



Values

What's most important
to you in your life?



Core values guide the way people live their lives and represent what is most important to them. In weight management, being aware of one's values can help foster a willingness to choose the difficult but worthwhile choices, such as not giving in to a craving, or exercising even when tired. Managing weight requires ongoing effort. Values provide a strong reason one may be willing to work hard over the long run.



WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

The best clinical weight management outcomes to date integrate as a central strategy a behavioral commitment to clearly-defined values. [This paper from Forman and butryn](#) also explains this principle.

Values – What Are They and Why Are They Important?

People are capable of difficult work long into the future if the work leads them in the direction of the things that are most important to them. The behaviours involved in successful weight management require lifelong attention and work. What might be important enough to you in your life that it would make you WILLING to attend to and work on these weight management behaviours long term? Core values are the things most important to you in terms of how you wish to live your life. Whether you are fully aware of your values or not, they are guiding forces that influence your daily decisions and behaviours. When we do things that are aligned with our values we tend to feel good about them, and we're even willing to experience some discomfort or inconvenience by living in this way because it's important to us. When we live in a way that doesn't support our values, usually there are signs of unease or dissatisfaction in us.

Long-term weight management is not easy and requires a willingness to even experience some short-term discomfort from time to time. The discomfort of passing up a tasty treat, preparing a simple meal at home instead of going through a drive-thru or ordering in when pressed for time, or exercising when you feel tired are all examples of the short-term discomforts you may experience. However, these discomforts may be minimized if those choices and behaviors are aligned with your values.

The Difference Between Values and Long-Term Goals

Distinguishing between values and goals is important. Values are a direction while goals are a destination. Values are a compass or a guide to help determine the direction you want to be going. You strive in the direction of your values but never reach them because they are not a destination. Long-term goals, on the other hand, are destinations, such as losing this much weight or fitting into this pants size. There are risks in setting long-term goals when it comes to weight management; you may not be able to achieve your goal, and this could result in disappointment, self criticism and giving up. Another risk of long-term goals is if you do reach your goal, what will motivate you to keep going after that, since managing weight requires long-term effort? Goals may change over time, be achieved or prove too difficult. In contrast, a person's core values tend to be constant and permanent.

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“I want to be working in a direction where my weight and health are least preventing me from participating in activities such as hiking, scuba diving, canoeing, and especially cycling with my kids whenever possible. Being able to enjoy these activities long into the future is really important to me.”

“I want to be working in a direction where my weight, health and energy least prevent me from planning and engaging in activities with my grandkids, such as playing games and playing with toys, even on the floor.”

“I want to be working in a direction where my health least prevents me from maintaining independence, travelling and exploring new places well into my retirement years.”

“I want to be working in a direction where I am feeling confident about my appearance so that I can most enjoy social, personal and professional interactions with others and get the most that I can from these experiences.” *

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What Are My Values?

A good place to start is to think about why you want to lose weight sustainably. For example, some may say, “I want to lose weight because I want to be healthier.” A rule with values is that if you can ask “why,” you have not yet found the underlying value. Why do you want to be healthy? “If I lose weight, I will have more energy and mobility.” Why do you want to have more energy and mobility? “I really enjoy participating in fun activities when travelling, like hiking, scuba diving, and canoeing, and I like cycling with my kids on the weekends. I want to share in all the experiences with my spouse, children and grandchildren long into the future.” Aha! Let’s start to capture the values statement. We suggest you may start your values statements with the phrase, “I want to be working in a direction where my weight and health are least preventing me from...” Below are some example of values statements.

If you can read your value statement(s) and say, “yes, this is really important to me,” then you are on the right track.

What about the value of fun? Considering the balance between two values

You will also be asked to consider maintaining a loyalty to enjoying the experience of good food and drink with family and friends, in socialization and in celebration. You may think that these values would seem contradictory to your values of health and quality of life. In a way, the opposite is true; sustained behaviour change to achieve weight loss requires maintaining a loyalty to all your values.

Flexibility and Balance

? Consider asking yourself before a dinner party, “How would this night end if I were to be loyal to both my values for ① health and ② fun, food and friends? How can I still enjoy the pleasure of good food and drink and yet minimize any negative impact on my health and weight?”

If you are celebrating an occasion with your family at a restaurant, you may choose to consider this a “celebratory meal” and plan for extra calories so that you can include a glass of wine (or two) and a shared dessert, for example, if these are important ways for you to enjoy the experience. In contrast, if you are dining out because you didn’t have a chance to grocery shop on the weekend, you may choose to consider this a “functional meal.” A functional meal would represent a meal you would otherwise eat at home, such as a healthy entrée. Prioritizing your values for health in this instance could mean avoiding the bread basket, appetizer, dessert, alcohol and fried foods.

