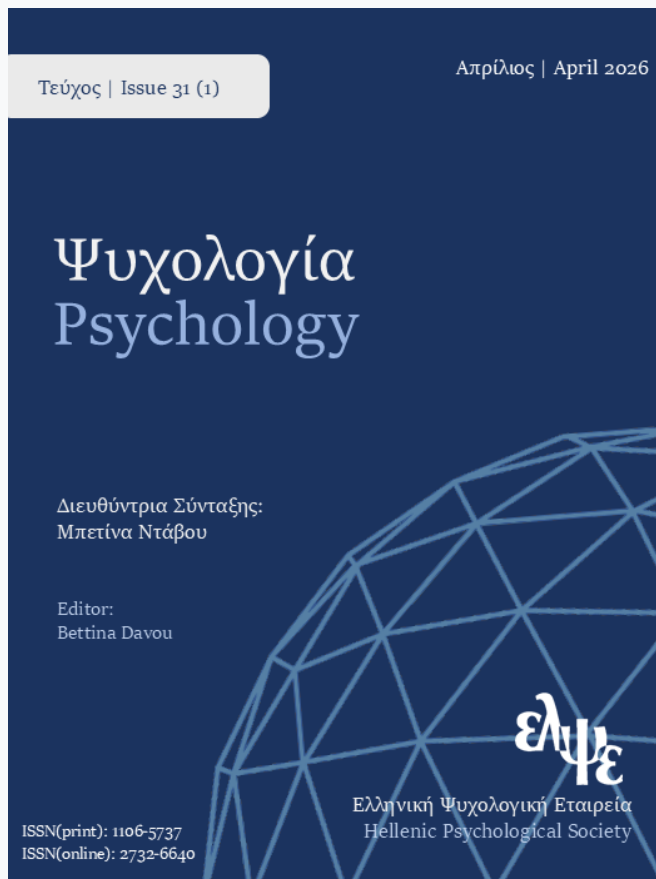


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How acting on personal values creates a meaningful life story

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Values-based therapy Personal narratives Psychological well-being Meaning making Values clarification Motivation enhancement Positive psychology Intentional behavior change Therapeutic interventions	Personal narratives have the power not only to heal trauma but also to actively promote well-being. Narratives that align with important personal values provide a solid base for guiding actions that meet challenges and support difficult life decisions. Basing our life story on values can have broad and positive impacts on well-being and on the sense that life is meaningful. Emphasis is placed on caring values because of their significant impact on well-being and their often subtle, hard-to-identify nature. Drawing on research from clinical, counseling, social, organizational and positive psychology, this paper will focus on findings that explain what values are, how they develop, and how they work, with emphasis on how values are useful in therapy. Using a four-step process that includes clarifying, assessing, planning, and increasing motivation, we consider how clients can intentionally increase values-based actions. For each step of the process, we suggest some evidence-based tools and consider why and how to use each tool. Using values in therapy can help clients to meet the challenge of building a life of purpose and meaning by intentionally taking actions on their most prized values.
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The story of your life is a deeply personal narrative. Actions taken over a lifetime are the raw material on which that story is built. A life story that is unrelated to what you have done might be great fiction, but to be meaningful it must be firmly anchored in your actions. In effect, a good life story is the narrative of a good life (Bauer, 2021). In creating such a story, clients need a coherent structure that allows all different kinds of events and actions to be woven together into a web of meaning and that creates a greater sense of purpose (King & Hicks 2021).

How can we help clients to structure a coherent narrative of a good life? We submit that values contribute to the foundation for structuring for a truly satisfying personal narrative. Values are the standards or principles for what is worthy and important. They guide us toward right action in our family or group or culture. When we consider whether someone has a good life, we are thinking about how faithfully their behavior embodies these standards. Therapists can provide important assistance in this work.

A personal narrative based on values

When the story of your life reflects the values that you most prize and that are prized by the people around you, life is imbued with personally meaningful direction (Steger & Kashdan, 2013). Prioritizing meaning is more strongly associated with life satisfaction, happiness, sense of coherence and gratitude than just seeking

positivity (Russo-Netzer, 2019). To better understand how meaning develops from values, Steger’s tripartite model (Steger, 2021) offers a useful framework. The model posits that that meaning is composed of three facets: coherence, the feeling that our lives make sense, purpose or a framework for organizing goals, and significance, the sense that life is worthwhile. Values contribute to each of these dimensions: providing a coherent framework for understanding our experiences, guiding us in choosing goals that align with our purpose, and reinforcing the sense that our lives are significant and meaningful. In therapy, meaning-based interventions can include values clarification exercises and goal setting anchored in personal significance (Wong, 2015).

