# A four-session skills group



A facilitator guide for four sessions of 50 or 90 minutes, one for each Everyday Insight tool: values, activity, experiments, and thoughts. Each session has its own participant handout.

## What the series is for

Each session uses one of the four Everyday Insight tools, and one thread runs through all of them. In session 1, each member chooses one value to carry through the series. Session 2 looks at how their days actually go and plans activities that serve that value. Session 3 tests a prediction about what gets in the way. Session 4 works on the thinking that keeps things stuck, then looks back over the whole series.

The methods are established ones. Values work comes from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and behavioral activation, behavioral experiments, and thought records come from cognitive behavioral therapy.

**The thread is the point.** Keep bringing each session back to the value the member chose. When someone gets lost in the details of a log or a thought record, ask what it has to do with their value.

## How the sessions fit together

| SESSION | FOCUS | TOOL AND WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|---|
| Session 1 | **What matters** | Values Card Sort. A quick sort and one value to carry through the series. |
| Session 2 | **How the days go** | Activity Record. One day looked at hour by hour, and two activities for the value. |
| Session 3 | **What gets in the way** | Behavioral Experiment. A prediction about the value and a small test of it. |
| Session 4 | **Thoughts, and looking back** | Thought Record. The thinking that keeps things stuck, and a plan for keeping going. |

Each session stands on its own. Open every one with a two-minute recap of the thread, so anyone who missed a session can take part. A newcomer picks one value from the list on the session 1 handout during the recap. Sessions 2 to 4 work with any value.

## Who it fits

The series isn't tied to one diagnosis and suits any of the settings in the notes below. Four to ten members is a good size. Members need to follow a short written page and stay with the group for the session. Someone in acute crisis, or too disorganized to follow along, is better served individually first.

## Materials

- That session's handout for each member. Session 1 is three pages, and sessions 2 to 4 are two pages each.
- A few spare session 1 handouts for newcomers.
- Each session builds on the last, so ask members to keep their handouts, or collect them and hand them back.
- Pens and a whiteboard or flip chart. Each tool's website also has a free online version, printable worksheets, and notes for therapists.
- Members who would rather not write can talk it through with a partner, or the facilitator can write for them.

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## Norms, every session

Set them out loud at the start of each session, in full the first time and briefly after that. They prevent the two most common derailments, which are performing for each other and caretaking each other.

- **Nobody has to share.** Passing counts as full participation. Someone can do the whole activity silently and still get a great deal out of it.
- **No comparing lists.** There is no better or worse set of values. If you catch yourself measuring your list against someone else's, notice it privately and let it go.
- **No rescuing.** If someone gets emotional, let them have the feeling. Resist the urge to hand them a tissue or tell them it's okay. Give them room instead.
- **What's said here stays here.** It's standard, but say it anyway, since this exercise gets personal.

**Two ways in.** Nobody ever has to show their page. In discussion, members can always talk about the process instead of the content. Say so each session: "You never have to tell us what's on your page. If you want to talk, you can talk about what this was like without saying what you wrote."

## Session 1: What matters

| 50 MIN | 90 MIN | STAGE | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 10 | **Welcome and norms** | A check-in, then the norms in full. |
| 7 | 10 | **Values versus goals** | Two columns on the board, then on page 1. |
| Skip | 5 | **Grounding** | The good hour. |
| 15 | 20 | **The quick sort** | Check and star on the one-page list, then choose five. |
| 5 | 8 | **One value to carry** | Choose one of the five and describe what living it looks like. |
| Skip | 12 | **Pairs** | Four minutes each on the chosen value. |
| 12 | 17 | **Discussion** | What it was like, and why this value. |
| 6 | 8 | **Noticing and close** | The week's practice, then the closing words. |

Session 1 uses the one-page list of all 83 values instead of the full card sort, which keeps the sort to 15 or 20 minutes. There's no gap rating. The series looks for change in what members do instead.

SAY "I want to start with the difference between a goal and a value. A goal is something you can finish. Get the job or finish the program, and it's done. A value is a direction. It's more about how you travel than where you end up. Nobody ever finishes being a loving parent or being honest. You just keep choosing it."

"This matters because goals can be taken from you. Illness can take them, and so can money trouble or other people. A direction can't be taken. Even on your worst day, you can still turn toward what matters to you."

**Values versus goals.** On the board, make two columns, goals on the left and values on the right. Take a few goals from the room and ask what each one is for. The answer usually names a value. Members add a few of their own on page 1 of the handout.

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**Grounding, in 90 minutes.** Use the good hour. The group will meet again, so the gentler exercise is the better start.

