

Clarifying Your Values and Moral Compass

Charles C. Cummins, MS, LPC

Personal values are a belief, a mission or a philosophy that is personally meaningful. They serve as the guideposts for making decisions about right and wrong, good and bad, should I? and shouldn't I? Most personal values have their foundation in our past and can have their origin in the family and community values we grew up with. In addition, we are exposed to countless other values and life events that shape our value system. These value systems are flexible and often change throughout a lifespan. Values can range from the commonplace, such as a belief in hard work and punctuality, to the more psychological, such as self-reliance, compassion and harmony of purpose. Whether we are consciously aware of our values or not, every individual has a core set.

If we are going to explore what values are, we must understand what values are *not*. Values go beyond words and into the realm of our thoughts and behaviors. If we are not careful, values can become distorted by patterns of negative thinking and become counterproductive. Values differ from goals in that goals are concrete and achievable events, situations or objects. Goals can be changed, possessed and completed, while values are more enduring and less tangible.

Values are not feelings, but there are frequently feelings that accompany our choices in life. Although you can live your life according to your values, which often leads to success, values are *directions* in life, not *outcomes*. Adherence to our values doesn't mean that our path is always going to be straight. You will inevitably face obstacles that will force you to change direction. Also, we are human and, as such, we will sometimes zig when we meant to zag.