D. A., & Hazan, C. (2008). Co-regulation, dysregulation, self-regulation: An integrative analysis and empirical agenda for understanding adult attachment, separation, loss, and recovery. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 12(2), 141–167.
[55] Friedman, R. (2002). Developing partnership promotes peace: group psychotherapy experiences. *Croatian medical journal, 43 2*, 141-7 .

> improve follow-through on cherished goals, thereby helping you *live* rather than merely *profess* your values.[56]

This is all great. But there's a catch: **you need to have relationships with people who are aligned with your values**. And those relationships must be healthy, loving and supportive.

How to seek out, find and foster healthy, loving relationships is beyond the scope of this guide (future episode!)

But relationships with people who share your values are crucial to developing and maintaining the wisdom to manage your own. As the saying goes, no man is an island. Find people who challenge and encourage you, then they can become powerful catalysts for living a richer, more consistent, and more enlightened life.

Non-Judgment and Self-Acceptance: The Foundation for Growth

When we fail to live up to our values, our natural reaction is to chastise ourselves, judge ourselves, and experience shame or embarrassment. Ironically, this is the worst possible thing you can do in these instances.

It is counterintuitive, but **accepting yourself as you are — flaws and all — actually helps you become the person you want to be**. As Carl Rogers once put it: *"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."* [57]

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[56] Peteet, J. R., Witvliet, C. V. O., & Evans, C. S. (2022). Accountability as a key virtue in mental health and human flourishing. *Philosophy, Psychiatry & Psychology*, *29*(1), 49–60.
[57] Rogers, C. R. (1961). On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy. Houghton Mifflin.

If you're constantly berating yourself for not living up to your values, you may create shame and discouragement that encourages you to give up or hide from the truth, thus hindering self-awareness and growth.

Non-judgment means observing yourself (and others) without harsh condemnation. It's a core principle in mindfulness, which encourages noticing your thoughts and feelings without labeling them as good or bad. Applied to values, this means that if you fail to live up to a value, you acknowledge it matter-of-factly — *"I cheated on my diet today; that's against my value of health."*

While you may feel disappointment or sadness, you refuse to spiral into narratives of judgment or condemnation. You don't tell yourself you're a loser, that you have no willpower, or that you can't achieve anything you set your mind to. These stories are self-defeating. Instead, practice self-compassion. Tell yourself: *"I'm human and I slipped. What can I learn? How can I support myself to do better tomorrow?"*

Self-acceptance is not giving yourself a pass to keep violating values; it's forgiving yourself for past mistakes and understanding yourself so that you can improve. Research by Kristin Neff on self-compassion shows that treating yourself with kindness and understanding when you fail decreases anxiety and depression and increases motivation to correct course.[58] When you beat yourself up, you may actually be subtly hiding from the issue or causing you to feel so demoralized that you never try again.

In practice, if you act against a value, a wise approach is to acknowledge the lie without ego judgment ("I told a lie; that was against my value"),

[58] K. W. Brown, J. D. Creswell, & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), Handbook of mindfulness: Theory, research, and practice. The Guilford Press.

identify why (fear, convenience, etc.), accept that you did it (you're not going to rewrite history or endlessly punish yourself), then commit to the value going forward — perhaps apologize to the person, and plan how to handle it better.

This cycle — notice, accept, correct — is far more effective than either extreme of excusing yourself completely — which enables further bad behavior, or excessively condemning yourself — which leads to shame and avoidance.

Additionally, **practical wisdom involves tolerance towards others' imperfections**. This is because it allows you to see situations more clearly — without excessive bias or contempt. When you label someone as "evil" or "stupid," you shut down curiosity and close yourself off to learning — or to the possibility that you might actually be wrong.

Being non-judgmental doesn't mean not having moral standards; it means approaching transgressions (yours or others') with a constructive mindset rather than one of pure blame. It aligns with the concept of "hate the sin, not the sinner" — you focus on actions and consequences, not condemning the person's entire worth as an individual.

But ultimately, the only way to really live out your values is by living them out publicly for all the world to see — and then accepting the consequences.

As we've learned, every value has a trade-off associated with it and every value demands some degree of sacrifice. Many people in the world will not appreciate those trade-offs or sacrifices and so you must be ready for the moment when they voice their dissatisfaction.

In this sense, the antithesis of living out your values is living out everyone else's values. It is giving in to the social pressures and cultural definitions of what's good. And it's giving up your autonomy and responsibility.

Ultimately, practical wisdom is essentially about **bridging the knowing-doing gap**: using self-awareness to know your values in the moment, regulating your emotions so they serve rather than sabotage your behaviors, surrounding yourself with support and positive social pressure and accepting the social consequences so you can keep learning rather than getting stuck in guilt or denial. When these abilities come together, you develop a kind of inner guidance system and eventually become the person who, even under pressure, tends to do what aligns with their principles — not out of rigid duty alone, but out of an integrated understanding of self, emotion, and context.

