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# BELIEFS & VALUES

How understanding your beliefs and values  
can improve your life

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**A PERSON'S BELIEFS**, and what they value, determine both the standards they set for themselves and their self-discipline to abide by those standards. They form every person's individual understanding of what "common sense" and "wisdom" mean, the moral rules that govern their lives, and the discipline those rules require.

**FROM THE MOMENT** you come into this world, through your childhood, adulthood, and even up until your death, the direction of your life is manifested through how and where you invest your energy, beginning with the most fundamental of concepts: your beliefs. Constructed subconsciously from birth and evolving constantly throughout your life, beliefs transform into thoughts, which in turn elicit emotions, and those emotions inevitably provoke action. The results of that action either reinforce or alter some part of the belief system from which they sprung, which again translates to thought, emotion, action.

This cycle not only makes you who you are but determines every aspect of who you will become. Therefore, the better you understand your beliefs and where they come from, the more intention and influence you can have on your own life.

Your beliefs are embedded in your self-image, coloring how you interact with the world and informed by every element of your surroundings—by your family, neighbors, society, culture, the news, religion, even geographical location. The foundation of your inner world, as well as how you view the external one, is constructed almost entirely by your beliefs. They are the fabric of self. You might be able to take that fabric and tailor it into any number of incarnations, but no matter what you construct, the fabric remains the same, determining the texture and weight of the final product.

Your most deeply rooted beliefs—the ones that have usually been with you from an early age—form the core of your identity; they are the thread which with your fabric was woven. They are so ingrained in your psyche that once they're in place, they can be difficult to change.

When beliefs are negative, they can lead you to stay trapped in negative thinking patterns, thus behaving in ways that hurt both yourself and others. Often, people seek therapy to help change their more negative beliefs.

Linked directly to your belief system are your personal values, which serve as your moral compass. Beliefs are the driving force behind your life, the rules by which you live, and you apply them as values. If beliefs are the fabric of your life, values are the sewing pattern that give it shape.

Perhaps an even more useful analogy is to think of beliefs and values in the context of building a home. Beliefs act as the foundation of whatever type of home you build—or the material you use for construction—and values are your blueprint. You can't build a house without both a foundation and a blueprint; otherwise, you don't have any idea what type of house you're building. Do you build a house with one floor or two, a basement or an attic, a balcony or a porch? The reason you even want a house in the first place, instead of an apartment, per se, is based on your beliefs and your value system.

If you want to understand more about a house that's already built—whether yours or your neighbor's—it's clearly much easier to see its final design than its foundation. You start with what you see, and work inward. Likewise, it's often simpler to examine your value system before you try to untangle your beliefs.

## GETTING TO KNOW YOU

In counseling, there's a lot of talk about boundaries, self-esteem, and codependency, but those concepts are directly linked to your values. Your boundaries are based directly on your value system; and so as you form your values, you also form your boundaries. You can understand one by understanding the other.