From a narrative therapy standpoint, individuals can strengthen the story of a good life by learning to separate themselves from the problems they face—a process known as externalization (White & Epston, 1990). Externalization involves viewing challenges not as defining aspects of identity, but as experiences that we need to navigate. Values can support this process by acting as guiding principles to help people reflect on moments of strength and meaning rather than focusing solely on the details of their difficulties. Research on narrative identity shows that life stories become more coherent and purposeful when individuals identify experiences that align with their values, such as perseverance, compassion, or creativity (Bauer, 2021; McAdams & McLean, 2013). This process is facilitated when therapists help clients to use values as guideposts to determine which events are worthy of integration into their personal narratives (Sagiv & Roccas, 2017). Together, therapist and client can connect value-based stories into a coherent and purposeful narrative rooted in the client’s most important values.

Therapists working within a positive psychology framework often utilize the PERMA model (Seligman, 2018) to promote client well-being. This model comprises five core elements: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. Values can serve as guiding principles to help clients cultivate each of these dimensions. For instance, values such as *gratitude*, *pleasure*, and *playfulness* can foster positive emotions like joy and contentment. *Curiosity* and *creativity* enhance engagement by encouraging sustained attention to meaningful tasks. *Trust*, *compassion*, and *authenticity* strengthen interpersonal relationships, while *capability*, *perseverance*, and *accountability* support progress toward mastery and achievement. Finally, values rooted in *purpose* and *contribution* reinforce a sense of meaning and fulfillment. When therapists aim to strengthen a particular aspect of PERMA, designing an intervention that draws on client values can make the process more relevant to the client.

Finally, values can serve as a powerful source of motivation for therapy itself, guiding clients toward a way of living that feels deeply meaningful. At the heart of these examples lies a core principle: once clients have identified values that are personally significant, therapists can use those values to inspire and support them through the challenging process of building a life rooted in meaning.

Where do values come from?

By understanding the forces that help to shape our values, we can have a deeper appreciation of them and be poised to use them effectively. Values develop throughout life as we are exposed to what our families, our friends, our schools, our faith-groups, our community, and our culture prize. As we grow up, we gradually absorb the values to which we are exposed (Sagiv et al., 2017). Values develop throughout childhood and adolescence and are highly influenced by family. The sense of which values are most important begins to stabilize during adolescence when our brains become capable of evaluating our own thoughts and imagining desirable situations (Dumontheil, 2014). Adolescence is also a period when the questions of, “Who am I?” and “What is important in my life?” become salient. Values adopted from parents may be questioned and



commitments to new values created (Meeus 2011). By adulthood, values are a core element of personal identity that is relatively stable (Berzonsky et al., 2011)

Culture is a very strong influence on the development of values. The values that characterize a society are one of its most central cultural features (Schwartz, 2009). Across cultures, the same values are endorsed everywhere, but their relative importance changes (Sagiv et al., 2017). Countries have distinct cultural values orientations (Schwartz, 2009) that are reflected in their institutions and in their written and unwritten rules about how people should act and think and feel.

The importance of acting on values

Research that has studied how holding different values relates to life satisfaction indicates that value priorities and satisfaction-with-life did not vary together (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000). Even when correlations have been found between having a particular signature character strength and well-being, the correlations are small (Blanchard et al., 2020). It is less important which values you endorse strongly and more important what actions you take that align with your values.

Higher values attainment scores have been associated with lower psychological distress, greater psychological flexibility and higher subjective well-being (Lundgren et al., 2012). Similarly, non-anxious individuals report living more consistently with their values than their anxious counterparts (Michelson et al. 2011). People diagnosed with cancer reported improved well-being and fewer distress-related outcomes as they lived greater congruence with their values (Ciarrochi, Fisher, & Lane, 2011). Among people living with chronic pain, success in living according to values was correlated with lower scores on measures of disability, depression, and pain-related anxiety (McCracken & Yang, 2006).