SAY "Think of a recent hour, even a very ordinary one, when you felt like yourself. Not necessarily happy, just yourself. Where were you, what were you doing, and who was there? Hold on to that hour. Somewhere inside it is something you value."

1. **First pass, check.** "Read through the list and check anything that matters to you at all. Don't limit yourself. The headings are only there to make the list easier to read."
2. **Second pass, star.** "Go back through only the values you checked, and star the ones that are very important, the ones you'd call core and not just nice. Most people end up with 10 to 20."
3. **Choose five.** "From your stars, choose the five you'd keep if you could keep only five, and write them on the next page."
4. **Choose one to carry.** "Now choose one of your five to carry through all four sessions. It doesn't have to be your first. Pick the one you'd most like to see more of in your days. Then write what it looks like when you're living it, something someone could see you do."

**Helping someone choose.** If a member can't pick, ask which value feels furthest from how their days go right now, or which one they'd miss most. Either works. The choice isn't permanent, and a member can switch in session 2 if a different value turns out to matter more.

**Pairs, in 90 minutes.** Pair members up. Each person takes four minutes to tell their partner about the value they chose, what it means to them and where it came from. The listener's only job is to listen, with no advice and no stories of their own. Then they switch. Pairs tend to bring out more change talk than large-group sharing, and they feel safer for quieter members. With an odd number, make one group of three and give each person three minutes.

### QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 1

- What was it like to choose just one?
- What does your value look like on an ordinary day?
- When did you last feel close to it?
- What would someone notice if you lived it a little more this week?

SAY "Before next time, notice one moment each day when your value shows up, even briefly, and jot it down on the last page. You're not trying to do more of anything yet. Just notice."

"One last thing. You won't live these values perfectly this week. Nobody does. The point of naming them isn't to give you a new list to fail at. It's so that when you drift, you know which way home is. Drifting and coming back is the practice."

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## Session 2: How the days go

| 50 MIN | 90 MIN | STAGE | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | 10 | **Recap and check-in** | The thread in a minute, then what members noticed. |
| 5 | 8 | **Activity and mood** | How they push on each other. |
| 15 | 20 | **Yesterday** | Each member rebuilds yesterday hour by hour. |
| 10 | 15 | **What stands out** | Patterns, in pairs or as a group. |
| Skip | 15 | **The activity menu** | A group list of things to do, sorted three ways. |
| 7 | 12 | **Two activities** | Each with a day and time, and an If and Then line. |
| 5 | 10 | **Close** | One activity each, said out loud. |

Activity and mood push on each other. When people feel low or anxious, they tend to do less of what matters to them, and that tends to lower mood further. This session looks at one ordinary day, honestly and without judgment, and plans two activities for the coming week that serve the chosen value. It's behavioral activation, aimed at the member's value.

**Recap and check-in.** Ask what members noticed about their value during the week. These moments are easy to share and make a gentle start.

SAY "When you feel low, you tend to do less. You skip the walk, put off the call, stay in. That makes sense in the moment, but doing less usually leaves you feeling worse, and then doing anything gets harder. It can work the other way too. Doing something that matters, even something small, often changes how a day feels. Today we're going to look at how one day actually went."

**Yesterday.** Walking through the day in order helps memory. Blank hours are fine, and so is a day that was mostly ordinary. In individual behavioral activation, people log hours as they go, often for a week. One remembered day is a shorter version that fits a group. Members who want more can keep logging between sessions on the Activity Record.

SAY "Pick one feeling to follow, like low, anxious, or calm. For each hour from when you woke up, write a few words about what you were doing and rate that feeling from 0 to 100. Then check any hour that had something to do with your value, even a little."

**What stands out.** Keep it descriptive. Ask what was going on in the highest and lowest hours, and how many hours touched the value. The aim is noticing, not grading the day. Avoid "you should," and let members draw their own conclusions.

**The activity menu, in 90 minutes.** On the board, make three columns: things people enjoy, things that bring a sense of accomplishment, and things that connect them with others. Ask the group to fill them, including small and free options. Members copy anything useful onto their page.

**Two activities.** Each member chooses two activities for the week that serve their value, small enough to do, and writes a day and time for each. Then they fill in the If and Then line, and after each activity they rate the feeling before and after. That rating is what lets them see what doing it actually did. Plans that name an obstacle and a response ahead of time are carried out more often than plans without one.

### QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 2

- How much did this past week look like your value?

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- What surprised you about how yesterday went?
- What was going on in your best hour, and in your hardest?
- How many hours touched your value?
- What's one small thing that could fit into a day like yesterday?

**A trap to watch for.** Logs can turn into self-criticism fast, with comments like "I wasted the whole day." Bring it back to noticing: "What do you see if you look at it as information?"

