Please note: this document builds on important content discussed in chapter 19 of 2nd edition of ACT Made Simple.

VALUES VS. DESIRES, WANTS, NEEDS, FEELINGS, VIRTUES, MORALS, ETHICS

At times, both therapists and clients may confuse values with the things mentioned in the heading above, so let's quickly clarify the differences.

Needs

Needs = things you require on an ongoing basis to survive and thrive

Values = desired qualities of action; how we want to behave; how we want to treat ourselves, others and the world around us

So our values describe how we want to behave:

a) when our needs are not met,

b) as we go about pursuing our needs

c) when our needs *are* met

Every time we set out to meet a need, that's a goal. Values describe how we want to behave as we pursue that goal.

For example, we need to eat food to survive. So every time we set out to eat something, that's a goal. Values describe how I want to behave - the qualities I want to give to my words and actions - as I pursue that goal (of eating a meal) in the service of the underlying need (to eat).

When we eat, the goal (of eating) is achieved; the need (to eat) is temporarily met, satisfied, or fulfilled.

But 'temporarily' is the key word, here. A need can never be permanently met or fulfilled or satisfied: it gives rise to recurrent goals, throughout one's life.

You could describe a need as an 'overarching goal' in that it describes an overarching aim or desired result that is continually sought throughout one's life, but never permanently achieved; an important, overarching life goal that is never in itself permanently attainable but throughout our life gives rise to a vast number of short-term, medium-term and long-term goals that can be achieved.

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In clinical practice, I'd avoid the word 'needs' if possible, as it can cause more problems than it solves. Instead, find out what the client wants in their life, and translate it into goals (what you want), actions (what you do to achieve the goals) and values (how you want to behave as you take those actions.)

Wants, needs, and desires. We may want or need or desire all sorts of things from other people—love, respect, kindness, and so on. We could those goals: things we are trying to get from others. For example:

- *Being kind to self or others = value (desired quality of behaviour)*
- *Seeking kindness from others = goal (what you want to get)*
- *Being respectful to self or others = value (desired quality of behaviour)*
- *Seeking respect from others = goal (what you want to get)*
- *Being loving to self or others = value (desired quality of behaviour)*
- *Seeking love from others = goal (what you want to get)*

As you'll see later in the book, committed action often involves helping clients to come up with effective strategies to achieve such goals; to fulfill those wants, needs and desires in a manner that's workable. We also want to help clients handle the pain that inevitably arises when their wants, needs and desires *can't* be fulfilled (which is guaranteed to happen at times). So we want to remind clients that although we have a lot of control over how we behave, we have no control at all over whether or not we will get what we are hoping for. Given this reality, it makes sense to focus onwhat is most within our control. The most empowering response to unmet needs and unfulfilled desires is to accept the inevitable pain, be self-compassionate, connect with our values, and take action.

Feelings. Values are not feelings. Our values will affect how we feel about any given event or situation and how we act in response to it, but they are not feelings. To get to values, we can ask, "What do I want to stand for in the face of this? How do I want to act in response to this event or situation?"

Virtues, morals, and ethics. Values are beyond right or wrong, good or bad. They are simply expressions of how we want to behave. Of course, the group that we belong to – our family, school, workplace, religion, culture, society, etc – will judge our values, and proclaim that some are good

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and others are bad. When your group judges certain values as “good”, “positive”, “superior”, or “right”, these become known as “virtues” (within this specific group; other groups may of course, espouse different virtues.). Our group then lays down rules about the right way and the wrong way to act on our values, and it tells us that if we don’t act the “right way” or “the good way” we are “bad.” This gives rise to morals, ethics, and codes of conduct. (So if our clients start talking about right, wrong, good, or bad, we know they have shifted from values into the realm of morals, ethics, or codes of conduct.)

Moral values

Values: desired qualities of behavior (without any judgment of “right” or “wrong”)

Morals: principles or standards of “right” and “wrong” or “good” and “bad” behavior

Moral values: values that are judged by one’s society or community to be right and good; also known as “virtues.” (For example, many societies and communities would judge values such as honesty, fairness, respect, kindness, and integrity to be “right,” “good,” or “virtuous.”)

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