A 90-minute values group

A facilitator guide for one 90-minute session, drawing on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Motivational Interviewing. Use it with the 90-minute participant handout.

What this session is for

The session is built around one moment. A member notices a gap between what they say matters to them and how they spend their time, and feels their own pull toward closing it. The rest of the plan is there to set that moment up and then leave it alone.

Two frameworks do the work. From Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, values are freely chosen life directions, not goals, rules, or feelings, and they are available even when symptoms are not. From Motivational Interviewing, the discrepancy between values and current behavior is what drives change, and change talk carries far more weight when it comes from the member than from you.

The hardest habit to keep. When someone names a gap, don't fix it or reassure it away. Reflect it and let it sit. That discomfort is what moves people, and soothing it too quickly is the most common reason this group falls flat.

What you'll need

- One 90-minute handout per member, five pages, and pens. Double-sided printing is fine.
- A whiteboard or flip chart.
- Optional: a printed card deck for anyone who would rather sort cards by hand.
- Optional: index cards for the closing step, so members can take their step home.

The session at a glance

MINUTES	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
0 to 10	**Welcome and norms**	A check-in, then the norms.
10 to 20	**Values versus goals**	Two columns, with the group adding examples.
20 to 25	**Grounding**	The good hour or the 80th birthday.
25 to 55	**The sort**	Check, star, ten, five, and the gap.
55 to 67	**Pairs**	Four minutes each on a first value.
67 to 82	**Discussion**	Four or five questions.
82 to 90	**One step and close**	A step, a plan for what might get in the way, and the closing words.

Welcome and norms, 0 to 10 minutes

Ask each person to say briefly how they're arriving today, and let anyone pass. Then set the norms out loud. They prevent the two most common derailments, which are performing for each other and caretaking each other.

- **Nobody has to share.** Passing counts as full participation. Someone can do the whole activity silently and still get a great deal out of it.

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- **No comparing lists.** There is no better or worse set of values. If you catch yourself measuring your list against someone else's, notice it privately and let it go.
- **No rescuing.** If someone gets emotional, let them have the feeling. Resist the urge to hand them a tissue or tell them it's okay. Give them room instead.
- **What's said here stays here.** It's standard, but say it anyway, since this exercise gets personal.

Two ways in. The sort is private, and nobody ever has to show their list. In discussion, members can always talk about the process instead of the content, about what it was like to cut a value rather than which value they cut. Say it plainly.

SAY "You never have to tell us what's on your list. If you want to talk, you can talk about what this was like without saying what you chose."

Values versus goals, 10 to 20 minutes

Draw two columns on the board, one for goals and one for values.

SAY "I want to start with the difference between a goal and a value. A goal is something you can finish. Get the job or finish the program, and it's done. A value is a direction. It's more about how you travel than where you end up. Nobody ever finishes being a loving parent or being honest. You just keep choosing it."

"This matters because goals can be taken from you. Illness can take them, and so can money trouble or other people. A direction can't be taken. Even on your worst day, you can still turn toward what matters to you."

Then ask the group to add examples to each column. Members often put a goal, like a job or a degree, in the values column. Ask what it would make room for, and the value usually turns up.

Grounding, 20 to 25 minutes

Pick one of these.

The good hour, gentler and better for new groups or acute distress

SAY "Think of a recent hour, even a very ordinary one, when you felt like yourself. Not necessarily happy, just yourself. Where were you, what were you doing, and who was there? Hold on to that hour. Somewhere inside it is something you value."

The 80th birthday, a future-self exercise from ACT

SAY "Close your eyes or soften your gaze. Imagine it's your 80th birthday, and the people who matter most to you are in a room together. One of them stands up to say something about who you were. Not what you accomplished, but what you were like. What do you most want them to be able to say honestly? Don't script it. Just notice what comes."

Sit in silence for about 45 seconds. Then invite members to open their eyes and keep whatever came to mind as they read the list.

A trauma-informed note. The 80th birthday can be activating for members facing loss, estrangement, or serious illness in the family, since it assumes a room full of loving people. If you don't know the group well, use the good hour. Always offer an opt-out: "If closing your eyes doesn't feel good, keep them open and look at the floor."

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The sort, 25 to 55 minutes

This is the card sort adapted for paper and for a group. The original asks people to sort 83 cards into three piles: not important, important, and very important. The three tiers break a long list into manageable passes, and they make leaving a value out an act rather than an oversight. The handout keeps them with two passes over one list. A value left unchecked is not important, a checked value is important, and a starred value is very important.

