

Changing Values and Beliefs

By Holly Osment, LMFT

What are Values?

We all have values. A lot of times, though, we don't know exactly what they are. What are values? They are the qualities and ideas about life that speak to what is important to us, that help guide our behavior and define who we are. Our values come from our beliefs, and are formed by various means... our parents, our family, our culture, our life experiences, hearing other people's beliefs and forming our own opinions, etc. Our morals come from our beliefs too, from what we believe is right and wrong.

Some examples of values are: achievement, belonging, bravery, carefulness, challenge, compassion, dependability, family, generosity, health, honesty, humor, kindness, knowledge, making a difference, open-mindedness, peace, perseverance, respect, self-control, silliness, spirituality, success, trustworthiness, and uniqueness. There are many, many more.

When Values Change

So we all have values and beliefs. And they change. They change because we want them to; they change sometimes even when we didn't mean them to. They change because something happens in our life; they change because something didn't happen. They change because we grow. Some values and beliefs don't change, but many do, and they continue to change throughout our lives. "The man who never alters his opinion is like standing water, and breeds reptiles of the mind." – English poet William Blake

Figuring out who we are is always a sticky process. Our values and beliefs are a big part of that, and when they change it makes it even harder to know who we are. A lot of times, however, our experiences help change our values in ways that make sense. For instance, we may have believed that something is wrong and now we aren't so sure that's true. We may have believed we'd never do something, but then we do and we decide that it's okay. Sometimes, though, we *don't* think it's okay, and that's a clue that our values have *not* changed. That's the time to take a good look at why we're doing what we're doing, and how we really feel about it.

The teenage years are a process of navigating that road – figuring out when our beliefs change, or seeing from our own inner reaction that something we did went against our values. We can be influenced by peers, romantic relationships, the media, experimentation, and rebellion; and we can think we have changed and then later we change again, sometimes even back to what we believed before. If we experiment with different behaviors, experiences, and friends, but don't actually change our values or beliefs, it usually turns out that these experimentations are temporary. We don't always know which way it will go. It's not an easy process, and it's not supposed to be. It's all part of growing up and figuring ourselves out.

Values, Sex and Alcohol/Drugs

There are so many different values and beliefs that may change for you over your high school years, but let's look at two areas of controversy that some of you may face: sex and alcohol/drugs.

Deciding when and how and with whom to be sexual is a big deal. There are so many ways this can happen, but the very best way is to act according to your values (and to know what your values around this are). There are a lot of things that get in the way of doing this, though. Like what? Plenty. Alcohol, for one. Many of you probably have first-hand experience with how alcohol affects your judgment and decision-making, which means you may compromise your values while under the influence. Drugs may do that too. And pressure... the pressure to fit in, the pressure to be liked, the pressure to be what you

think the other person wants you to be, the pressure to prove something. Oh another thing that gets in the way: hormones. Being swept away by the heat of the moment. Having a hard time stopping when things feel good. It can be hard to think clearly when your brain is soaking in a soup of hormones. This hormonal overload can also affect your judgment and lead you to compromise your values.

It's much easier then, to think about what you are doing and what you want when you're not right there being sexual with someone. When you're not swimming with hormones, when you're not under the influence of alcohol/drugs, when you're not right there in the moment. When you can take a step back from the pressure and think about... what you really want, how you want to treat someone else, how you want to be treated, how you plan to protect yourself, who will be affected, and what the consequences of your actions might be. Regrets around sex can be painful and embarrassing, or worse. You can only rely upon yourself to look out for your own best interest. Sexuality and sex can be a wonderful thing – in the right context for you. Know what you believe that to be.

Deciding whether or not to experiment with drugs/alcohol, how much, how often, or what types... all these are also big decisions. And just like with sex, your values and beliefs may change over time and your behavior can be swayed by pressure and outside influences. Life involves risk, and choosing to be sexual and/or choosing to try alcohol or drugs can be risky. There are many decisions we make that might be dangerous or harmful. We need to know our limits and know what's safe. By knowing our values, we know how we want to act around these topics, and what we think is okay for us.

Values and Relationships

Okay, so we all know that our values and beliefs often change. And if this is true for us, it's also true for our friends. When our friends' values change, it can be hard to know if we still know who they are, or if we still want to be friends with them. It's easy to judge others, and to resent how they change, even when we are changing too. Changing values (ours or our friends') affect relationships. Some friendships weather these changes. With the ones that don't... sometimes that's what's best for us, to distance ourselves from that person. Other times, it's too bad to lose a friendship that might have continued to enrich our lives because maybe we (or they) were judgmental and intolerant. It can be very hard to know what the right call is. Our values can guide us.

Our changing values also sometimes conflict with our parents' values, or our culture's values. This can be painful and confusing for everyone involved. How these differences are accepted, tolerated or understood will play a big part in how everyone handles things. Hurting the relationship between you and your parents is never the best idea, since everyone feels bad and there's a lost opportunity for each side to grow. Sometimes, unfortunately, this can happen when one or both sides just cannot accept or agree. In the best case, parents listen and try to understand the individuality of their teen, and teens communicate as best they can to help their parents hear them. It takes effort on both sides, but the payoff is room for you to develop and grow into who you believe yourself to be, and room for your family to know who that person really is.

“Figuring out who you are is the whole point of the human experience.” – Anna Quindlen

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