Now that you have identified your values and what is most important to you, think about what eating habits and exercise habits reflect those values. When making decisions about food, drink and exercise ask yourself, “Is this decision aligned with my values?” “Of course, I can eat this, drink this or forgo this activity, but ... is this decision in line with the direction I want to be going in, towards the things that are most important to me?” It’s amazing how powerful pausing and asking these questions can be in helping with decisions related to eating and activity.

Behavioural Goals Aligned with Values

If values are the reason weight management is important to you, behavioural goals are within your control and can help keep you in line with your values. Setting daily behavioural goals, such as “I will pack a healthy lunch instead of going to the food court,” can increase the likelihood of behaving in a way that is in line with your values.

SEE RESOURCE: *Daily Goals: A Plan for One Day* for more information on setting behavioural goals.



Values Reflection

This may sound obvious, but behaviours that are followed by a positive experience tend to be repeated. Conversely, behaviours that are followed by a negative experience tend not to be repeated.

This simple learning principle was embedded into psychology in 1898 by Edward Lee Thorndike when he introduced his [law of effect](#). Later (1913), B.F. Skinner further studied and defined this learning principle with the term [reinforcement](#).

The exercise of values reflection is based on this simple learning theory—the principle that behaviours that are followed by a positive experience tend to be repeated, and behaviours that are followed by a negative experience tend not to be repeated. The values reflection exercise invites one to ask at the end of the day, “Did I move in the direction of my values today? Were my decisions around food and activity in the direction of what is most important to me?”

When the answer to this questioning is yes, this reflection may be naturally and immediately followed by any number of positive emotions including satisfaction, happiness and hopefulness. These positive emotions serve to reinforce the behaviours and increase the likelihood that the behaviours are repeated.

What if the answer to the above questions is no? “No, my eating and activity today were not aligned with my values.” In this case, the reflection may be naturally and immediately followed by any number of mild negative emotions including mild dissatisfaction and unhappiness. These mild negative emotions serve to do the opposite of reinforcement, making the off-track and undesirable behaviours less likely to be repeated.

In this model, off-track days become important learning opportunities, potentially leading to behaviours that next time are on track.



Beware of Self-Critical Thoughts

A big caveat. The end-of-day reflection exercise carries some risk. Reflecting on your day can generate thoughts of self-criticism!

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“Sure, one day, big deal. I've put together good days before, only to be followed by gaining weight. Let's not break our arm patting ourselves on the back”

Self-Critical Thoughts - On-Track Day

Even an on-track day can be followed by self-criticism.

Here, self-criticism disables the positive emotional experience required to reinforce the day of on-track behaviour, and the new learning does not take place.

Self-Critical Thoughts - Off-Track Day

An off-track day can, of course, also lead to self-criticism. Self-critical thoughts go beyond feeling unhappy or dissatisfied about the day. They can affect your sense of self-worth and belief in your abilities to manage your weight. They can lead to a sense of defeat and hopelessness. For example, reflecting on an off-track day may generate thoughts such as:

“I shouldn't have done that! Here I go again. I'm weak. I have no willpower. I will never succeed at this. It's too hard.” These thoughts lead to strong negative emotions that then lead to demotivation.

We said earlier that when off-track days occur, the goal is to experience mild negative emotions that promote learning and positive changes in behaviour. The strong negative reaction described above puts you at risk of not being open to positive learning. Fortunately, this subject is covered comprehensively in the resilience module. If the end-of-day reflection exercise on off-track days feels demotivational, please reference the resilience module.



All too often, people look to reinforce all the hard work of weight loss by looking at the scale or how their clothes fit, or whether they are receiving compliments from other people or if their health goals are being realized. The problem with using these outcomes to reinforce our behaviours is that they don't happen immediately adjacent to the behaviour we are looking to reinforce. For example, if you are teaching a dog to roll over and you are holding a cookie in your hand—if the dog rolls over, you do not go away and bring the cookie as a reward the next day. You give it right away, along with encouragement, and the dog FEELS good immediately; the emotional reward comes right after the behaviour and the behaviour is thereby reinforced.

Looking to the scale for reinforcement is the equivalent of rewarding a dog that followed a command the next day or at the end of a week! Also note, as well-described in the “glycogen” material, the scale is not always a reliable indicator of progress. Rewards should come adjacent/ beside the behavior you are trying to reinforce, not the next day or week.

End Of Day Reflection Exercise

END-OF-DAY REFLECTION

At the end of the day, find a place where you can be uninterrupted. Think about your values and the goals you had set for that day. Reflect and ask yourself two questions—the only two possible answers are **Yes** or **No**.

WAS I ON TRACK TODAY?

ON TRACK

If your answer is **Yes**, then the second question is:

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE FOR ME TO HAVE AN ON-TRACK DAY?

What is it like to acknowledge in that moment that you are on track to where you want to be with your daily goals and are moving in the direction of your values? Though you may be on a long road, right now, you are exactly where you wanted to be. What is this experience like and how does it make you feel? What thoughts come to mind?

Check your experience, feelings and thoughts.