You might notice this sounds like building character — indeed it is. This is exactly how Aristotle saw it. You build your inner character the same way you build anything — one piece at a time. Some days you'll succeed. Some days you won't. But each scenario, good or bad, is an opportunity for further practical wisdom.

Conclusion

The 80/20 of Values

There is a lot in this guide to digest. But through all of the theory and philosophy, here are the most important takeaways:

- **Clarifying your core values** begins with deliberate introspection, often by writing down a wide range of possible values — like loyalty, freedom, kindness — and forcing yourself to choose which resonate most deeply. You can also reflect on emotionally charged memories to see what principles were at stake for you in those moments. Pinpointing exactly what you care about lays a foundation for making decisions that honor, rather than undermine, your sense of purpose. This clarity transforms abstract ideas about "what matters" into tangible reference points you can use day-to-day.

- **Mapping out higher versus lower values** involves noticing which values you would sacrifice for others — and why. For instance, you may say health matters more than comfort, yet you frequently avoid exercise to sleep in. This process helps you see what truly comes first in practice, and whether that lineup aligns with the person you want to be. As you become more conscious of these trade-offs, you can recalibrate your priorities toward the values you consider most meaningful.

- **Confronting cognitive dissonance** means shining a light on the times when your actions do not match your stated values. You

might pause weekly to examine specific instances in which you felt uneasy or guilty, then connect that feeling to the value you compromised. By intentionally reviewing these gaps, you challenge yourself to either change your behavior or re-evaluate the priority of that value. This honest self-review creates a productive discomfort that can motivate genuine personal growth.

- **Developing practical wisdom** relies on building self-awareness and emotional regulation so that you can act in line with your values, not just talk about them. In emotionally charged situations, pausing to acknowledge your feelings before responding gives you a moment to decide if your planned reaction reflects your true principles. Simple practices like focused breathing or rethinking the other person's perspective can help you avoid impulsive decisions that lead to regret. Over time, these small acts of mindful self-control add up, forging an internal compass that consistently guides you toward behavior you find honorable.

- **Finally, creating a values-supportive environment** anchors these efforts in everyday life. Seeking out companions or mentors who share your commitment to self-improvement provides both accountability and encouragement, making it harder to ignore your higher principles. Tools like habit-trackers or reflective journals serve as regular reminders of the values you want to live by, ensuring you don't lose sight of them amid everyday stress. In a setting where your chosen values are encouraged—rather than threatened—you can sustain the progress you've made and continue growing into the person you aspire to be.

Real-Life Benefits of Value Alignment

Should you do this, it will have massive benefits in your day-to-day existence. Decades of research demonstrate that people who discover and embody their values experience:

- **Less Stress, More Peace:** Living true to your values reduces internal conflict and stress, leading to better mental health and even a calmer physiological stress response.
- **Greater Resilience and Emotional Stability:** Your values provide an emotional anchor, making you more resilient in the face of adversity and contributing to a more stable, balanced emotional life.
- **Meaningful Happiness:** Following your values boosts life satisfaction by infusing your life with meaning and purpose. You're happier when you pursue what *you* find meaningful, rather than external definitions of success.
- **Mental Clarity:** When your actions match your beliefs, you experience less mental friction. This cognitive alignment leads to clearer thinking and more confident decision-making, without the fog of regret or self-doubt.
- **Better Relationships:** Living authentically according to your values fosters trust and understanding in relationships. It encourages healthy interactions and attracts people who respect you for who you are, leading to stronger social connections.

- **More Motivation and Drive:** Values give you a powerful why. They ignite your internal motivation and help you stick to your goals, making it more likely that you'll achieve outcomes that truly satisfy you.

Clarify Your Values & Build Your Best Life Around Them

Imagine it's a Wednesday, and you're just wrapping up work for the day.

You're "behind" on a series of tasks you'd set out to accomplish — going to the gym, sending your partner a sweet note to let them know you're thinking of them, checking in on a friend or family member who's having a rough time, and there's also a bunch of unanswered messages on your phone from people you love.

These are all things you value, yet you only have time and energy for so much. **You decide to be kind to yourself** — thankfully you've worked on that with your therapist enough to be good at it now. But now what? You've read this guide and you have all the knowledge on values.

But how can you put it into practice?

How can you get more intentional and use all you've learned to better handle the real-life conflicts you'll find yourself in?

Well, that's where ***The Solved Membership*** comes in–my members-only community built on the idea that continuous growth beats out big effort every time.

Inside, you'll get exactly what you need to **clarify and reorganize your values** and **develop practical wisdom** so you can live by them, in a **values-supportive environment** to help you stay the course.

I designed this membership to encourage the small wins it really takes to make lasting life change — and in a way that is flexible, doable, and compassionate. You'll even get an entire course of action steps *specific* to defining and living by your values, based on all the knowledge in this guide.

This truly is the foundation for a fulfilling & deeply meaningful life.

So I hope you check it out and consider joining here.

"If you're even thinking about joining, there's a reason. The Solved Membership isn't just another self-help program — it's a place where real growth happens, with people who are doing the messy, meaningful work right alongside you. The content is powerful, but the community is what makes it life changing." – Sarah