



Running a values group

An Everyday Insight tool
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A facilitator guide for one 75-minute session, drawing on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Motivational Interviewing. Use it with the participant handout.

What the 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.

Materials

- One copy of the participant handout per member. It runs five pages, and double-sided printing is fine.
- Pens, with extras.
- A whiteboard or flip chart for the opening.
- Optional: a printed card deck for each member 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

0 to 8 min	Opening and framing	Values versus goals, group norms, and lowering the stakes.
8 to 13	Grounding	A brief exercise to move out of analysis mode.
13 to 25	First pass, check	Silent and self-paced. Check anything that matters at all.
25 to 32	Second pass, star	Back through the checked values only. Star the core ones.
32 to 41	Ten, then five	The hard part. Circulate quietly.
41 to 47	The gap	Rate how much daily life reflects each of the five, from 0 to 10.
47 to 68	Discussion	Four or five questions, lightest first.
68 to 75	One small step and close	One step each, a brief go-round, and a warm close.

For a 60-minute group, skip the grounding exercise and the narrow-to-ten step, go straight from the starred list to five, and hold discussion to three questions. For a 90-minute group, add the pairs exercise and the questions about values in conflict.

Values 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. Public domain. The headings were added for readability.

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Opening and framing, 0 to 8 minutes

Start with the difference between values and goals. 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 set 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.
- **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.

Grounding, 8 to 13 minutes

Pick one of these.

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.

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.”

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.”





The sort, 13 to 47 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 matter. They break a long list into manageable passes, and they make leaving a value out an act rather than an oversight. The handout keeps all three tiers 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 12 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 on page 4. 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 6 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. Everything feels core when you’re looking right at it, and there’s quiet pressure not to demote anything. 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?”

The pairs exercise, optional for 90-minute groups. About 10 minutes. After ranking, pair members up. Each person takes three minutes to tell their partner about their number one 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.

Discussion, 47 to 68 minutes

You won’t use all of these. Choose four or five and let the group take them where it wants. The questions 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?

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?"





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 small step and close, 68 to 75 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.’”

Then a brief go-round. 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.

Close with a normalizing frame so nobody leaves with a new reason to be hard on themselves.

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.”
- **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.

Between sessions

- **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.
- **Carry the card.** Write the top value on an index card and keep it in a wallet or on a mirror.
- **The one-degree experiment.** Choose the value with the widest gap and commit to one small action each week for four weeks, then report back.
- **Sort again.** Values shift with circumstances. Sorting again after a few months, or after a big change, shows members what moved, and the changes often surprise them. Members can also do the full sort online at myvaluescardsort.com, where nothing they enter leaves their device.

Adapting the session

- **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.
- **Spanish speakers.** The handout and this guide are also available in Spanish at myvaluescardsort.com/es/printables.
- **One on one.** Most of this plan works in individual sessions. The discussion questions and facilitator moves carry over directly.

Source

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.

