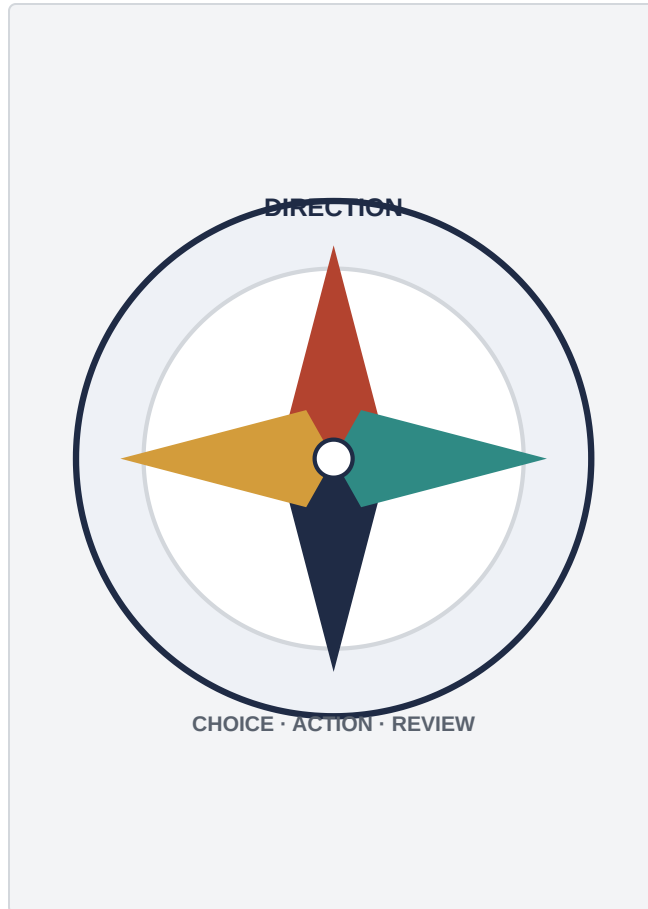


An Introduction to Values

A complete, redesigned edition of the Psychology Tools guide for understanding, choosing, and acting on values.



This guide is about helping you live a well-lived life: one where you are connected with your values—the ways of living you find meaningful and rewarding.

How to use it

Work through the guide in sequence if values are new. If you are familiar with values, or are working with a therapist, move to the section most useful now.

Learn

What values are, why ACT treats them as directions, and how they differ from goals.

Practice

Choose values, plan three actions, and respond to barriers.

UNDERSTAND

Pain, avoidance, and the ACT frame.

CLARIFY

Values as chosen qualities and directions.

CHOOSE

Sort 69 source words and refine a top three.

ACT & ADAPT

Plan three steps and respond to barriers.

Source and sharing notice

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About the authors

The original guide credits three clinicians and Psychology Tools.

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Dr Jenna LeJeune is President and co-founder of Portland Psychotherapy Clinic, Research and Training Center in Portland, Oregon. As a licensed clinical psychologist, Dr. LeJeune is deeply interested in issues of meaning, purpose, and values. In her clinical practice, Dr. LeJeune specializes in using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to help those she serves connect with what is most meaningful, so that they are able to live lives of purpose and integrity even in the midst of suffering.

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About Psychology Tools

Psychology Tools creates and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. It supports mental health professionals to deliver more effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, its library contains hundreds of resources, professional guidance, and multilingual translations.

Its materials are used by practitioners and teams worldwide and are designed to enhance practice, save time, and help clinicians feel prepared.

psychologytools.com

This does not mean living without pain or suffering. You may have come to therapy or started this guide because you are trying to “fix” or get rid of difficulties—specific conditions such as depression or anxiety, problems resulting from difficult experiences such as trauma, or a general feeling of being stuck or lost. That is understandable; none of us likes to suffer. There are effective tools and skills that may help people cope with painful experiences.