## Session 3: What gets in the way

| 50 MIN | 90 MIN | STAGE | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | 10 | **Recap and check-in** | How last week's two activities went. |
| 7 | 10 | **Predictions** | What a prediction is, and how to test one. |
| Skip | 20 | **An experiment in the room** | A small prediction tested right here. |
| 15 | 20 | **The page** | A prediction, how strongly it's believed, and a test. |
| 12 | 20 | **Discussion** | Predictions and plans, as members choose to share. |
| 8 | 10 | **Step and close** | The test with a day and time, and an If and Then line. |

Most people already know what they'd like to do. What stops them is often a prediction, like "If I call her, she'll be annoyed," or "If I go, I won't be able to handle it." A behavioral experiment treats that prediction as something to test instead of something to obey. This session reviews last week's activities, then each member writes one prediction connected to their value and plans a small test.

**Recap and check-in.** Ask how the two activities went and what happened to the feeling, with curiosity, not as a report card. When an activity didn't happen, ask what the member thought would happen if they did it. That prediction is often the best material for today. When both activities went fine, ask what bigger step for their value they've been putting off, and what they think would happen if they took it.

SAY "A prediction is a thought about what will happen if you do something. 'If I speak up, people will think I'm stupid.' 'If I go to the gym, everyone will stare.' Some predictions turn out right, and some don't. The only way to know is to find out. A behavioral experiment is a small, planned way of finding out."

**An experiment in the room, in 90 minutes.** Invite members to try something small right here, like asking the group a question or saying one thing they appreciated about the session. Before they do it, they write what they expect to happen and rate how sure they are from 0 to 100. Afterward they compare. Nobody has to take part.

**The page.** Each member writes one prediction connected to their value, as "If I…, then…," and rates how strongly they believe it from 0 to 100. Then they plan a test, with what they'll do, where, and when, and what they'd expect to see if the prediction came true. They also name what they usually do to stay safe, like rehearsing, keeping it short, or bringing someone along, and leave it out this time. A test with the safety behavior still in place can't tell them much. The best test is the one they're willing to try now, not the scariest one. They fill in the second page after the experiment and bring it to session 4.

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QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 3

- How much did this past week look like your value?
- What prediction came up when you thought about last week's activities?
- How sure are you, from 0 to 100?
- What would you expect to see if the prediction were true?
- What's the smallest test that would still tell you something?

**Keep tests safe and small.** Experiments test what happens, and they are never dares. If a plan sounds risky or too big, help the member find a smaller version. Steer away from predictions about a traumatic memory, a real medical risk, or harming oneself. Those belong in individual work with a clinician.

## Session 4: Thoughts, and looking back

| 50 MIN | 90 MIN | STAGE | WHAT HAPPENS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | 10 | **Recap and results** | What happened in the experiments. |
| 9 | 8 | **Thoughts and feelings** | How a situation, a thought, and a feeling connect. |
| Skip | 15 | **A worked example** | The group works through a made-up situation together. |
| 15 | 20 | **A thought record** | Each member works through one of their own. |
| 6 | 15 | **Discussion** | What members noticed. |
| 6 | 10 | **Looking back** | The value, what changed, and what comes next. |
| 6 | 12 | **Closing round** | One thing each person is taking with them. |

The last session reviews the experiments, then works on the thinking that keeps things stuck with a short thought record. It ends with a look back over all four sessions and a plan for keeping going.

**Recap and results.** Members bring the second page of their session 3 handout. Ask how the experiments went and compare the belief ratings before and after. A prediction that came true is useful too. Ask how bad it actually was, and for how long it mattered. If a member didn't run the test, ask what got in the way. That moment often makes a good thought record later in the session. So does a prediction that held up.

SAY "The same situation can feel very different depending on what we tell ourselves about it. If a friend doesn't text back, 'She's busy' and 'She's tired of me' lead to very different feelings. A thought record slows that down, so you can look at the thought instead of just believing it."

**Thoughts and feelings, in 50 minutes.** Sketch one quick example on the board, a situation with two different thoughts and the feeling each one leads to. Members then see the steps once before they try their own.

**A worked example, in 90 minutes.** Use a made-up situation, like someone who planned to go to a friend's birthday dinner and stayed home instead. Ask the group what that person might have been thinking, pick the hottest thought, and work through the evidence for and against it together, then a more balanced thought. Working on someone imaginary first makes it easier to do with your own.

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**The thought record.** Members pick a recent moment when they felt stuck about their value, one that matters but isn't the hardest thing in their life right now. They work through the steps on the page, from the situation to new ratings. A balanced thought isn't a positive one. When the evidence mostly supports the hot thought, it says what's true and what the member can do about it. Either way, the thought becomes something they can look at instead of something they just believe.