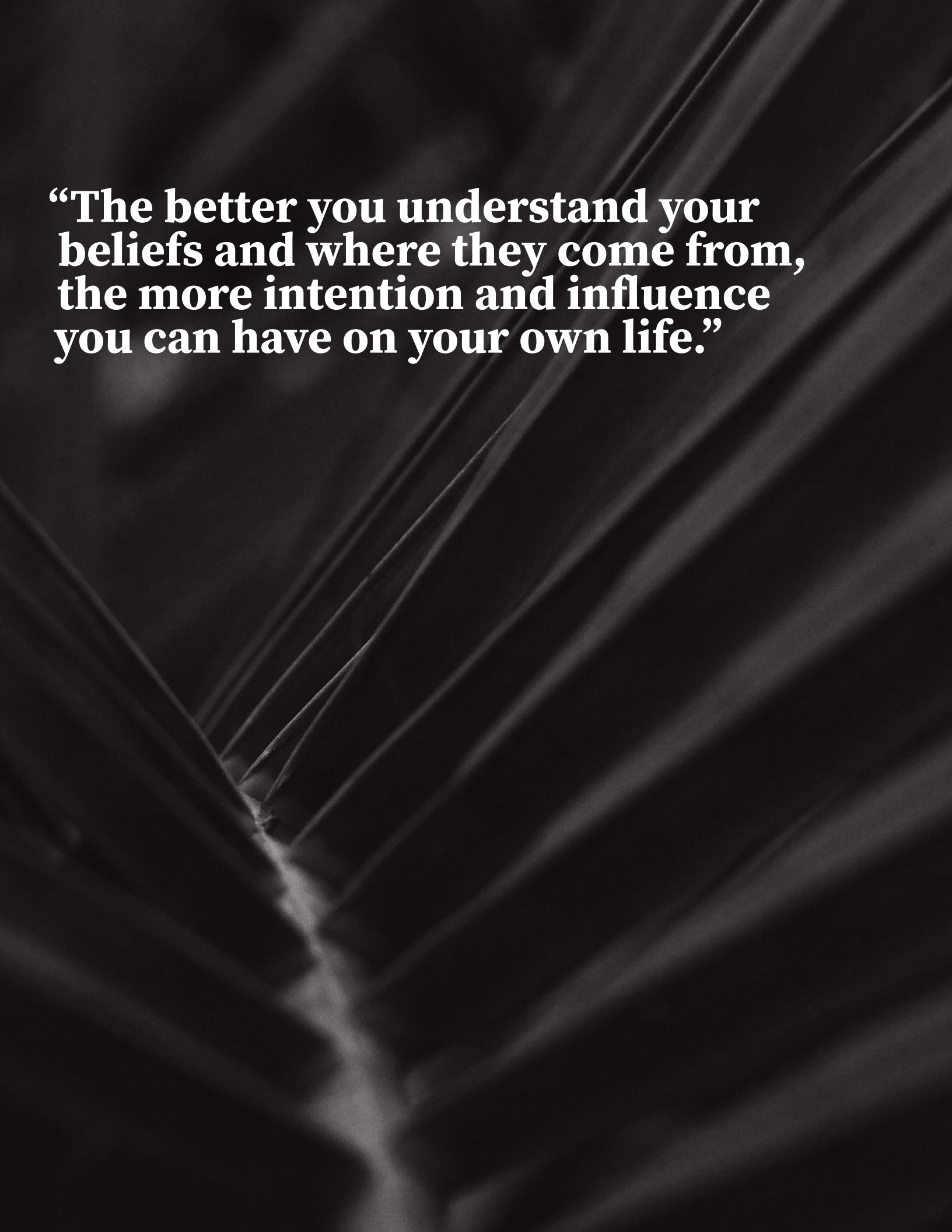
When you haven't consciously defined your most important values, not only do you not know how to set boundaries for yourself, your life can also become chaotic and directionless. Like flags in the wind, you might toss and turn according to the whims of any passing breeze. That breeze could be what other people value, your own impulsiveness, or the random choices that can come with feeling lost. Making decisions without a clear set of values drastically decreases the likelihood that those decisions will bring you happiness.

Let's say you place a high value on your health. If you're out of touch with your priorities, you might choose a partner who doesn't share that value set, who perhaps eats unhealthy food, doesn't exercise, sits around for most of the day, and smokes. How happy do you think you'd be in that situation? The most likely outcome of such a relationship would be resentment, which would lead to fighting, criticism, and all manner of conflict. Without being clear on your own values, you made the decision to be with this person. If you had been

clear on what was important to you and your life, you may have recognized that it wouldn't be a great match and chosen a different path. At the very least, you could have addressed the issue with intention and insight from the beginning of the relationship and looked for solutions together rather than retreating to defensiveness and aggression. When you don't spend the time it takes to consider and clearly identify your core values, not only do you go against yourself, you actively betray your best interests.

The goal isn't that you and your partner share all of your values; that's an impossible standard to set for yourself. Value systems are as individualized as people; even the best matches won't always agree. But by learning more about what matters most to you, as well as what matters most to your partner, you can develop a deeper understanding of why you each feel or react to a situation in the way you do. That understanding provides you with a framework for communication and patience, and it's an invaluable step when reconciling issues in a relationship.





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## OPENING THE DOOR

When you live according to the values that matter most to you, life feels easier and more fulfilling. Values can help guide decisions on where to live, what friends to surround yourself with, what type of partner you want, how to raise your children, and so on. They help you make the right decision for you. Choosing a path based on your values is called values-based decision-making. By following this technique, you can create and define the life you want.

The “doorman principle” is an excellent values-based decision-making tool, conceived of by Richard Sapio, founder of the Business Finishing School: Imagine that you have a doorman who acts as a safeguard between you and the outside world. The doorman knows all of your values. Before people can enter your home, they have to be granted entry by the doorman. And so only people he recognizes—people who share your values—will be allowed inside.

