

THE COMPASS METAPHOR

Therapist: Values are like a compass. A compass gives you direction and keeps you on track when you're traveling. And our values do the same for the journey of life. We use them to choose the direction in which we want to move and to keep us on track as we go. So when you act on a value, it's like heading west. No matter how far west you travel, you never get there; there's always further to go. But goals are like the things you try to achieve on your journey: they're like the sights you want to see or the mountains you want to climb while you keep on traveling west.

We can give clients a couple of examples to clarify the difference. One of my favorite examples is the contrast between "getting married" and "being loving" (Hayes et al, 1999). If you want to be loving and caring, that's a value—it's ongoing; you want to behave that way for the rest of your life. And in any moment you have a choice: you can either act on that value or neglect it. But if you want to get married, that's a goal. It's something that can be completed, achieved, "crossed off the list." And you can achieve the goal of marriage even if you completely neglect your values around being loving and caring. (Of course, your marriage might not last too long.)

Values are far more empowering than goals because they're always available to us. In any moment, we can act on them or neglect them; the choice is ours. Not so for goals. We can't guarantee we'll ever achieve the goal of marriage, but in any moment we can act on our values around being loving and caring. This is possible even if we don't have a partner; we can be loving and caring toward our friends, neighbors, family, pets, pot plants, environment—and, of course, ourselves.

Here's another example I often give: if you want a better job, that's a goal. Once you've got it, it's "mission accomplished." But if you want to be helpful and efficient and productive, those are values: desired qualities of ongoing action. And in any moment, you can act on those values—even if you don't like your job or you don't currently have one.

Here are a few more examples to really hammer this point home: To lose ten pounds of weight is a goal; eating healthily is a value. To go to the gym is a goal; caring for your body is a value. To have a big house is a goal; supporting your family is a value. To get love and respect from others is a goal; to be loving and respectful is a value. To feel less anxious is an "emotional goal"; acting courageously is a value. To feel happy is an emotional goal; being warm, open, and friendly toward others is a value. To stop criticizing your partner is a "dead person's goal" (a dead person will never criticize his partner); being accepting, understanding, and appreciative is a value.