The story of Louise suggests how acting on values can change clients. Louise (Live Well with Pain, n.d.) had lived with the chronic pain of fibromyalgia for years. Her prescription opioids made her feel foggy and isolated. Her life had become a cycle of symptom management, not meaning. During a pain management workshop, Louise was asked to reflect on her core values. She listed *independence*, *authenticity*, and *connection*. The clarity about her values helped her to realize that her current medical approach to pain did not align with these values. She began tapering her medications and replacing them with practices that honored her values: She became more independent by using gentle movement therapies like yoga and tai chi, which gave her a sense of agency over her body. She started journaling to express her thoughts authentically and reconnect with an identity beyond being a patient. She joined a support group for people with chronic pain, to share her story and connect with others. Her pain did not disappear, but her suffering lessened in a way that Louise described it as “reclaiming her life.”

Acting on values is how clients can realize the benefits of lower psychological distress and greater meaning. This raises the question “are actions on some values better than action on others?”

The significance of caring values

To compare the benefits of acting on one value versus another, we first need a sense of how values relate to one another. The Schwartz Theory of Basic Human Values (Schwartz 1992; Schwartz et al., 2011) has generated a substantial body of research that shows that values are arranged in a circular structure. The closer values are around the outside of the circle, the more similar are their underlying motivations. Values on opposite sides of the circle have antagonistic motivations. There are two poles that divide the circle roughly into quadrants: the self-transcendent/self enhancement pole and the openness-to-change/conservation pole. Values in each quadrant are similar in nature (Insert figure 1 about here).

The self-transcendent/self-enhancement pole is one that is worth examining more carefully. On the self-transcendent side of the pole are the values of universalism and benevolence, the caring values. At the other side of the pole are the self-enhancement values that are about personal gain and power. At any given moment, pursuing a value on one side of a pole typically precludes taking action on the opposite side. For example, if I am constantly looking out for myself (self-enhancement) that will tend to diminish actions I take for others (self-transcendent). There are several reasons why this self-transcendence-self enhancement pole is of particular interest.

Self-transcendent values consistently relate to behavior that is prosocial (Sanderson & McQuilkin, 2017) and negatively relate to interpersonal violent behavior (Seddig & Davidov, 2018). These values are necessary for societies to function effectively. Evidence for this idea is derived from research that indicates that the self-transcendent values - benevolence and universalism- are two of the three values that rank as most important in more than 50 countries on six continents (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Societies cannot function if a good proportion of their citizens are not frequently helpful, honest, forgiving, loyal and responsible. Universalist values like social justice, equality, and broad-mindedness also contribute to positive social relations as we focus our efforts on strangers instead of just those who are close to us. These values promote caring for the people we don't know and for the planet. They allow diverse societies to function smoothly and promote behaviors that contribute to a healthier world. In short, societies need people to be caring to thrive.

The second reason that the self-transcendence-self enhancement pole is consequential is on the individual level. On the self-enhancement side, there is a well-documented relationship between valuing material gain and poorer well-being. Meta-analytic findings from 259 independent samples show that materialism is associated with significantly lower well-being in terms of risky health and consumer behaviors, lower negative self-appraisals, lower life satisfaction and negative affect (Dittmar et al., 2014). Actions in pursuit of money, possessions, and image crowd out other actions that lead to greater well-being in the long run (Kasser, 2002).

At the individual level, the self-transcendent side of the pole emphasizes acts of kindness. A recent review and meta-analysis indicated that performing acts of kindness boosts happiness and well-being (Curry, et al. 2018). A study of paying it forward, doing acts of kindness without expectation of reward, found that those who performed such acts for about an hour and a half experienced higher positive and lower negative affect. In addition, the people who received the kind acts smiled more frequently and more sincerely and said that they would be more likely to do such acts themselves (Pressman et al, 2014). Holding self-transcendent values has also been related to higher romantic relationship quality (van der Wal, 2023). It seems that caring values benefit not only society but also the individuals who uphold them and those who are the recipients of their care.

Do we perceive caring clearly?

The prevalence of caring values across cultures and the benefits they bestow on individual well-being might suggest that they should be easily recognizable. However, that seems not to be the case. Research from the Common Cause Foundation found that most people (74% of the 1000 people surveyed) endorsed the importance of caring values like equality and community over wealth and public image. The surprising part of the survey was that when the same people were asked how others felt, 77% underestimated the importance that others placed on compassionate values and overestimated the importance others place on selfish values. We do not easily recognize that others care.

