A three-session values group

An Everyday Insight tool
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A facilitator guide for three sessions of 50 or 90 minutes each, drawing on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Motivational Interviewing. Each session has its own participant handout.

What the series is for

The series 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. Three sessions give that moment room. Session 1 names the values. Session 2 looks at the gap and at what shows up when members move toward a value. Session 3 measures the gap again and prepares members to keep going on hard days and after the group ends.

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.

How the sessions fit together

SESSION	FOCUS	WHAT HAPPENS
Session 1	**Finding your values**	The sort, five values described in members' own words, and a week of noticing.
Session 2	**The gap and what shows up**	Rating the gap, then the thoughts, feelings, and urges that come up on the way toward a value.
Session 3	**Going on**	Measuring the gap again, values on a hard day, and a plan for drift.

Each session stands on its own. Open every one with a short recap, so anyone who missed a session can take part. A newcomer in session 2 or 3 gets the session 1 handout and picks five values from the list during the recap. The rest of the session works with any five.

Materials

- That session's handout for each member. Session 1 is four pages, and sessions 2 and 3 are two pages each.
- A few spare session 1 handouts for newcomers.
- Session 3 compares the gap ratings with session 2, so ask members to keep their session 2 page, or collect the pages and hand them back.
- Pens and a whiteboard or flip chart.
- Optional: a printed card deck for anyone who would rather sort cards by hand.

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Norms, every session

Set them out loud at the start of each session, in full the first time and briefly after that. 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.
- **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. Nobody ever has to show their list. In discussion, members can always talk about the process instead of the content. Say so each session: "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."

Session 1: Finding your values

50 MIN	90 MIN	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
5	10	**Welcome and norms**	A check-in, then the norms in full.
7	10	**Values versus goals**	Two columns on the board.
Skip	5	**Grounding**	The good hour.
20	30	**The sort**	Check, star, and five. In 90 minutes, narrow to ten first.
Skip	12	**Pairs**	Four minutes each on a first value.
12	15	**Discussion**	What it was like, and what members found.
6	8	**Noticing and close**	The week's practice, then the closing words.

There's no gap rating in session 1. Holding it until session 2 keeps this first session about what matters, and gives members a week of noticing their values before they measure the distance.

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."

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Grounding, in 90 minutes. Use the good hour. In a series the group will be together again, so the gentler exercise is the better start.

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 sort. 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.** "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.** "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, in 90 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 describe them.** "Now choose five and number them. Next to each one, write what it looks like when you're living it. Keep it concrete, something someone could see you do."

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."

Pairs, in 90 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 questions for session 1 are below. In 50 minutes, use the first three.

QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 1

- What was it like to do that? Not what you chose, but what the process was like.
- Which value surprised you by making your list?
- Which one was hardest to cut?
- Did anyone find a value on this list you had never put words to before?
- Whose voice do you hear when you look at your list, your own or someone else's?

Noticing and close. Give the week's practice, then the closing words.

SAY "Before next time, notice one moment each day when one of your five shows up, even briefly, and write it on the last page. You're not trying to do more of anything yet. Just notice."

"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."

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Session 2: The gap and what shows up

Most people already know what matters to them. What stops them is what shows up when they move toward it, like a thought that it won't matter anyway, a wave of dread, or the urge to put it off until tomorrow. This session measures the gap, then makes room for those without letting them make the choice, which is what ACT calls willingness.

50 MIN	90 MIN	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
8	10	**Recap and check-in**	Values versus goals in a minute, then what members noticed.
7	10	**The gap**	Rate each of the five from 0 to 10.
7	10	**What shows up**	Toward moves and away moves, on the board.
15	25	**The page**	A step, what shows up, and willingness.
8	25	**Discussion**	In 90 minutes, start with 10 minutes in pairs.
5	10	**Step and close**	A step with an If and Then plan.

Recap and check-in. Ask what members noticed during the week. Moments when a value showed up are easy to share, and they set a warm tone before the harder part.

SAY "Write your five down the left side of the page. For each one, circle how much your life right now reflects it, from 0, not at all, to 10, fully. Not how much you care about it, but how much your time and your choices show it. Be honest. Nobody is reading this."

Expect the room to get quieter here. If someone names a wide gap, reflect it and let it sit. Shame tends to follow, so be ready: "The gap isn't proof you've failed. It's proof the value is still alive."