- I feel a sense of accomplishment
- I feel satisfied
- I feel happy
- I feel in control
- I feel hopeful
- I feel content
- I feel peaceful
- I feel neutral

OFF TRACK

If your answer is **No**, then the second question is:

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE LIKE FOR ME TO HAVE AN OFF-TRACK DAY?

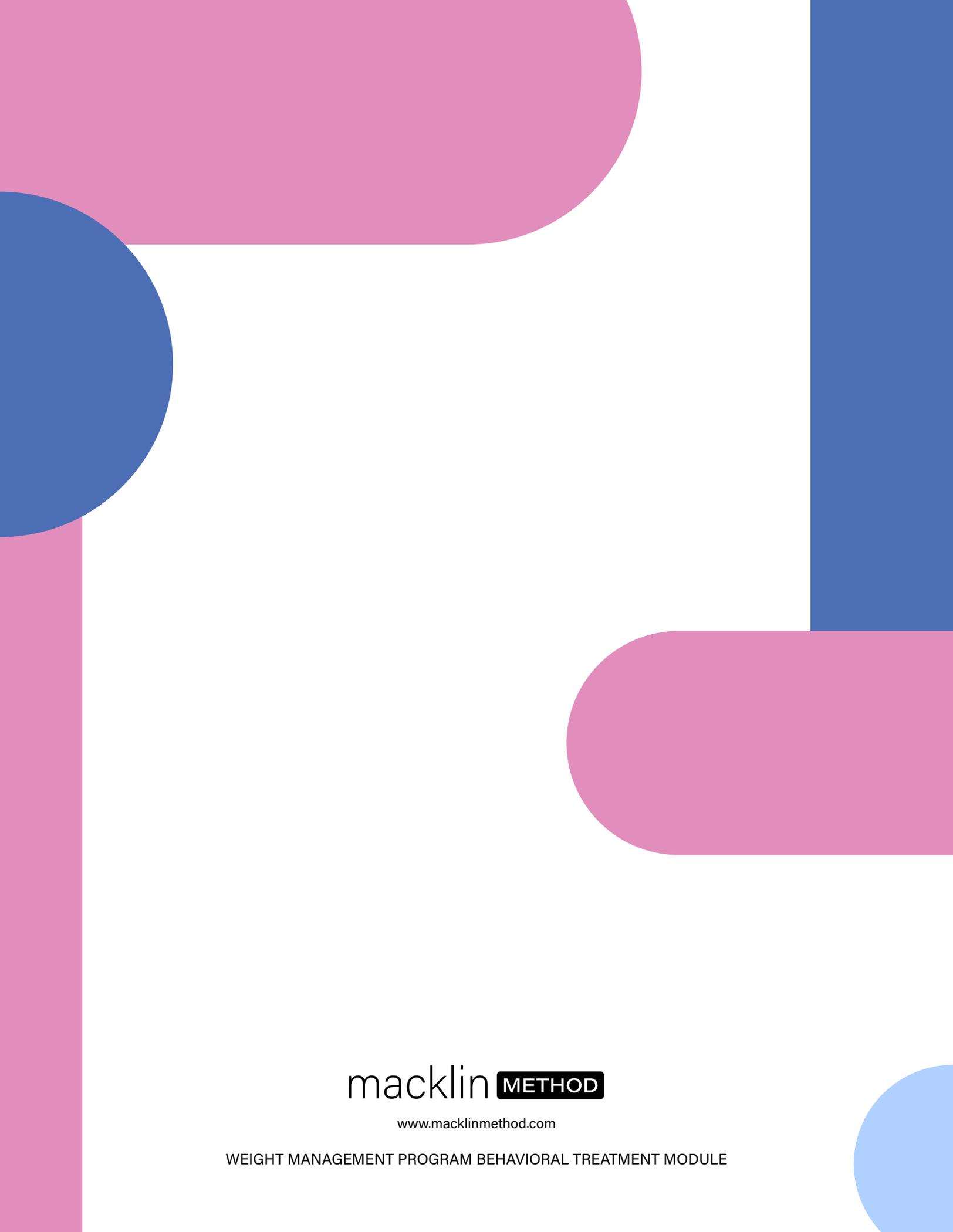
What is it like to acknowledge that in the moment you are not on track to where you want to be with your daily goals, and made choices that do not support your values? What is this experience like and how does it make you feel? What thoughts come to mind?

Check your experience, feelings and thoughts.

- I feel out of control
- I feel dissatisfied
- I feel regretful
- I feel unhappy
- I feel off track
- I feel neutral

Consider documenting your end-of-day reflections in the food notes in My Fitness Pal or in an electronic or paper journal.



The background features several large, overlapping geometric shapes in shades of pink and blue. A large pink shape is at the top left, a blue circle is on the left side, a blue vertical bar is on the right, and a pink rounded rectangle is at the bottom right. A small blue circle is also visible at the bottom right corner.

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