There are important social and personal consequences of not recognizing that others care (Common Cause Foundation, n.d). When people feel their care is unnoticed, mutual trust deteriorates and efforts to solve



social problems like climate change or inequality lose momentum. They are less likely to participate in collective efforts like volunteering if they believe others will not. Seeing others as uncaring can create an “us versus them” mentality that makes collaboration across differences more difficult. On the individual level, feeling unseen can contribute to anxiety, depression, and loneliness, especially in environments where empathy is lacking.

It is not only the caring of others that is unclear; we do not even understand the impact of our own caring. Researchers who studied compliments found that people consistently underestimated the positive impact that a compliment would have on the other person and so, were less likely to give a compliment. They also worried (unnecessarily) that the person receiving the compliment might feel uncomfortable (Boothby & Bohns, 2021). Similarly, people who performed random acts of kindness and increased both their own happiness and the happiness of the recipient regularly underestimated the impact of their actions. We also underestimate the positive impact that acts of kindness, including giving money, have on recipients, perhaps because we focus on the cost or effort involved rather than the warmth and positive feelings the actions generate in others (Kumar & Epley 2023). These findings suggest that by underestimating the benefits of value-driven actions - for both ourselves and others - we risk missing valuable opportunities to make a positive impact and experience personal well-being

To summarize, caring actions are good for the actor, good for the recipient, and good for the world. But we do not see any of this very clearly. The balance of this article will deal with the question of how to help individuals clarify their own values and align their behavior toward them, with particular emphasis on caring values, because these values are significant but hard to perceive. This is not to say that other values are not useful or important. Values are, by definition, qualities that are desirable so any change that helps clients to act in congruence with values is a positive change.

Can action on values be influenced or changed?

We have said that values are relatively stable in adulthood, so it may be quite difficult to change them. But what about action on values? Can it be increased? Can we act more consistently on those values that we choose? Research on priming values offers insights into the question of how values can be switched on or activated. Priming works by activating mental representations of values, which then guide behavior in a way that is consistent with those values. There is a wealth of research that shows that priming works in predictable ways (Bargh et al., 2000).

Several priming studies have examined the impacts of priming environmentally friendly values and shown that environmentally caring actions can be primed. For example, Americans recommended policies promoting smaller ecological footprints when reminded of the American values of self-expression, family, and generosity (Sheldon et al., 2011). People in Britain who were asked to reflect on why acceptance, affiliation or being broadminded were important to them spoke about social and environmental challenges in ways that conveyed a stronger sense of moral duty, and a greater obligation to act to help meet these challenges than those who reflected on popularity, wealth and preserving their image (Maio, 2012).

These and other studies show not only that caring values can be primed, but that priming one caring value bleeds over and stimulates other similar values (Maio et al, 2009; Sheldon et al, 2011). Helping people to think about protecting the environment, for example, might also stimulate them to be more broadminded or more helpful in other ways related to the values that are similar or near them (see figure 1). Priming one value also reduces the importance of an opposing value. Reminders of money, for example, led to reduced requests for help and reduced helpfulness toward others (Vohs et al., 2006). However, the duration of priming

effects is relatively short, seldom more than a day. This suggests that if we want to help build lives based on values, we need to find ways to stimulate those values regularly and to act intentionally.

A process for intentionally increasing action on values

The remainder of this article outlines a four-step process designed to help clients intentionally increase values-based actions. This approach moves beyond natural activation of values, emphasizing instead the importance of deliberate and planned engagement. The process aims to expand both the breadth and depth of actions that contribute to a more satisfying and purposeful life. Each of the four steps can be applied independently or in combination, depending on the unique needs and goals of the client.

1. **Clarify.** We have many values and part of the clarification process is to examine them and determine which are most important to us - our core values.
2. **Assess.** Assessment builds upon the foundation of clarity. It is valuable to examine where core values are currently active: the life domains in which they are expressed and how frequently they guide actions. This step helps illuminate areas where values may be underutilized, offering insight into opportunities for more intentional engagement.
3. **Plan.** Planning involves identifying *what* you want to do and figuring out *how* to act congruently with values.
4. **Motivate.** Although values are inherently motivational, they often compete with other priorities and internal drives. This step is designed to support sustained commitment to values-based action, even in the face of competing demands.

Why clarify values?