Source framing · The central contrast

“Instead of being centered around trying to feel ‘good’, it’s focused on helping you live well—because a well-lived life is about a whole lot more than just avoiding pain.”

This guide covers

- **What values are** and why they are important.
- **Exploring** your values.
- **Taking action** toward your values.
- **Facing barriers** and staying on course.

Use in sequence. Unless values are already familiar, or you are working with a therapist, the source recommends moving through the sections in order.

Evidence-informed context

These ideas describe an ACT framework, not a universal rule or guaranteed outcome. Values work is one part of ACT's six-process model, and a guide does not by itself treat depression, anxiety, trauma, pain, or another condition. Symptom relief, medical care, safety, rest, and external problem-solving can all remain important.^[E1–E6]

Before you continue: What would you hope to understand, choose, or do differently after working through this guide?

[illegible]

Related full guide retained from the source

This resource is an abridged version of *Values: Connecting To What Matters*, designed to introduce values and help readers take first steps toward what matters. The full version includes more exercises and information intended to help readers refocus on a well-lived life.

Find it at: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/values-connecting-to-what-matters/>

People often come to therapy or read psychological self-help materials because they are suffering. They may feel profound sadness or intense fear, struggle with difficult thoughts and worries, or experience another form of pain or discomfort. Understandably, they may want to get rid of this suffering.

This strategy often works best when the problem is external—what the source calls an “outside the skin” problem. If there is a rock in your shoe, removing it solves the problem.

People may work very hard to eliminate anxiety, worry, self-doubt, hopelessness, memories, sensations, or other painful experiences. The source proposes that, in some situations, more effort to get rid of internal experience can give it more room in daily life.

Question: what happens when control becomes the main project?

“Outside” and “inside” are teaching labels, not diagnostic categories. Internal experiences can respond to evidence-based treatment, skills, medication, environmental change, or support. ACT specifically targets *experiential avoidance* when attempts to alter private experiences are costly, ineffective, or unnecessary—not every effort to feel better.^[E2]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

From moving away to moving toward

The source presents ACT as a choice about where attention and effort go—not a demand to ignore symptoms or danger.

Source framing · Two statements in the source

1. “You are going to experience pain in your life. Sadly, it’s an inescapable part of being human.”
2. “The more our lives become oriented around avoiding what we don’t want, the less they’re focused on what we do want.”

You may recognize times when so much energy went into moving away from pain that what you wanted to move toward became harder to see. The source asks whether this is part of why you are reading.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) calls that “something else” **values**. It aims to support contact with the present and persistence or change in behavior when doing so serves chosen values.^[E1]

Source question: What are you going to focus your efforts and energy around—your pain or something else?

ACT’s proposal: pain can be present while action also serves something meaningful.

Not an either/or verdict

The source's wording is retained above as its model. In practice, pain varies, can sometimes be reduced, and may call for treatment, protection, recovery, accommodation, or rest. A person does not have to choose “values instead of care.” Ask: **What combination of care, safety, symptom support, and values-consistent action is workable here?**

NOTICE	ORIENT	CHOOSE
Moving away from? Name the thought, feeling, memory, sensation, problem, or situation without grading yourself.	Moving toward? Name a quality or direction that matters in this context.	Workable now? Include safety, treatment, energy, access, responsibilities, and support.

A “moving away” pattern I have noticed:

Something I might want to move toward as well:

What are values?

“Values” can mean different things. This guide uses the word in a specifically ACT-informed way.

Sometimes *values* refers to a sense of right and wrong: “That goes against my values.” At other times, it means areas of life that matter, such as family, work, or community: “I really value this relationship.” People may also use *values* like goals—things to achieve, such as being a parent or making money.

None of those everyday uses is wrong. Here, values are presented from an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy perspective. They are not objects you possess or endpoints you achieve. They concern **how you are living**: what your actions serve, not only what you are doing.