1. **First pass, check. About 11 minutes.** “Read through all seven headings and check anything that matters to you at all. Don’t limit yourself. Most people check 25 to 35. The headings are only there to make the list easier to read.”
2. **Second pass, star. About 7 minutes.** “Go back through only the values you checked, and star the ones that are very important, the ones you’d call core and not just nice. Most people end up with 10 to 20.”
3. **Narrow to ten. About 5 minutes.** “From your stars, choose ten and write them down. Cutting a value doesn’t mean you don’t care about it. It means something else is louder right now.”
4. **Choose five and rank them. About 4 minutes.** “Now five, and put them in order. Notice what it feels like to cut. That feeling is information.”
5. **The gap. About 3 minutes.** “For each of your five, rate from 0 to 10 how much your life right now reflects it. Not how much you care about it, but how much your time and your choices show it. Be honest. Nobody is reading this.”

Watch for star inflation. With a list this long, the starred tier tends to swell. If someone ends up with 40 stars, the second pass hasn’t done its job. Say it to the whole group so nobody feels singled out: “If almost everything you checked also got a star, go back through and be stricter. The question isn’t whether it’s good. It’s whether it’s core.”

While they work, circulate quietly without hovering or reading over shoulders, and be available for questions about wording. If someone is stuck, the most useful prompt is usually “Which one would you miss most if it disappeared from your life?” If the group needs to stretch, take two minutes after the sort.

Pairs, 55 to 67 minutes

Pair members up. Each person takes four minutes to tell their partner about their first value, what it means to them and where it came from. The listener’s only job is to listen, with no advice and no stories of their own. Then they switch. Pairs tend to bring out more change talk than large-group sharing, and they feel safer for quieter members. With an odd number, make one group of three and give each person three minutes.

Discussion, 67 to 82 minutes

You won’t use all of these. Choose four or five and let the group take them where it wants. They run from lightest to most personal, so move down the list as trust builds and stop where the group stops.

OPENING THE FLOOR

- What was it like to do that? Not what you chose, but what the process was like.
- Was narrowing down harder or easier than you expected?
- Did anyone find a value on this list you had never put words to before?
- Was there a word you had to reinterpret to make it fit you?

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THE GAP AND WHAT IT MEANS

- Which value surprised you by making your list?
- Were you surprised by anything you left unchecked? This one often goes furthest, since it's where someone discovers they don't value something they've been organizing their life around.
- Did anything get checked but not starred, something that matters but turned out not to be core? What was it like to see that?
- Which one was hardest to cut?
- Where is your widest gap, a value you care about that your life barely reflects right now?
- For that gap, what would be different on an ordinary Tuesday if you were living that value fully?
- What's one thing you're already doing, even a small thing, that lines up with one of your five?

OWNERSHIP AND ORIGIN, ONCE THE GROUP IS WARM

- Whose voice do you hear when you look at your list, your own or someone else's?
- Is there a value on your list that you inherited rather than chose? What would it mean to choose it on purpose, or to set it down?
- Was there a value you almost picked and talked yourself out of? What was the argument against it?
- Have your values changed in the last five years? What changed them?
- Which value has kept you going through a hard stretch, even before you had a name for it?
- Are any of your five in conflict with each other? How do you referee that now? Common pairs include Autonomy and Family, Caring and Health, and Safety and Growth.

TOWARD ACTION

- If one of your values moved up a single point on the 0 to 10 scale, what would that take?
- What's the smallest step that would still count as a real step?
- What gets in the way? Is that obstacle outside you, or is it a thought you're believing?
- If nothing changes after today, what will that cost you a year from now? Use this one sparingly and gently, since it's a sharp question.
- Who in your life would notice first if you started living this value more fully?

Facilitator moves

How you respond to answers matters more than which questions you pick. These four moves cover most of it.

1. Reflect change talk

When you hear desire, ability, reasons, or need for change, reflect it back so the member hears it in the room. When you hear sustain talk, acknowledge it briefly and move on. What you reflect tends to grow.

A member says, "I put Health second, but I haven't been to a doctor in three years." Avoid normalizing it away with something like "It's hard to find time, we all do that." Try "So it's near the top of what matters to you, and it's been three years. What's it like to say that out loud?"

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2. Use a double-sided reflection for ambivalence

SAY "On one hand, you value Autonomy enough to put it first. On the other hand, almost every decision you described today ran through what someone else needed. Both of those are true for you right now." Then stop talking.