Both clinical and research observations indicate that people are not always aware of their values. When we ask clients about values, the most frequent answer is that they value their families. This is not just a clinical observation. When 19,000 adults in 17 countries were asked about where they find meaning in their lives, the most common answer was their families (Pew Research Center, 2021). What they are saying is that their families are very important to them. Family is indeed an important priority, but it is not a value. Values are principles. Taking actions that demonstrate love for your family, caring for family, protecting family are values because they involve principles: to love, to care, or to protect. Many clients need help to articulate their most important values.

Values are hard to articulate because they are largely tacit. Tacit knowledge is knowing something that we do not quite know how to explain. Values are like this. For example, values often guide decisions and behaviors outside awareness; this is a feature of tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1958). Experiential learning is another property of tacit knowledge; we absorb our values less through explicit instruction or study and more through experiential interactions with family and culture. Because a value is difficult to articulate does not make it unimportant. It does mean however that we need to learn to articulate values if we want to use them intentionally.

Finally, it is crucial to know which values are most important because sometimes they conflict with one another. Think for a moment of someone who values honesty and kindness and is confronted with a friend asking, "How do you like my new haircut?" If they like the haircut, all is well. But if not, should they tell the truth to be honest or tell a social lie to be kind. The answer lies in the question of which value is stronger. Prioritizing values, deciding which are most important to us, before social pressures impinge, promotes clearer thinking and ultimately supports the development of personal meaning.



How to clarify values: The Intrinsic Values Test. The Intrinsic Values Test (Clearer Thinking, n.d.-b) is a self-report questionnaire that is designed to identify and prioritize *intrinsic* values, something you value for its own sake and not something that is a means to another end. For example, if you need money to keep your family secure, your value is not money but security. The test presents a series of statements that are ranked from “not something I value” to “an incredibly important intrinsic value.” For example, the statement “I am grateful for what I have” points to the value of gratitude. After rating each statement, the program provides feedback on your highest-scoring responses and assists in ranking them. The output is an ordered list of your top intrinsic values in both text and graphic formats. The test is freely available online and provides users with the opportunity to review relevant concepts prior to participation. An interactive intrinsic values wheel (Clearer Thinking, n.d.-a) shows all the statements that are used to assess different values.

How to clarify values: The VIA Character Strengths and Values Test. The VIA Character Strengths and Values Test, an online questionnaire that identifies 24 character-strengths and prioritizes them for each user, is designed to help individuals better understand their core strengths (Personality Quizzes, 2024). There are 120 statements rated from *very much like me* to *very much unlike me*. For example, the item “I have many interests,” taps the value of Curiosity. “I experience deep emotions when I see beautiful things” assesses Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence. The VIA is a scientifically validated tool that identifies strengths that contribute to well-being, resilience and positive relationships (Niemi, 2013). It has an extensive research base about the uses and benefits of different strengths. Supplementary materials are available to help users apply strengths in their personal and professional lives (Niemi, 2013).

Why assess action on values?

Identifying which values are most important is distinct from knowing their influence on behavior. The psychological benefits of living in alignment with values arise from consistent action, not merely from endorsing the principles. The purpose of the assessment step is to increase client awareness of the current breadth and depth of action. The assessment step will allow you to find out where your values are active and to identify impediments to keeping your values active in challenging circumstances.

Values vary in their activation depending on context. For instance, ambition and capability are often emphasized in professional settings; caring and pleasure-seeking are more commonly expressed in personal life. However, values are not confined to specific domains. A client might show care toward colleagues or demonstrate capability in a leisure activity like tennis. Even within a single domain, situational factors matter. For example, ordering more expensive recycled paper may align with organizational values in an environmental NGO, but may be questioned in a for-profit company. Therefore, it is important to assess the context in which core values are currently active.

Another important aspect of context is stage of life. The behavioral expression of a value, referred to as an *instantiation* (Hanel et al., 2017), can vary significantly across the lifespan. For example, a person may instantiate the value of stimulation by traveling the world in their twenties, and by engaging in philosophical study in their seventies. As life priorities shift with age, new opportunities for enacting values must also emerge to maintain alignment with what matters most.

How to assess action on values: Write Your Values History

The Discover Your Values History tool (Becoming Your Best Self, n.d.-a) is a structured exercise that fosters self-awareness through reflection on past experiences, present circumstances, and future goals. Focusing on a single core value, clients can craft a personal narrative and identify ways to integrate that value into daily

life. Research shows that narrative reflection enhances identity development and promotes a coherent sense of self (McAdams & McLean, 2013). For older adults, life review practices are linked to greater life satisfaction (Zhong et al., 2023). This kind of reflection can bring to light meaningful insights that support intentional, values-based action.