Working ACT definition: values are chosen qualities of purposeful action that can be expressed moment by moment. Concrete values-consistent goals can be completed; the value remains an ongoing direction.^[E1]

Eight ways ACT therapists talk about values

“Values are about being proud of how you lived your life.”	“Values are how you are living when you are living a meaningful life.”
“Values are ways of living that are meaningful.”	“Values are what living a well-lived life means for you personally.”
“Values are the qualities you want to embody with your actions.”	“Values are what you choose to make important in your life through your actions.”
“Values are what you want your life to stand for.”	“Values reflect the kind of person you’d want to be as you move through this life.”

A description, not a test
These phrases overlap but are not identical. Treat them as prompts. A values label does not reveal a hidden essence, prove character, or determine what anyone ought to value.

Directions, not destinations

Values describe qualities you can bring repeatedly; goals describe concrete endpoints or steps.

Values are not actions you can complete or finish. They are more like directions than destinations.

In ACT, “I value being a parent” is usually treated as a role or accomplished status, not a value. “I value family” names an important life area, but not a behavior. A values phrase might instead be “**lovingly caring for my family**” or “**playfully engaging with my kids.**” The lovingly caring or playfully engaging quality is the value.

Your values are reflected in how you “show up,” how you spend time and energy, the qualities you bring to activities, and what your efforts serve.

If you value being supportive and caring in relationships, you might go to your niece’s basketball game. The value is not only attendance. It may involve putting your phone away and attending intentionally, because of how and why you want to be there.

GOALS ARE LIKE DESTINATIONS

Reach a particular peak

A goal can be attained, completed, revised, replaced, or made unavailable.

Example: Attend my niece’s game on Saturday.

You can reach the destination and accomplish the goal.

VALUES ARE LIKE DIRECTIONS

Keep orienting north

A value can guide different actions across contexts and be expressed again and again.

Example: Be supportive and caring in this relationship.

You do not “accomplish” the direction; it helps orient the journey.



LIFE AREA / DOMAIN

Family

VALUE / DIRECTION

Lovingly caring

GOAL / ACTION

Put my phone away and attend Saturday’s game

One important life area:

How I might want to show up there:

Your values are **your own**

The same behavior—including not doing something—can serve different values for different people.

Going to a friend's party, going to a basketball game, or deciding not to go may reflect different values and functions depending on the person and context.

Friendly and welcoming

"I want to be someone who is friendly, so I'm going to make sure I talk with some new people at the party and make them feel welcome."

Health and rest

"I value being healthy, but I haven't been getting enough sleep lately. Even though I'd like to go to the party, I'm going to stay home and get some rest instead."

Reliable friendship

"I think it's really important to be a reliable friend, and so I'll go to this party even though I don't feel like it."

Adventure

"I want to live a life of adventure. That's meaningful to me, so I'll go to the party as a way to be adventurous, even though I don't know anyone and I feel anxious."

Playfulness

"I value being playful. This party will give me a chance to be playful and fun."

The source emphasizes free choice. People may value creativity, caring for the planet, justice, health, relationships, play, rest, or many other directions. It says there are no universally "right" or "wrong" values to uncover; all of these examples can be valid and "good," and you choose what to make important.

Choice is personal and contextual

Values can express care for others and can be chosen in relation to family, culture, community, spirituality, history, or collective responsibilities. Word lists can omit culturally meaningful values and may invite socially desirable answers; use them as prompts, not verdicts.^{[E3][E7]}

One action I could take—or not take—for more than one possible reason:

The value I would want that choice to serve:

Logan: when the same behavior changes what it serves

As Logan struggled more with her body, running stopped being about health or presence. It became about control, self-criticism, and grasping for a body that always seemed out of reach. Rather than being present, she was running to achieve a body she thought she could be at peace with. The same behavior that had served health and presence lost meaning and joy when it became organized around control and escaping present pain.

