

What are Values for?

Although often overlooked, they are central to our individual wellbeing, and the wellbeing of our world.

By Charles Fowler

The first three World Values Days in 2016, 2017 and 2018 focused on values from an individual, an organisational, and a community point of view. The vision of a special day focused on values really caught on, and on those days millions of people around the world reflected on their values and put them into practice a bit more than they might usually do.

For some, the impact of World Values Day events and activities has been more profound. They discovered that values are not just a nice thing to have or a helpful tool - they suddenly realised that values are what make all of us what we are. Our values guide and shape our lives. When we live in alignment with them, we feel good about ourselves and we are happier, more purposeful, more fulfilled. If we override them, we get stressed and unhappy. In other words, they are the drivers of our wellbeing – our mental and emotional wellbeing, and to an extent even our physical wellbeing.

Wellbeing seems to be on everybody's agenda these days. Yet in all the intense discussion about wellbeing that we see across the media, the role of values is all too often underrated or ignored. We are told that we should work-out more, relax more, be more mindful – maybe put on some background music, stroke a cat, or read a novel. Or we should eat more fruit, smile more, spend more time with friends.

None of these are bad things to do, and they may lift our mood for a while. But on their own they can't provide a solid foundation for our long-term wellbeing. For that we need to look to values.

What is wellbeing and how is it linked to values?

The word 'wellbeing' is often used interchangeably with 'happiness', and both are sometimes defined as occurring when we have feelings of pleasure and don't have any feelings of pain, when we feel life is going well.

The problem with this is that these feelings are often fleeting and transient. The type of wellbeing or happiness that most of us would prefer to aim for is something more sustained, more permanent.

The research in the field of positive psychology over the past thirty years has provided hard evidence for this, highlighting our deep need for values-

based meaning and purpose in our lives rather than mere transitory enjoyment. This is called "eudaimonic" wellbeing, from the word used by Aristotle who taught his followers to live a virtuous life doing what is worth doing.

According to this view, our wellbeing derives from aligning our lives with the values that will guide us through that meaningful life, rather than a life spent chasing short-lived pleasures. After all, bringing up children is, for most of us, fundamentally rewarding and meaningful, but can be intensely difficult at times. The hospital doctors that toil around the clock caring for their patients suffer regularly from stress and often feel less than "happy", yet in the long term most can feel that they are living meaningful and fulfilling lives.

Are some values better for wellbeing than others?

Most of us would agree that there is some benefit to our wellbeing when we align our actions to our values, irrespective of what those values might be. It is better to have values and be aware of them than not. However there is strong evidence, much of it from positive psychology, that certain values produce a very much stronger effect on our wellbeing than others.

Positive psychologists call this category "intrinsic values", although I prefer the term "human values". They are values which are natural to us and good "in themselves". Their worth does not depend on whether they bring us some benefit or advantage. Extrinsic values on the other hand are valued for the personal benefits they bring us. We could call them loosely "selfish values" or, more kindly, "survival values".

For instance we would normally value friendship, justice, community, care and compassion for their own sake, not for any personal advantage they bring us. But if we pursue a friendship in order to boost our status, then that would be to gain a personal advantage over others, which would make it *extrinsically* valuable. It would be linked to underlying extrinsic (selfish) values such as success, prestige and control.

It seems that values which are "natural" to us, which are inbuilt in us as human beings, are much more powerful in enhancing our wellbeing. Moreover, in general these natural human values are to do with seeking the wellbeing of others.

Research done in the last twenty years has shown that behaviour based on these intrinsic human values has a much greater and more lasting positive impact on our wellbeing than behaviour based on extrinsic values. Behaving in alignment with our natural "human" values makes us feel good. We really are an altruistic species at heart.