How to Assess Action on Values: The Values Bullseye. The Values Bullseye (Becoming Your Best Self n.d.-b) is an exercise designed to stimulate awareness action on values across four key areas of life: work/education, leisure, relationships and personal growth/health. Individuals mark an 'X' on a dartboard graphic, where the bullseye shows full alignment with values and the outer rings represent high levels of misalignment. The tool has a section to identify obstacles, internal and external, that prevent alignment with values and an action component that has elements of the third step of our process. The Bullseye offers an opportunity to explore values across multiple domains in an intuitive and efficient way. This assessment of obstacles is designed to bridge gaps between the ideas of values and the actions taken on them.

Planning for intentional action on values

Values are activated naturally, for instance, pointing out a cashier's mistake in giving too much change may reflect a strong value of honesty. Intentional action, however, goes further. Rather than waiting for values to be triggered by circumstance, intentional action involves planning. The planning phase involves two important steps: planning *what* you want to do and then planning *how* to do it.

When planning values engagement, therapists can help clients consider how much time they can realistically commit. In midlife when balancing family and career, time may be limited. During major transitions—like starting a new career or entering a marriage, a client may choose to invest more time to align an important decision with values. For those able to make a longer commitment of time, engaging in a life project may offer a meaningful avenue for sustained values-based action. The next three sections outline approaches for limited, moderate, and substantial time investment.

Planning what to do: Intentions that fit into a busy life. Focusing on values in daily life is often the most accessible strategy. The Values Bullseye introduced above helps identify where core values are active. For instance, if health is a key value, you might be thriving in leisure and personal domains, exercising regularly and preparing healthy meals, yet feel over-stressed at work. This insight offers a starting point that could suggest reducing work hours, declining non-essential projects, or asserting yourself in meetings. Plans will vary by individual, but targeting a weaker domain creates meaningful opportunities for intentional action.

If a job is not a great fit with client values, research says that deploying other core values in the workplace can be helpful. People whose jobs were low in “calling” - the sense their work is important to the world and that they feel summoned to it - using their strengths made a bigger difference for their life satisfaction than for others (Allan & Duffy, 2014). In other words, if work is less than fulfilling, using your values in the workplace is even more important to you. A substantial body of research points to an effective way to do this by setting implementation intentions. These are sometimes referred to as *If...then rules*: if this happens then I will do that. Implementation intentions specify in advance where, when and how to move toward a goal. A meta-analysis of the impacts of implementation intentions found that this strategy had medium-to-large positive effects related to initiation, to protecting goals from negative influences, and to keeping people from giving up (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

To reduce workplace stress, implementation intentions or “if...then” plans can help translate values into action. For example: If my boss assigns more work than I can handle, then I'll ask her to prioritize tasks. Or, If I feel stressed about a project, then I'll consider what standard I'd expect from a colleague. These small,



targeted strategies can help client to act on values without major life changes by specifying when, where, and how to respond.

Planning what to do: Using values for an important decision. If values shape how we experience the quality of our lives, it is advisable to use them to guide major decisions in careers and relationships. Research shows that values alignment contributes to job satisfaction, commitment, and lower turnover, and that fit between personal and organizational values supports well-being (Arieli et al., 2020). Job interviews offer a chance to ask about an organization's core values and how they're reflected in daily practices. However, if job change is not an option, volunteering with a values-aligned organization is a strong alternative.

In relationships, understanding a partner's values can deepen connection. Discussing similarities and differences fosters intimacy and mutual growth. While shared values are not essential (Brauer et al., 2022), recognizing a partner's strengths is linked to greater satisfaction, commitment, and support (Kashdan et al., 2018). The VIA Institute offers helpful Conversation Starters that couples can use to explore values together (VIA Institute on Character, n.d.).

Planning what to do: Values for implementing a life purpose. For people who want to realign their lives more comprehensively, the Best Possible Self intervention is a way to start. The BPS involves writing about one's best possible self in an ideal future. The instructions are as follows.

“Think about your life in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. You have worked hard and succeeded at accomplishing all of your life goals. Think of this as the realisation of all your life dreams. Now write about what you imagined” (King, 2001, p. 801).