3. Ask for more instead of interpreting

"Say more about that." "What was it about that word?" "When was the last time you felt that one strongly?" These are almost always better than the smartest thing you could say about someone's list.

4. Protect the silence

After a hard question, count to ten before you rescue the room. Some of the most important things said in this group will come out of silences you didn't fill.

One step and close, 82 to 90 minutes

Move deliberately from insight to action, the committed action step in ACT. Without it, the group produces a pleasant feeling that is gone by Thursday.

SAY "Pick one value. Not necessarily the biggest gap, but the one you have some willingness to move on this week. Write down one thing you'll do, and make it small enough that you'll actually do it. 'Call my sister on Sunday' beats 'be a better sister.'"

Planning for what gets in the way. Then ask members to fill in the If and Then line under This week. "What's most likely to get in the way? Write it down, and decide now what you'll do if it happens." Plans that name an obstacle and a response ahead of time are carried out more often than plans without one.

Go around once. Each member says their value and their step in one sentence, and passing is allowed. Saying it aloud turns a wish into a commitment, so protect these minutes even when discussion runs long.

SAY "One last thing. You won't live these values perfectly this week. Nobody does. The point of naming them isn't to give you a new list to fail at. It's so that when you drift, you know which way home is. Drifting and coming back is the practice."

What to watch for

- **The list that points outward.** Five values that are all about other people, such as Caring, Family, Nurturance, Helpfulness, and Service. These are real values, so don't pathologize them. Do get curious: "I notice all five of yours point outward. Where are you on this list?" Then let the member answer without steering.
- **The should list.** Values chosen because they sound right. The tell is that the person can't say much about why. Ask, "When did you last feel that one strongly?" If nothing comes, point that out kindly.
- **Grief.** Someone realizes a top value has been dormant for years, or ended with a relationship. This is an appropriate response, and for that member it may be the most important part of the session. Reflect it rather than fixing it: "That one's been gone a long time."

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- **Shame about the gap.** The gap becomes evidence of failure instead of direction. Interrupt this one actively: “The gap isn’t proof you’ve failed. It’s proof the value is still alive. You can’t miss something you don’t care about.”
- **Intellectualizing.** Debating definitions or questioning the list, which is often a way of keeping the exercise at arm’s length. “Set the definitions aside for a second. Which word do you feel something about?”
- **Comparison.** “Everyone else picked Family and I didn’t.” Return to the norm that there’s no correct list. Values that look cold on paper, such as Autonomy, Solitude, or Non-Conformity, can be some of the most honest choices in the room.
- **Safety concerns.** If anything a member says raises concern about their safety, follow your setting’s usual procedures.

Notes by setting

- **Inpatient units.** Reading a long list can be hard on a unit, so read the instructions aloud and offer the printed cards to anyone who struggles with the list. Keep steps doable on the unit or in the first days after discharge, like calling someone who visits or asking staff about an activity. Don’t depend on homework, and expect members to come and go. For inpatient groups, the 50-minute plan is usually the better fit.
- **Intensive outpatient and partial hospital programs.** When sessions are a day apart, keep each step small enough to try before the next one.
- **Substance use treatment.** Values often carry recovery motivation, which makes this a strong fit. Sobriety works better as a way of living a value than as a value itself, so ask what staying sober makes room for. Watch for shame about the gap, which can run high in early recovery.
- **Outpatient groups.** Members have time to try steps between sessions, so the step and the follow-up carry more weight here.

After the session

- **The daily check.** One question each evening: “Which of my five did I move toward today, even slightly?” It’s a noticing practice, not a scorecard.
- **Sort again.** Values shift with circumstances. Sorting again after a few months, or after a big change, shows what moved. Members can do the full sort online at myvaluescardsort.com, where nothing they enter leaves their device.
- **Cards instead of the list.** For members who think better with something in their hands, print the card deck and let them sort into three piles in place of the two passes.
- **Children and younger teens.** Use the youth deck, which has 48 cards in plain words. Its values come from Values Card Sort for Kids by Aria E. Fiat, PhD, adapted and used with her permission.
- **One on one.** Most of this plan works in individual sessions too.

Sources

The 83 values and their meanings come from the Personal Values Card Sort by W. R. Miller, J. C’de Baca, D. B. Matthews, and P. L. Wilbourne, University of New Mexico, 2001, which the authors placed in the public domain. The seven headings on the handout were added for readability and are not part of the original. The If and Then plan draws on research on implementation intentions, reviewed by P. M. Gollwitzer and P. Sheeran in Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 2006.

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