Francesca: adventure after a life change

Lucas: caring in different settings

Lucas understood caring for people as important throughout his life. Nursing in an addiction recovery center and volunteering at a food bank were demanding and sometimes tiring, yet they let him act as someone who helps others. He also cared for himself through singing in a choir and gardening, and cared for family by cooking on holidays. Caring was a thread expressed across roles.

A value that has taken different forms in my life:

An activity whose purpose or meaning has changed for me:

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Values and difficult experiences

Caring can expose us to uncertainty and pain. This does not make pain a requirement or a command.

The source proposes that things we care about can also be sources of pain: caring about connection can make rejection matter; loving someone can make loss or worry painful; caring for the future can bring fear.

- You may feel anxious about rejection in social situations.
- You may feel grief over a lost relationship or worry about a struggling loved one.
- You may feel scared about your future or the future of the planet.

Source reflection: “For this NOT to be painful, what would I have to NOT care about?”

Costs the source asks you to consider

- Would avoiding rejection anxiety require giving up on belonging?
- Would avoiding mourning or worry require not caring about the person?
- Would avoiding fear about the future require not caring about yourself or the world?

Source framing · Values and pain as “two sides of the same coin”

The source describes values as our deepest longings and says that pain will be found wherever values are present. It then asks: “What are you going to make more important—and what are you going to focus your efforts around—your values or your pain?”

Contextualizing the metaphor

This is an ACT teaching metaphor, not a universal causal fact. Pain does not prove that something is valuable; not every value must involve suffering; and reducing avoidable pain can itself serve care, health, justice, or safety. Values-guided action may coexist with difficulty, but it should not override danger, coercion, disability needs, treatment, material constraints, or consent.^[E1–E6]

Something I care about that can also bring difficult thoughts or feelings:

A way I might honor both that value and my need for safety or support:

Practice choosing your values

This exercise is for intentional exploration—not finding one hidden, permanently “authentic” answer.

Values are intentional choices, chosen at least as much as they are discovered. You freely choose what to make important; this need not be self-centered or individualistic: many people choose directions that benefit others or reflect what matters in their culture or family.

You do not need to identify the “right” values or prove which are most important. The aim is to practice deliberate choice. You may work alone, with a friend or family member, or share the exercise in therapy.

STEP 1 · SORT

Sort the words on page 12 into:

- VERY important** to make important in my life.
- SOMEWHAT important** to make important.
- WOULDN'T want** to make very important.

STEP 2 · CHOOSE

Take the values in the “**very important**” group and choose your **top 10**.

The source list is not complete. Add words you need.

STEP 3 · REFINE

If you could focus on only three, which describe the person you would most want to be?

If unsure, choose three you are most interested in exploring.

Source framing · What the sort is asking
Not what seems possible, not what you are currently valuing, and not what you think you *should* value. Instead: **If you were totally free to choose, what values would you want to make important? What words describe the person you would most want to be? What qualities would you need to live a well-lived, meaningful life?**

My “very important” top 10

My top 3 to explore further

A value word or phrase I want to add

De-emphasize evaluation
A long list can be helpful or overwhelming. It can also prompt “good person” answers. Circle, revise, translate, combine, or reject words. Treat the result as a starting point for discussion.^[E3]

Values word bank

The person I would most want to be would be someone who was...

Mark, circle, adapt, or add. Every option from the original list is retained.		
Accepting	Friendly	Passionate
Adaptable	Fun	Patient
Adventurous	Generous	Peaceful or harmonious
Always growing	Gentle	Persistent
Appreciative (of beauty, nature, others, etc.)	Gracious	Playful
Authentic or genuine	Hard working	Powerful or strong
Bold	Healthy	Present
Builder or creator	Helpful	Quiet
Committed	Honest	Rational
Communal	Humorous	Relaxed or at ease
Compassionate	Impactful	Respectful
Competent	Inclusive	Responsible
Connected with others	Independent	Risk-taking
Courageous	Intimate	Romantic
Courteous	Just or fair	Secure or safe
Creates or appreciates beauty	Kind	Simple or uncomplicated
Creative	Knowledgeable	Spiritual
Curious	Loving	Spontaneous
Dependable	Loyal	Thoughtful
Disciplined	Moderate	Traditional or honors customs
Emotional	Moral	Unique
Expert	Open	Virtuous
Free	Open-hearted	Whimsical

