



## TOOL KIT 2 – Values: Life's Compass

Adapted from H. Stefanakis (forthcoming) Strong Back Open Heart: Living with Courage and Compassion

Few people want to create a life filled with violence and abuse. Generally speaking we all want healthy and nurturing environments for ourselves and our families to grow. In the challenges of everyday life we can lose our way and react in destructive ways to the problems and challenges we face. Although we may not often think about it we have a very useful compass to help us through these difficult times in healthy ways. This compass is made up of our own VALUES.

You already know your values. This toolkit was not written to tell you what you should or should not value. Rather this will only help you remember or bring back to the forefront that which you already possess. Just like having the best compass will not help you when you are lost if you keep it in your back pocket and do not pull it out, your values do not do you much good if they are not consciously present in your life.

Values, for our purposes, are defined as *the guidelines we have for how we wish to treat ourselves and others (including our environment)*. So we are not referring here to "what" we value (e.g., family, a good job, etc.) but "how" we choose to live.

Your task now is to identify those values that you hold even though you may not have lived up to them perfectly. Take a moment to begin making a list of these values on the back of this page. Do not get caught up in creating an exhaustive list. You can change and add to it later. In addition, do not worry about overlap in the values.

Like most people, you will likely have created a list that looks something like this:

- Respect \* Honesty
- Trust \* Compassion
- Caring \* Loyalty

Let us look more deeply into what these values mean to us and how they impact our lives. Take a moment to answer the following two questions. The focus is on your behaviour not that of others.

1. How do you feel about yourself when you do not live up to these values? In other words, how do you feel about yourself when you act in disrespectful, dishonest, untrustworthy, impatient, uncompassionate, etc. ways?
2. How do you feel about yourself when you do live up to these values, especially in difficult or challenging situations?

It should come as no surprise that we feel good about ourselves when we live up to our values and generally feel lousy, ashamed or otherwise displeased with ourselves when we do not live up to our values. This is important information. This is why our values are so critical to our experience of happiness and peace of mind. They tell us when we are on the right path and when we have lost our way.

Just like a compass when you are feeling lost (e.g., confused, anxious, angry) you can use your values to help you decide which way to respond. If what you are thinking of doing is not consistent with your values then you need to take a step back and figure out how you will respond. For example, if you feel disrespected by someone else's behaviour you need to figure out how you can respond in a way that respects yourself and the other person instead of reacting in a way that just adds to the disrespect already out there. This is referred to as the Strong Back (respect self) Open Heart (respect others) approach. It is neither a weak/passive approach nor an aggressive one.

Remember that if we really believe in our values we need to be able to follow them when it is difficult (e.g., when we feel disrespected) not just when it is easy (e.g., when we experience other as respectful). Reacting to others (giving back what we think we are getting from them) may be easy in the short term. We may also feel like we are protecting ourselves from being taken advantage of. In the long term, however, we give up control of our lives because our life no longer depends on us but rather on what is happening outside of us. Therefore, we let others decide for us how our lives will proceed. This is a difficult and stressful way to live. When we live according to our values we choose how we will deal with life and therefore feel more confident and peaceful even in difficult circumstances.