SAY "When you move toward something you care about, things show up. Thoughts like 'I'll mess it up' or 'It won't matter anyway.' Feelings like dread or embarrassment. Urges to scroll, to sleep, to do it tomorrow. They show up for everyone, and they tend to show up most around the things that matter most. Today isn't about getting rid of them. It's about whether they get to make the decision."

Draw two arrows on the board, one for toward moves and one for away moves, and ask the group for examples of each. Keep them general so nobody has to disclose. An away move isn't a bad move. Avoiding something brings relief right away, which is why it's so common.

The page. Members choose a value and write one step toward it. Then they list what shows up, the thoughts, feelings, and urges, and what they usually do next. Last comes the willingness question. "Not yet" is a fine answer. It means the step is too big, so they make it smaller until the answer is yes.

QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 2

- What showed up when you pictured taking your step?
- Which of those is the most familiar to you?
- When that thought shows up, what does it usually get you to do?
- Has there been a time you took a step with that thought along for the ride? What happened?
- What would make you a little more willing?

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A trap to watch for. Sometimes a member tries to argue a thought away, or the group starts reassuring someone that the thought isn't true. Redirect gently. The aim isn't to win the argument with the thought. It's to take the step with the thought still there.

Step and close. Members write their step and fill in the If and Then line. Plans that name an obstacle and a response ahead of time are carried out more often than plans without one. Go around once, then close.

Session 3: Going on

The last session looks back and ahead. Members measure the gap again, plan for the days when living their values is hardest, and decide how they'll notice drift once the group ends.

50 MIN	90 MIN	STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS
8	10	**Recap and check-in**	How the week's steps went.
7	10	**Measure again**	Rate the five again and compare with session 2.
10	15	**On a hard day**	The smallest version of each value on a bad day.
Skip	15	**From value to goals**	A goal for today, this month, and this year.
7	10	**Keeping going**	Reminders, signs of drift, and what to do then.
10	15	**Discussion**	What changed and what members are taking with them.
8	15	**Closing round**	One thing each person is taking with them.

Checking in on steps. Ask with curiosity, not as a report card. "Who wants to say how their step went? Doing it, not doing it, and doing half of it are all useful to hear about." If someone didn't do it, ask what showed up when they thought about it.

Measure again. Members rate their five on the same scale as session 2, then copy their earlier numbers into the last column.

SAY "Rate your five again, the same way as last time. Then copy your numbers from session 2 into the last column. If you weren't here for session 2, just rate them now."

A change in either direction is useful. A number that went up often points to a step that mattered. One that went down usually reflects a hard week, not a failure, so treat it that way. Keep the comparison private unless someone wants to share it.

On a hard day. This is the part members tend to keep. It makes values something that lasts through bad days, which is when people most often let them go, and it works much like a relapse prevention plan.

SAY "Think about your worst kind of day, when you're exhausted or hurting or everything has gone wrong. What's the smallest way you could still live each of your values on a day like that? If Health is one of yours, it might be a glass of water. If it's Family, it might be one text. Write the smallest version next to each value."

From value to goals, in 90 minutes. Members pick one value and write a goal for today, this month, and this year that would move toward it. Goals are where a value becomes concrete. Remind the group of session 1. Each goal can be finished, and the value can't.

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If two values pull against each other. The page has an optional box for this, since not everyone feels that pull. If it comes up, a simple framing helps: "That pull doesn't mean your list is wrong. It means you care about both. The question usually isn't which one wins forever, but which one gets this hour, and whether the other can get something too."

Keeping going. The last part of the page plans for drift: what will remind them, how they'll know they've drifted, and what they'll do when they notice. Drift isn't the problem. Not noticing it is.

QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 3

- What changed between your two sets of numbers, and what do you make of it?
- What's the smallest version of one of your values on a hard day?
- What will tell you that you've drifted?
- Who in your life could you tell about your plan?
- What do you want to remember from these sessions?

Closing round. Each member says one thing they're taking with them, and passing is allowed. If the group has worked well together, invite members to say one thing they noticed someone else do or say. Keep it to what people did, not what they are. Then give the closing words, and mention that sorting again in a few months shows what has moved.

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?"

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.

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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."
- **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. On a unit, the series works best when sessions fall on consecutive days, with steps small enough to try in between.
- **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. In session 2, cravings and urges belong on the What shows up list like anything else.
- **Outpatient groups.** Members have time to try steps between sessions, so the step and the follow-up carry more weight here. The series is the strongest choice when the same members meet weekly.

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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