Other value words or phrases I want to include:	Words I want to rewrite in language that fits me:

List-use note. These are prompts, not personality traits you must possess, standards to meet, or culturally complete categories. The source exercise is inspired by Miller, C'de Baca, Matthews, and Wilbourne's *Personal Values Card Sort* (2001).

Time to reflect

After choosing your top three, notice your experience and what the choices may suggest.

If doing the exercise with someone else, each person can complete steps 1–3 independently, then talk through responses together. You can also reflect privately or bring the page into therapy.

1. What did you notice while choosing which values to make important? What thoughts and feelings showed up while sorting?

2. Among the values you marked most important, what themes or similarities do you notice? Do any overarching values encompass several?

3. If it were possible to embody your top three values, would you choose that? What difficult thoughts, feelings, or sensations might you be willing to have in the service of those values?

4. What does this exercise suggest about next steps you might take or explore?

5. Looking at your top three values, what do you think would be different in your life if you were really living them?

Choice and pacing

“Willingness” is not pressure to endure unsafe conditions or overwhelm. You may pause, answer partly, choose a less personal example, or return with support. A value can be “tried on” and revised rather than treated as a permanent commitment.^[E3]

When setting out—especially on a new trail—it can help to choose a direction, set a compass, and find map reference points that show whether you remain on course.

A diagram illustrating a path or process. It features a dashed line that starts at the bottom left, rises to a peak, dips to a valley, and then rises again. Three red circles with white numbers are placed along the path: '1' is on the first rise, '2' is in the valley, and '3' is on the second rise. The word 'START' is positioned at the beginning of the path, and 'KEEP ORIENTING' is positioned at the end of the path.

- 1 First thing this week**
Spend 20 minutes looking online for a new hike in my area I haven't been on yet.
- 2 Second thing this week**
Ask Jose if he wants to go on the hike with me on Saturday. If he can't, ask Pam.
- 3 Third thing this week**
When I'm on the hike with Jose or Pam, share one thing about myself that they probably don't know about me.

The source example is retained, including names and sequence. It is not a model response. A different person could express openness or adventure through a smaller, indoor, accessible, culturally relevant, or supported action.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slight shadow on its right side, suggesting it's resting on a surface.

Now it's **your** turn

Choose a domain, set a values direction, and identify three single, concrete actions for this week.

1. Choose an area of life—the “land”

- Family
- Intimate relationships
- Parenting
- Friends & social life
- Work
- Personal growth and education
- Fun, leisure or recreation
- Spirituality
- Community & environment
- Health & physical wellbeing
- Aesthetics (art, music, literature, beauty)

2. Set your compass

Choose the value you want to move toward.

3. Now for action

For each step, identify one concrete action on a specific day or at a specific time.

Examples retained from the source

If the domain is **parenting**, could attending your child's football match serve the value you want to move toward? How would you be at the match while embodying it? If the domain is **spirituality** and the direction is open and adventurous, could a new hike in nature be one step?

My valued domain—the land I'm journeying in:

What this direction could look like here:

The value I want to move toward:

First thing I could do this week:

☐ Day ☐ Time ☐ Place / support

Second thing I could do this week:

☐ Day ☐ Time ☐ Place / support

Third thing I could do this week:

☐ Day ☐ Time ☐ Place / support

The source compares moving toward values with traveling north: streams, mountains, injuries, and major life changes may interrupt the route. Barriers can be psychological, physical, social, material, or external.