**An alternative.** When weighing the evidence feels invalidating, as with a thought that's partly true or keeps coming back, use a defusion exercise from ACT. The member rewrites the hot thought as "I'm having the thought that…" and notices whether its grip loosens. The aim is to hold it more lightly, not to prove it wrong.

#### QUESTIONS FOR SESSION 4

- How much did this past week look like your value?
- What was the hot thought?
- What did you find when you looked at the evidence?
- How does the balanced thought sit with you?
- How does this thought connect to your value?

**Looking back.** Members fill in the second page: the value they carried, what they did for it, what they want to keep doing, and what they'll do when they notice they've drifted. Drift isn't the problem. Not noticing it is. The bottom of the page lists the four tool websites for anyone who wants to keep going.

**Closing round.** Each member says one thing they're taking with them, and passing is allowed. If the group has worked well together, invite members to say one thing they noticed someone else do or say. Keep it to what people did, not what they are. Then give the closing words.

SAY "One last thing. The group ends today, but the value doesn't. You'll drift from it, probably this week. Everyone does. You now have four ways to find your way back: notice it, plan for it, test what's in the way, and look at the thought that's stopping you. Drifting and coming back is the practice."

## Facilitator moves

How you respond to answers matters more than which questions you pick. These four moves cover most of it.

### 1. Reflect change talk

When you hear desire, ability, reasons, or need for change, reflect it back so the member hears it in the room. When you hear sustain talk, acknowledge it briefly and move on. What you reflect tends to grow.

A member says, "Health is one of my five, but I haven't been to a doctor in three years." Avoid normalizing it away with something like "It's hard to find time, we all do that." Try "So it's near the top of what matters to you, and it's been three years. What's it like to say that out loud?"

### 2. Use a double-sided reflection for ambivalence

SAY "On one hand, you chose Autonomy as the value to carry. On the other hand, almost every decision you described today ran through what someone else needed. Both of those are true for you right now." Then stop talking.

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### 3. Ask for more instead of interpreting

"Say more about that." "What was it about that word?" "When was the last time you felt that one strongly?" These are almost always better than the smartest thing you could say about someone's list.

### 4. Protect the silence

After a hard question, count to ten before you rescue the room. Some of the most important things said in this group will come out of silences you didn't fill.

## What to watch for

- **Tools turning into scorecards.** Logs, ratings, and experiments can become new ways to feel like a failure. Keep everything framed as information.
- **Shame about the gap.** The gap becomes evidence of failure instead of direction. Interrupt this one actively: "The gap isn't proof you've failed. It's proof the value is still alive. You can't miss something you don't care about."
- **Values shaped by culture or faith.** Family, Duty, Tradition, Spirituality, and God's Will may sit at the center of a member's life. Treat them as fully personal, and ask what living them looks like rather than whether they were freely chosen.
- **Debating thoughts.** A thought record weighs evidence, and it works best when the member does the weighing. If the group piles on to prove a thought wrong, slow down and hand it back: "What do you make of the evidence?"
- **Experiments that are too big.** Help scale them down. The best test is the one the member will actually try.
- **Safety concerns.** If anything a member says raises concern about their safety, follow your setting's usual procedures.

## Notes by setting

- **Inpatient units.** Read the instructions aloud and offer to go through the list with anyone who needs it. Run the sessions on consecutive days, use a day on the unit for session 2, and keep steps doable on the unit or in the first days after discharge. Expect members to come and go.
- **Intensive outpatient and partial hospital programs.** When sessions are a day apart, keep each step small enough to try before the next one.
- **Substance use treatment.** Values often carry recovery motivation, which makes this a strong fit. Sobriety works better as a way of living a value than as a value itself, so ask what staying sober makes room for. Watch for shame about the gap, which can run high in early recovery. In session 3, keep experiments away from situations with a risk of use.
- **Outpatient groups.** Members have time to try steps between sessions, so the step and the follow-up carry more weight here. The series fits best when the same members meet weekly.

## Sources

The values come from the Personal Values Card Sort by W. R. Miller, J. C'de Baca, D. B. Matthews, and P. L. Wilbourne, University of New Mexico, 2001. Session 2 follows behavioral activation as revised by C. W. Lejuez and colleagues, Behavior Modification, 2011. Session 3 follows the Oxford Guide to Behavioural Experiments in Cognitive Therapy by J. Bennett-Levy and colleagues, 2004. Thought records go back to A. T. Beck and colleagues, Cognitive Therapy of Depression, 1979. If and Then plans draw on P. M. Gollwitzer and P. Sheeran, Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 2006.

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