If clients have clarified their core values, following these instructions will allow them to imagine the actions, large and small, that would reflect a best possible version of themselves. A meta-analysis that examined studies using this intervention found that it improves well-being, optimism, and positive affect (Carrillo et al. 2019). A similar tool, the Purpose Toolkit (Bronk et al., 2018) has been developed for adolescents and can be completed on a personal device over two weeks. The toolkit effectively allows adolescents to search for and identify a purpose that they hope to use to guide their lives (Bronk et al., 2019).

Planning how: Goal setting

There is a large body of research that supports the idea that achieving our goals supports well-being (Klug & Maier, 2015). Studies also suggest that pursuing goals that are congruent with our most important or intrinsic values has been associated with higher levels of well-being and a greater sense of purpose (Sheldon & Kasser, 1998). For example, students who combined goal setting with values training significantly improved their academic achievement compared to students who only set goals (Chase & Houmanfar, 2013). Aligning personal goals with core values helps to ensure that the actions you take to achieve your goals also contribute to feeling that you are doing something important with your life.

How to set an effective goal. The Set an Effective Goal interactive online quiz helps users identify and commit to a meaningful goal (Clearer Thinking, n.d.-c). It encourages reflection on both the benefits and challenges of the goal, prompting users to visualize how life might improve with progress. Clients can create actionable steps and assess their commitment. Research shows that starting with small goals boosts motivation early on, while focusing on values becomes key as goals near completion (Huang et al., 2017). Visualizing positive outcomes also enhances adherence and emotional engagement (Pham & Taylor, 1999).

How to find a place to enact values. What Cause Matches Your Values is an interactive tool (Clearer Thinking, n.d.-d) that can help you begin to identify causes that align with your most important values. It

recommends causes aligned with core values and altruistic orientations. Research shows that altruism boosts self-esteem, pride (Post, 2005), and reduces anxiety by shifting focus outward (Schwartz et al., 2003). The tool helps users identify meaningful ways to contribute that are personally fulfilling and that also have social impact.

Why work on motivation?

If values are motivational, why do people who want to increase values-based actions need help with motivation? The reason is that human beings are highly complex and have multiple and sometimes conflicting motivations. Even if values are clear, there will be challenges. One major barrier is procrastination. Understanding its roots can help overcome it. Steel's (2012) procrastination equation highlights key factors:

$$\text{Motivation} = \text{Value} \times \text{Expectancy} \div \text{Impulsiveness} \times \text{Delay}$$

This formula shows how low value or expectation of a positive outcome, high impulsiveness, or long delays can undermine action—even on meaningful goals. The four-step process for working with values contains some elements to help reduce procrastination.

Value. Clarifying your values (Step 1 of the process) means that the value of the goal you have set is already easy to understand and access. Procrastination decreases as clarity about values increases.

Expectancy. This element reflects how difficult a task feels and how confident we are in completing it. Planning actions consistent with your values and setting goals (Step 3) breaks goals into manageable steps, which boosts self-efficacy (Rai et al., 2023). Confidence in helping others can also grow by overcoming emotional barriers or hearing stories of those who have made a difference.

Impulsiveness. Impulsiveness varies by individual (DeYoung, 2011) but can be reduced through mindfulness. Mindful reflection, reviewing past successes and applying those lessons, was found to be the most effective habit-change strategy among 22 tested (Lopez, 2019). This approach encourages awareness and intentional action over distraction and impulse.

Delay. Because acting on values is a lifelong pursuit, it lacks natural deadlines—making procrastination more likely. Setting goals with self-imposed deadlines, though less effective than external ones, still improves follow-through (Ariely et al., 2002). When progress stalls, revisiting time-bound goals can help reignite intentional action.

How to work on motivation: Write your Eulogy. The Write Your Eulogy tool (Attuned Psychology, 2024) is a reflective exercise that fosters mindfulness and purpose by prompting users to imagine their legacy. Visualizing how we want to be remembered clarifies what truly matters. The tool also encourages setting one specific, achievable action toward that ideal life, helping counter procrastination. Reflecting on mortality can boost motivation for values-based behaviors by highlighting the urgency of making time count (Pyszczynski et al., 2004).