You can’t underestimate the value of this tool, because once people are inside your home, it can be difficult to get rid of them. It might take years to finally kick them out, and in the process you’ll have spent a lot of energy, time, and resources. It is exceptionally difficult to detach yourself from a close friend or a family member who you may have known for a long time but whose values are not aligned with your own.

You create your best life when your energy is in alignment with your values.

Sometimes you might be forced to make a decision that goes against your values. This is known as cognitive dissonance—the mental discomfort or stress that occurs when we are confronted with situations that contradict our beliefs and values, such as deciding to get a divorce when family and unity are priorities for you.

Another problem can arise when people may share the same value but have experienced different cultural norms, so the expressions of that value may be out of alignment. Respect is a value shared among people of all cultures, for instance, but while people in the Western hemisphere generally consider looking someone in the eye while talking to them to be a sign of respect, in many parts of Asia, the same action is considered disrespectful. People from both cultures may have the same value, but they interpret it very differently.

The severity of these problems is lessened, though, when you understand yourself, your beliefs, and your values. When you know the source of a problem or issue, it’s easier to have compassion for both yourself and others.

Since your values continue to evolve throughout your life, it’s good to return to these exercises from time to time to see what values, if any, have shifted for you. We are not static creatures, and we also have agency over who we become. By knowing who you are, you can help shape who you want to be.

## FINDING YOURSELF

Now that we know why it's important to understand your values, we can talk about how to understand them.

Let's begin with a simple exercise:

Sit still, and consciously reflect on what feels most important in your life. You might consider your own personal goals, the types of activities you enjoy, and your vision of what an idealized life might look like for you. Maybe you love the thrill of skydiving, so it's likely that you value concepts such as adventure and action and want to avoid boredom and stillness. If "family" is a word that immediately comes to mind for you, recognize that "family" is in itself not so much a value as it is a feeling that comes with being with those you love. Perhaps the value fueling that feeling is prioritizing quality relationships.

Reflecting on the circumstances of your life, especially your childhood, helps this exercise. What was your family like? Where were you born? What religion did you grow up with? What were the rules of your household? What values did your family actively try to teach you? What did your friends seem to value? What school did you go to? Where do you live now?

By distilling the events and circumstances of your life, you can not only come to understand what your beliefs and values are, but why you have them.

On the next page, you'll find a list of common values. Go through the listed values and mark or highlight the ones that resonate with you.

When doing this, you want to consider how each value makes you feel as you reflect on it. As behavioral therapy teaches us, every living creature abides by an innate and simple strategy—to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. When considering a value, you want to also consider the goals that accompany that value, as well as what emotional states you might be trying to avoid, such as discomfort or loneliness. Most everyone is trying to avoid emotional and physical pain and seeking feelings of love, wellbeing, and fulfillment. How those goals are expressed, though, may differ from person to person.



