



# Knowing and Doing What Matters

By Paul Kawkabany, MA, BICBT-CC, Dip.ACBT

## Introduction

Life often pulls us in many directions — chasing goals, meeting expectations, and managing responsibilities. Yet, beneath the noise lies a deeper question: *Are we living in alignment with what truly matters?*

This article explores how clarifying values, distinguishing them from goals, and committing to meaningful action can help us live with purpose. By cultivating psychological flexibility, we can overcome barriers, stay connected to our values, and create a life that feels rich and authentic.

## The Objectives of Living by Values

To live meaningfully, we must learn to:

- Understand the aspects of our values.
- Clarify and contact values.
- Discover the difference between a goals-oriented life and a values-oriented life.
- Bring our values to life through committed action.
- Overcome barriers that block us from living authentically.
- Learn practical skills to achieve our goals while staying true to our values.

## Psychological Flexibility

Psychological flexibility is the ability to stay present, open up to experiences, and take effective action guided by values. It allows us to adapt to challenges without losing sight of what matters most.

Without flexibility, we risk becoming rigid — trapped by fear, avoidance, or unhelpful thoughts. With flexibility, we can bend without breaking, act with integrity, and live with resilience.

## Values in a Nutshell

Values are your heart's deepest desires for how you want to behave — toward yourself, others, and the world.

- **Aim:** To clarify values so they can guide both overt and covert behavior.
- **Synonyms:** Chosen life directions, desired personal qualities, what you want to stand for.
- **When to Use:** When motivation is lacking, when setting goals, or when seeking meaning and fulfillment.

Values are not about what you *should* do, but about what you *choose* to embody.

## Values, Goals, and Actions

- **Values** are desired qualities of behavior (e.g., kindness, honesty, patience).
- **Goals** are future achievements (e.g., losing weight, buying a house).
- **Actions** are the steps we take to pursue goals or live our values.

Living meaningfully requires aligning actions with values, not just chasing goals.

## Values vs. Goals: A Quiz

Consider these examples:

- *Lose 10 kg* → Goal
- *Being caring, kind, loving* → Value
- *Write a book* → Goal
- *Curiosity, learning, persistence* → Value
- *Be respectful* → Value
- *Buy a house* → Goal

This distinction helps us recognize whether we are pursuing external achievements or embodying deeper qualities.

## A Values Checklist

Values can take many forms, such as:

- Acceptance, authenticity, compassion, connection.
- Courage, creativity, curiosity, fairness.
- Fitness, flexibility, freedom, forgiveness.
- Gratitude, honesty, intimacy, kindness, love.
- Mindfulness, persistence, responsibility, supportiveness, trust.

Each person's values are unique, but clarifying them provides a compass for decision-making and action.

## Workability: The Key Question

Ask yourself: *Is what I am doing working to give me a rich, full, and meaningful life?*

- If yes → Keep doing it.
- If no → Consider doing something different.

This simple reflection helps us evaluate whether our actions align with our values.

## Properties of Values

- **Here and now:** Values can be acted on immediately.
- **Freely chosen:** You decide what matters to you.
- **Never completed:** Unlike goals, values are ongoing.
- **Intrinsically rewarding:** Living by values brings meaning, even without achieving goals.
- **Dynamic:** Values shift in priority over time.
- **Never need justification:** Values are valid simply because they matter to you.

## Values Exercises

1. **Looking Back at 80:** Reflect on what you worried too much about, what you neglected, and what you'd do differently.
2. **Your Funeral Speech:** Imagine what loved ones would say about you — your qualities, strengths, and how you treated them.
3. **One Year From Now:** Picture yourself handling today's challenges in the best possible way. What values guided you?

These exercises help clarify what truly matters.

## The Bull's Eye Exercise

Visualize your values across four life domains:

1. **Work/Education**
2. **Relationships**
3. **Personal Growth/Health**
4. **Leisure**

Mark where you stand today and where you want to be. This helps identify gaps between values and actions.

## Committed Action

Committed action means taking effective, flexible steps guided by values. It involves:

- Translating values into patterns of behavior.
- Using goal setting, problem solving, and skills training.
- Persisting or adapting as circumstances require.

## The Challenge Formula

In any difficult situation, you have three options:

1. Leave.
2. Stay and live by your values — making room for pain while improving what you can.
3. Stay and give up acting effectively — doing things that make no difference or worsen the situation.

## Goal Setting with Values

To align goals with values, use the **SMART framework**:

- **Specific** → Define clear actions.
- **Motivated by values** → Ensure goals reflect what matters.
- **Adaptive** → Choose goals likely to improve your life.
- **Realistic** → Match goals to available resources.
- **Time-framed** → Set deadlines for action.

## Assessing Goals

- Is it a **living person's goal** (something you can actively do), not a “dead person's goal” (like “never yell”)?
- Is it **realistic**?
- What are the **payoffs** — the values and benefits underlying the goal?

## Preparing for Obstacles

Anticipate challenges:

- **Internal difficulties:** Thoughts and feelings like self-doubt, anxiety, or low motivation.
- **External difficulties:** Lack of time, money, skills, or conflicts with others.

Plan ahead for how you'll respond, guided by values.

## Conclusion

Living a rich and meaningful life is not about eliminating pain or achieving every goal. It's about:

- Clarifying values.
- Distinguishing values from goals.
- Taking committed, flexible action.
- Evaluating workability.
- Preparing for obstacles.

When you know and do what matters, you create a life filled with authenticity, resilience, and fulfillment.

### Reference:

Harris, R. (2019). *ACT made simple: An easy-to-read primer on acceptance and commitment therapy* (2nd ed.). New Harbinger Publications.

**Paul Kawkabany, BICBT-CC, A-CBT**

**Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Psychotherapist**

**Beck Institute CBT Certified Clinician BICBT-CC**

**Diplomate of the Academy of Cognitive and Behavioral Therapies A-CBT**