

80th Birthday Exercise for Values Exploration

Rationale

This is an exercise that's about getting a sense for what you want to be about in your life. It's a way of exploring what you would like to treat as important and how you want to be with yourself or with others. If you're willing to give it a try, we'll both close our eyes and I'll guide us through noticing different aspects of our experience. I'll ask you some questions. You don't need to answer out loud. Just notice what comes up for you. There are no right or wrong answers in this exercise – it's all about noticing what comes up. Are you willing?

Exercise

OK, let's start by closing our eyes. Take a moment to get centered by noticing your breath and noticing how your body feels. (Pause). If you find yourself getting distracted or notice your mind wandering, that's OK. Just notice that and gently bring your attention back to this exercise. (Pause). Now, imagine moving forward through time. Imagine yourself aging and growing older as you move through life. Imagine now that you are turning 80 years old, and your friends, family, and coworkers have gathered to celebrate your 80th birthday.

Imagine what you will look like on your 80th birthday. And, I invite you to imagine not who you think would likely be there, but imagine who you would most want to be at your 80th birthday party – even if that means they would be very old. There could even be people you haven't met yet. (Pause). Try to really picture who would be there. (Pause). Now the time has come in the party where people are starting to give speeches. They are taking turns standing up and speaking about what you have meant to them. They are speaking about what you have stood for as a person, and the impact you have had. (Pause). Again, I'm not asking you to imagine what they would likely say. I'm inviting you to imagine, if you were to be bold in this moment, what you would most want them to say. Deep down in your heart, imagine what you would most want others to say about what you've meant. (Pause).

Imagine the first person standing up to speak. Imagine it's someone very close to you. Take a moment now and imagine what you would most want them to say about the impact you've had. Try to really hear them saying that. (Pause).

Now, imagine the next person standing up to speak. This could be someone from a different part of your life – perhaps a coworker or neighbor. And for them too, imagine what you would most want for them to say about what you have stood for in your life. (Pause).

Now thank your mind for this experience, and gently bring your attention back to the present moment. (Pause). Take a moment to get centered here, noticing your breath and how your body feels. And when you're ready, you can open your eyes.

Debriefing

There are lots of ways to debrief from this exercise. The direction you take will depend on what comes up for the participant. Here are some possibilities.

Questions to ask:

What came up for you?

Who did you imagine speaking?

What did you most want them to say about you?

What other thoughts/feelings did you notice?

Ideas to explore:

Values as a choice (in contrast to “shoulds”)

Values as an on-going direction or agenda in life (in contrast to specific goals)

Values as a quality of action (in contrast to an emotion or object)

To care about something is to be vulnerable to it (pain and values are connected)

Notes

This exercise can be tailored in many ways to fit the goals and abilities of the current audience.

For example, the length of time between the present and the imagined future can be manipulated for varying levels of intensity. You can make the exercise more intense by having participants imagine their own funerals. Or, you can make it less intense by having them imagine a reunion 10 years from now. You can even have them imagine themselves one week from today, looking back on what they treated as important with their behavior in the next week.

Also, you can vary the prompts you give for who participants will imagine speaking about them. For example, if you are working with a group of teachers, you might ask them to imagine a former student speaking at their retirement party.

It's important to note that this exercise requires a fair amount of skillfulness in the participants. For example, it requires the skill of sitting quietly and focusing attention. Not everyone is capable of doing this. However, those skills could be shaped over time with other interventions, and there are other ways to explore values.