How to work on motivation: Listen to inspiring stories. Listening to inspirational stories can spark values-driven action. The Hero Next Door podcast (Fitzpatrick, 2024) features everyday people making a difference, followed by expert insights offering science-based strategies for personal growth. Relatable narratives can increase expectancy by boosting confidence, reduce fear and self-doubt (Gabriel et al., 2016), and strengthen self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). By showcasing small, meaningful acts of service, the podcast empowers listeners to see themselves as capable of creating positive change in their communities.



From values clarity to meaningful action: A pathway to meaning and therapeutic change

While psychology offers rich insights across many subfields, research on value-based actions remains limited. Because values are deeply personal, abstract, and shaped by culture, we need culturally sensitive studies that define and measure values-driven behavior in observable terms. Crucially, understanding why people often fail to act on their values, despite knowing what matters, requires deeper exploration of psychological, social, and contextual barriers. Investigating these obstacles can lead to more effective interventions. Finally, assessing the long-term impact of values-based practices is essential for understanding how they contribute to lasting improvements in well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction.

Personal narratives are the way we tell ourselves our life stories. When we align those narratives with important values, particularly caring values, we can improve our own sense of well-being and life satisfaction. Working with clients on values can help them reduce avoidance of difficult but value-based actions, move toward greater flexibility in the face of obstacles, and create more meaningful lives.

Although values develop naturally, and spontaneously, knowing about values does not guarantee action. The benefits of living according to our values can be increased with thought and planning. We have outlined a four-step process for *intentionally* increasing valued actions that include clarifying, assessing, planning, and increasing motivation to do the work. For each step of the process, we have described and rationalized the use of tools to facilitate it. Helping clients turn their core values into deliberate actions enhances therapy by offering a way for them to create profoundly satisfying lives.

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Πώς η δράση σύμφωνα με τις προσωπικές αξίες δημιουργεί μια αφήγηση ζωής με νόημα

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ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ	ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ
Θεραπεία βασισμένη στις αξίες Προσωπικές αφηγήσεις Ψυχολογική ευημερία Νοηματοδότηση εμπειριών Διασαφήνιση αξιών Ενίσχυση κινήτρου Θετική ψυχολογία Σκόπιμη αλλαγή συμπεριφοράς Θεραπευτικές παρεμβάσεις	Οι προσωπικές αφηγήσεις έχουν τη δύναμη όχι μόνο να θεραπεύουν το τραύμα αλλά και να προάγουν ενεργά την ευημερία. Οι αφηγήσεις που ευθυγραμμίζονται με σημαντικές προσωπικές αξίες παρέχουν μια σταθερή βάση για την καθοδήγηση πράξεων που ανταποκρίνονται στις προκλήσεις και υποστηρίζουν δύσκολες αποφάσεις ζωής. Όταν βασίζουμε την ιστορία της ζωής μας στις αξίες μας, ενισχύεται η ευημερία και η αίσθηση ότι η ζωή έχει νόημα. Ιδιαίτερη έμφαση δίνεται στις αξίες φροντίδας, λόγω της σημαντικής τους επίδρασης στην ευημερία και της συχνά διακριτικής και δύσκολα αναγνωρίσιμης φύσης τους. Αντλώντας από έρευνες της κλινικής, συμβουλευτικής, κοινωνικής, οργανωσιακής και θετικής ψυχολογίας, το παρόν άρθρο εστιάζει σε ευρήματα που εξηγούν τι είναι οι αξίες, πώς αναπτύσσονται και πώς λειτουργούν, με έμφαση στη χρησιμότητά τους στην ψυχοθεραπεία. Χρησιμοποιώντας μια διαδικασία τεσσάρων βημάτων που περιλαμβάνει τη διασαφήνιση, την αξιολόγηση, τον σχεδιασμό και την ενίσχυση του κινήτρου, εξετάζουμε πώς οι θεραπευόμενοι μπορούν να αυξήσουν σκόπιμα τη δράση που βασίζεται στις αξίες τους. Για κάθε βήμα της διαδικασίας προτείνουμε ορισμένα εργαλεία τεκμηριωμένα από την έρευνα και εξετάζουμε γιατί και πώς χρησιμοποιείται το καθένα. Η αξιοποίηση των αξιών στην ψυχοθεραπεία μπορεί να βοηθήσει τους θεραπευόμενους να ανταποκριθούν στην πρόκληση της οικοδόμησης μιας ζωής με σκοπό και νόημα, προβαίνοντας συνειδητά σε ενέργειες που αντανακλούν τις πιο πολύτιμες αξίες τους.
ΕΠΙΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ	
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