AFFIRMING IMPORTANT VALUES

Difficulty: MODERATE | Frequency: VARIABLE | Duration: 15 MINS

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

In our daily lives, we sometimes encounter threats to the self—from receiving negative feedback at work to being excluded in social situations. In these moments, it’s difficult to stay clear-headed, open-minded, and in control. We may get defensive or act out, depriving ourselves of constructive lessons and harming our relationships with others.

Researchers have found that writing about our most important values can help us feel more connected to others and make healthier choices.

TIME REQUIRED

15 minutes. You can try this practice whenever you feel defensive or threatened.

HOW TO DO IT

1. The following is a list of different values, some of which may be important to you and some of which may not. Start by ranking them in order of their importance to you, from 1 to 6:

   - business
   - art/music/theater
   - social life/relationships
   - science/pursuit of knowledge
   - religion/morality
   - government/politics

2. Then, write a brief account (one to three paragraphs) of why your #1 value is important to you, including a time when it played an important role in your life.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS


Writing about an important value reduced smokers’ defensiveness when they encountered evidence that smoking harms health—a form of self-threatening information. Smokers felt more loving and connected after they spent 10 minutes writing about their top value, and these feelings accounted for their greater acceptance and reduced skepticism of the self-threatening information.


In this study, participants faced a different threat to the self: feeling excluded by others. Those who were excluded but then spent eight
minutes writing about an important value—particularly a self-transcendent one (such as compassion or relationships)—showed more self-control: They subsequently ate fewer cookies than participants who had simply written about their daily routine.

WHY IT WORKS

Research shows that this practice increases positive emotions, particularly emotions directed at others—such as love, connection, empathy, and gratitude. Reflecting on what matters most may help us move beyond selfish concerns and feel connected to something larger than the self. We start to realize that there's something we care about—whether it's cultivating relationships or gaining wisdom—that matters more to us than our self-image.

Once we gain this broader perspective, we become more open to hearing things that threaten that self-image. We can see the big picture, instead of getting bogged down in negative feelings.

SOURCES

Brandon Schmeichel, Ph.D., Texas A&M University

This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.