

Values Writing

I want to ask you to write about your values, answering a small set of questions I will ask. This values-writing will help you explore further, in an open and unregulated way, the story you've been telling yourself about your values and how you can reconnect with your authentic values.

Research has shown that values-writing has more impact on behavior and health than just asking people to pick their values from a list, or state them in a few words. Values writing can reduce defensiveness, making us more receptive to information that suggests changes we need to make in our lives. It reduces physiological stress responses and buffers the impact of negative judgments of us from others. And we know a bit about why all of this happens.

Values writing is most powerful when it leads us to care more about transcending our own ego and self-story and helps us link our caring to the good of others. Values work helps build socially positive emotions, like gratitude and appreciation, and the feeling that you are making a meaningful difference in other's lives.

If that sounds preachy, please remove any sense of "should" from it. You don't need a wagging finger from me any more than you need one from anyone else, including you. I'm advocating values work because science shows it improves our lives. It's just the way we are wired.

To start, take out a piece of paper and write for ten minutes about a value you care about deeply in any domain from the list I just gave you. Really do it – ten minutes is not very long!

As you do so, address the following questions:

What do I care about in this area? What do I want to *do* in this area that reflects that caring? When in my life has this value been important? What have I seen in my life when others pursue this value, or not? What might I do to manifest this value more in my life? When have I violated this value and has that been costly?

Try to focus your writing on the qualities of your life as *you* want to live it – qualities of your own you hold as being of intrinsic importance. This is between you and you; it's not about seeking approval or follow a bunch of rules. You are not trying to avoid guilt or tell a self-justifying story.

If it feels like you are beginning to write a holiday list to Santa – a list about what you want *from* life or others – redirect your writing in the direction of describing the qualities of actions you would like to manifest in your life. If you bog down, just rewrite things you've already written until new things show up. Since this is between you and you, you cannot get it wrong.

Don't continue reading until you've written for at least ten minutes. Trust me on this. Just do it.

Now we can look back at what you've written. But before turning to that, consider that I asked about times in your life when this value was important because that helps reaffirm your commitment to it. For me, one of these times was crying under my bed as my parents fought, which helped me see how I longed to help others in a new way. To this day, I sign off on most of my emails (especially ones in which I'm trying to help others who are looking for ACT resources and the like) with the phrase "peace, love, and life."

I asked what you can do to act more in accord with this value, to help you identify specific actions to commit to. Finally, I asked the painful question about times you've fallen short and how that affected your life because we have much to learn from the pain we inevitably experience.

Okay, now read what you wrote and see if you can distill out of it a few examples of things you want to *do* in this area. Actual behavior.

Next look for mentions of the qualities you want to manifest in your actions. You might want to do things genuinely, lovingly, carefully, creatively, curiously, compassionately, respectfully, openly, joyously, industriously, healthfully, adventurously, thoughtfully, justly, supportively, learnedly, peacefully, humorously, simply, honestly, spiritually, fairly, charitably, traditionally, dependably, and so on and so on.

We are not used to writing about the qualities of action, so don't expect these exact words to show up – I'm trying to give you a set to help you see what I mean by qualities. It's hardly a complete list ... just use it as a rough guide.