## LIST OF VALUES

ACHIEVEMENT/DRIVE	DISCERNMENT	INTELLECTUAL STATUS	RATIONAL
ADAPTABILITY	DISCOVERY	INTELLIGENCE	RECEPTIVITY
ADDING VALUE	ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS	INTENTION	RECOGNITION
ADVANCEMENT	ECONOMIC SECURITY	INTIMACY	RELIABILITY
ADVENTURE	EFFECTIVENESS	INVOLVEMENT	RELIGION
AESTHETIC	EFFICIENCY	JOB TRANQUILITY	REPUTATION
AFFECTION	ETHICAL PRACTICE	JOY	RESOLUTION
AFFINITY	EMPATHY	JUSTICE	RESOLVE
ALIVENESS	ENDURANCE	KINDNESS	RESOURCEFULNESS
ARTS	ENERGY	KNOWLEDGE	RESPECT
ARTICULATE	ENTHUSIASM	LEADERSHIP	RESPONSIBILITY
ATTRACTIVENESS	ENVIRONMENT	LEARNING	SECURITY
AUTHENTICITY	EQUALITY	LEVERAGE	SELF-DETERMINISM
AWARENESS	EXCELLENCE	LOCATION	SELF-RESPECT
BEAUTY	EXCITEMENT	LOVE	SENSITIVITY
BLISS	EXPERTISE	LOYALTY	SENSUALITY
CARING	EXPRESSION	MAKING A DIFFERENCE	SERENITY
CERTAINTY	FAIRNESS	MARKET POSITION	SHARING
CHALLENGING PROBLEMS	FAME	MEANINGFUL WORK	SIMPLICITY
CHANGE AND VARIETY	FAMILY	MENTORSHIP	SOPHISTICATION
CHARISMA	FAST LIVING	MEDITATION	SOUL
CHARITY	FAST-PACED WORK	MERIT	SPIRIT
CHEERFULNESS	FINANCIAL GAIN	MONEY/MAKING MONEY	SPIRITUAL
CHIVALRY	FLEXIBILITY	MUSIC	SPONTANEITY
CLARITY	FOCUS	NATURE	STABILITY
CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS	FORGIVENESS	NURTURING	STRENGTH
COACHING	FREEDOM	OPEN AND HONEST	STATUS
COMMITMENT	FRIENDSHIP	OPENNESS	SUCCESS
COMMUNICATION	FUN	ORDER	SUPERVISING OTHERS
COMMUNITY	GIVING	PARTNERSHIP	SYNERGY
COMPANIONSHIP	GRATITUDE	PASSION	TEAMWORK
COMPASSION	GROWTH	PATIENCE	TECHNOLOGY
COMPETENCE	GOD	PEACE	TENDERNESS
COMPETITION	HAPPINESS	PERCEPTION	TIME FREEDOM
CONFIDENCE	HAVING A FAMILY	PERSEVERANCE	TOGETHERNESS
CONGRUENCE	HEALTH	PERSONAL GROWTH	TRAVEL
CONNECTION	HEART	PHYSICAL CHALLENGE	TRUST
CONSCIENTIOUSNESS	HELPING OTHER PEOPLE	PLAYFULNESS	TRUSTWORTHINESS
CONSIDERATE	HELPING SOCIETY	PLEASURE	TRUTH
CONTRIBUTION	HONESTY	POWER AND AUTHORITY	UNITY
CONVICTION	HONOR	PRESENCE	VALUE
COOPERATION	HUMILITY	PRIVACY	VIGOR
COURAGE	HUMOR	PROBABILITY	VISION
COURTEOUSNESS	INCLUSIVE	PRODUCTIVITY	VITALITY
CREATIVITY	INDEPENDENCE	PUBLIC SERVICE	VULNERABILITY
DECISIVENESS	INFLUENCING OTHERS	PURITY	WEALTH
DEMOCRACY	INNER HARMONY	PURPOSE	WISDOM
DEPENDABILITY	INSPIRATION	QUALITY	
	INTEGRITY	QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS	

SOURCE:  
BUSINESSFINISHINGSCHOOL.COM

**AS YOU HIGHLIGHT VALUES** that resonate with you, write them in the spaces provided below. Begin with at least 10 values on your list, then narrow that number to five. From those five, choose the three that resonate the most with you. Order them according to hierarchy, beginning with the value that feels most important.

Try this exercise with the following lists:

**MY PERSONAL VALUES ARE:**

- |     |    |
|-----|----|
| 1.  | 1. |
| 2.  | 2. |
| 3.  | 3. |
| 4.  | 4. |
| 5.  | 5. |
| 6.  |    |
| 7.  |    |
| 8.  | 1. |
| 9.  | 2. |
| 10. | 3. |

**MY BUSINESS VALUES ARE:**

- |     |    |
|-----|----|
| 1.  | 1. |
| 2.  | 2. |
| 3.  | 3. |
| 4.  | 4. |
| 5.  | 5. |
| 6.  |    |
| 7.  |    |
| 8.  | 1. |
| 9.  | 2. |
| 10. | 3. |

**MY SPIRITUAL VALUES ARE:**

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- |     |    |
|-----|----|
| 1.  | 1. |
| 2.  | 2. |
| 3.  | 3. |
| 4.  | 4. |
| 5.  | 5. |
| 6.  |    |
| 7.  |    |
| 8.  | 1. |
| 9.  | 2. |
| 10. | 3. |

**MY FAMILY VALUES ARE:**

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- |     |    |
|-----|----|
| 1.  | 1. |
| 2.  | 2. |
| 3.  | 3. |
| 4.  | 4. |
| 5.  | 5. |
| 6.  |    |
| 7.  |    |
| 8.  | 1. |
| 9.  | 2. |
| 10. | 3. |