



## Values: Helping Agricultural Producers Find Motivation by Focusing on What Matters

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If you find yourself with a lengthy list of things you know you should do, ought to do, or might do but just don't want to do them, you're not alone. This can be described as a motivation problem – "I'm just not motivated enough to \_\_\_\_" or "I just don't feel like doing \_\_\_\_." For agricultural producers, this may include investigating better production practices, caring for their health, getting new equipment, or focusing more on their relationships. This fact sheet addresses the importance of tuning into values as a way of maintaining motivation and promoting mental health for agricultural producers.

While it is true that it is easier to act when feeling motivated, motivation is a fickle thing; evidence suggests that it fluctuates significantly from day to day, even for basic tasks like taking life-saving medication (Cook et al., 2018). Furthermore, when people already feel poorly, this can reduce motivation to feel well, creating a cycle of ineffective actions (Millgram et al., 2019). Waiting to act until feeling motivated can lead people to put off doing the things that would improve their lives and relationships (Harris, 2011). Some people suggest that a solution is to "fake it until you make it" or "just push through." These approaches work occasionally but are not a good long-term strategy, especially in the face of the many complex stressors confronting agricultural producers (Fadel, 2022).

### Values

An alternative approach to maintaining motivation is to clarify and tune in to your values. We do not mean religious values or political values, necessarily. Values play an important role in acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT); with this approach, values are simply the things that you find personally meaningful and worthwhile (Plumb et al., 2009; Stoddard & Afari, 2014). Values are a combination of actions and a description of how you will achieve them. For example, suppose you care about being a good, supportive listener to your family, friends, and colleagues. The action here is "listening" and the value to work toward is "being supportive." In other words, the value is listening *supportively*.

Living more in line with values yields better outcomes, including less depression and anxiety and greater pain tolerance and meaning in life (Bramwell & Richardson, 2018; Fauth et al., 2021; Rahal & Gon, 2020). At the same time, even when symptoms of distress do not decrease, making progress toward living values is

associated with greater quality of life (Grau et al., 2020). Living more in line with one’s values on a daily basis is associated with less distress and greater well-being (Grégoire et al., 2021).

When thinking about values, it can be helpful to remember that the same value can be lived in different ways; unlike goals, values are flexible and can be lived even when circumstances change. To illustrate this, try picking an adverb from the left column in the table and matching it with two actions on the right. How might the adverb influence how you approach the actions in the right column? Then, pick a different adverb for the same actions. How would the way you perform the actions change?

| Adverb        | Action                               |
|---------------|--------------------------------------|
| Honestly      | Talking to someone                   |
| Courageously  | Spending time with your child        |
| Kindly        | Participating in a hobby             |
| Diligently    | Working your production              |
| Hopefully     | Contributing to a community activity |
| Cooperatively | Helping a friend                     |
| Respectfully  | Discussing a conflict                |

### Why Do Values Matter?

Values serve two purposes: first, clarifying your values helps you to orient yourself and adjust course if needed (Harris, 2019). Second, tuning in to your values helps you stay engaged and act effectively in the face of challenging situations, thoughts, and feelings (Hayes, 2019). You can think about values as working like a compass—once you get your bearing, you can tell whether you are staying on track to get to your desired destination; if you are on course, you can keep going, even if the terrain is difficult. And if you have gotten off course, you can change your direction and move forward with confidence.

#### Example: Parenting

Parenting illustrates how values work. Any parent knows that raising children is an intensely meaningful activity; it is also stressful, particularly when children push boundaries and parents’ buttons. If you’re a parent that values “parenting kindly,” then in times of conflict with a child, you could tune in to this value and try aligning your behavior with kindness. This would not necessarily make the stress go away, but it would provide



the best chance to respond in the way you want to. If you realized that your behavior was not in line with your value of parenting kindly, you could apologize and work to improve.



### Example: Life on the Farm

You can also think about values in the context of managing a farm. Let's say that your purpose in running the production is to continue your family's business and pass on your heritage to your children.

Unfortunately, drought followed by a summer storm wipes out half of your crops. Your mind starts to tell you unhelpful things like, "I should just give up; there's no future in ag," or, "Why does this always happen to me? We will never make our loan payments." Along with these thoughts come painful feelings, like disappointment, shame, and fear.

A common reaction would be avoiding these painful feelings (Harris, 2019) or getting very distressed about the thoughts, leading you to go on an angry tirade about selling the farm, eat food or drink alcohol in excess, or take out frustration on others. However, if you instead chose to acknowledge the stress and think about your values, you would find a way to navigate the situation more aligned with those values.

## Letting Values Guide Actions

Here are a few ideas to help you get started in clarifying your values:

1. **Flip pain into purpose** (Hayes, 2019). Your values and pain are like two sides of a coin; as Stephen Hayes says, "You hurt where you care, and you care where you hurt" (Hayes, 2019, p. 24). Identify some of the areas in life where you are dissatisfied with your current situation or the way you are responding to it. Ask yourself this question: What does my dissatisfaction in this area tell me about what is most important to me? For example, dissatisfaction with weight might indicate valuing physical health, which could encourage engagement in more physical activity, changing eating patterns, or seeking medical assistance.
2. **Pick values from a list.** Sometimes looking at a list of potential values can help you begin identifying your own. Try [this list](#) from Russ Harris' (2019) *ACT Made Simple*. Pick three values that resonate most with you. How can you bring those values to bear in your relationships or work?
3. **Look to the future.** Ten years from now, imagine having effectively resolved your present challenge (Harris, 2009). If you were to look back on this experience, how would you most like to be able to describe **how you acted**? Think in terms of the qualities of your actions, not the actions themselves. How would you most like someone you care about to describe who you are, how you treated them, and what you stood for in this difficult situation?

## Conclusion

Your values are like tools in a workshop; depending on the situation, some may be more important or useful, while at a later time or in a different situation, other values may be at the forefront. By clarifying your current values, you can adjust course and pivot to what matters to you; by tuning in to your values, you can gain the strength to engage effectively even in challenging situations. As you do so, you gain motivation that is independent of your situations—and that is something to get excited about.

## References

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