Trusted friends, family, or a therapist may help identify ways to pivot. The source names **acceptance**, **defusion**, and **flexible perspective-taking** as skills that may help when barriers arise. These are parts of a broader ACT process model, not instructions to use without regard to readiness or context.^{[E1][E5]}

This assumption can be hopeful, but it is not always immediately possible. Danger, coercion, poverty, discrimination, disability, illness, caregiving, exhaustion, and lack of access may genuinely block an action or require delay. Rest, protection, non-disclosure, asking for accommodation, or declining an action can be values-consistent. The obstacle is not proof of insufficient commitment.

Thought, feeling, sensation, habit,
conflict, time, health, access, risk, or
another constraint?

Information, care, money, access,
rest, accompaniment, skills,
advocacy, or protection?

Smaller, different, shared, later,
private—or a deliberate pause?

[illegible]

Pause, notice, and choose a next step

The source closes by recognizing the effort of completing the guide and returning choice to the reader.

Well done for making it through this guide. Pause and notice the time and effort you put into it. **What was that effort in the service of?** The source suggests that this may be the first of many steps that shift the course of your life.

The source hopes you have identified the next smallest step for exploring and living your values. It may involve working with a therapist to develop other psychological flexibility skills that help you stay on course.

Its closing message says that experiencing pain is certain and frames the choice as whether to live meaningfully and in line with what matters even while pain is present. It reminds readers that they may need every tool available and that the choice remains theirs.

Evidence-informed close

The autonomy message is retained. The certainty and binary framing are softened: pain and barriers vary; treatment or support may reduce them; and a meaningful choice can include rest, safety, medical care, or postponement. Values work is an invitation, not a cure claim or duty to persist.

The effort I gave this guide may have been in the service of:

The next smallest step I might take—or a reason I am choosing to pause:

A person, resource, treatment, or skill that could support me:

Full-guide promotion retained once

The source again points to *Values: Connecting To What Matters*, its fuller guide with additional exercises and information: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/values-connecting-to-what-matters/>

References and further reading

All references and the exercise attribution from the original guide are retained.

For readers interested in values and action

- Harris, R. (2022). *The happiness trap: How to stop struggling and start living*. Shambhala Publications.
- Hayes, S. C. (2005). *Get out of your mind and into your life: The new acceptance and commitment therapy*. New Harbinger Publications.
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For therapists interested in values in ACT

- Hayes, S. C., Strosahl, K. D., & Wilson, K. G. (2016). *Acceptance and commitment therapy: The process and practice of mindful change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.
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- Luoma, J. B., Hayes, S. C., & Walser, R. D. (2007). *Learning ACT: An acceptance & commitment therapy skills-training manual for therapists*. New Harbinger Publications.

Choosing-values exercise attribution

Miller, W. R., C'de Baca, J., Matthews, D. B., & Wilbourne, P. L. (2001). *Personal values card sort*. University of New Mexico.

Evidence notes added for this edition

[E1] Association for Contextual Behavioral Science, *The Six Core Processes of ACT*. [E2] Hayes et al. (2013), *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Contextual Behavioral Science*. [E3] Berkout et al. (2021), *Working With Values*. [E4] Rahal & Gon (2020), *A Systematic Review of Values Interventions in ACT*. [E5] NHS Scotland Matrix, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. [E6] Cleveland Clinic, *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*. [E7] Lombardero et al. (2022), cultural humility and ACT framework. URLs and evidence limits appear in *research.md*.

Evidence boundary

The sources support ACT's definitions and broader model. They do not establish that this values worksheet alone treats a diagnosis, guarantees symptom change, or makes every valued action possible or safe.

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Resource details retained from the original source	
Title	An Introduction To Values
Type / format	Guide / Guide
Language	English (US)
Translated title	An Introduction To Values
URL	https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/an-introduction-to-values/
Version	20240531
Last updated by	CW

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