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# Wisdom for Well-being from Philosopher Valerie Tiberius, PhD



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What do you want out of life? For a fresh take on tackling this big question, we reached out to Valerie Tiberius, Ph.D., the Paul W. Frenzel Chair in Liberal Arts and professor of philosophy at the University of Minnesota. Trained in exploring and researching conundrums, Valerie provides thoughtful guidance in her latest book, [\*What Do You Want Out of Life: A Philosophical Guide to Figuring Out What Matters.\*](#)

As a philosopher, Valerie makes the distinction between happiness, a psychological state of feeling good, and well-being, a state philosophers attribute to values fulfillment. “I think you achieve well-being when you fulfill the values you have over the course of your life,” says Valerie. How closely our values suit our personalities, how much they conflict with each other, and how we manage that conflict can also contribute to or detract from values fulfillment. “If you want well-being, you want a life in which you have a set of values that can evolve with you over time and that you fulfill, whatever that means to you.”

For Valerie, values are essentially very special, important goals.

When conflict arises between our values, our ability to achieve fulfillment is compromised. This can happen in minor and major ways. If you want to go out for dinner, and you also want to stay in, one of these goals is going to be frustrated because they are incompatible. This tension becomes more consequential in cases such as wanting to work late on a presentation and wanting to attend your child’s soccer game. “If your big values are represented in your life in a way that they’re always conflicting with each other, it’s going to mean that you get less fulfillment.”

Because our values are typically high-level and abstract, fine-tuning them is an important step. It allows us to fulfill our values more effectively and more skillfully navigate conflict between our values. “You can’t fulfill the value of ‘career’ without knowing more about what that means,” says Valerie. “You have to make it specific by thinking about: What kind of career? And what does success mean?” Fine-tuning

big values in a way that increases their compatibility fosters clarity and helps mitigate frustration in times of conflict.

Hidden goals, those we haven't articulated, can be another pitfall to fulfillment. "Because we aren't explicitly endorsing these goals and making a plan to achieve them, they end up frustrated which ends up making us miserable," says Valerie. To help identify these undiscovered goals, Valerie recommends foregoing your rationalizing, linguistic brain and tuning into your emotional responses, emotional dispositions, and tendencies. In addition, she advises reflecting on times when you were the happiest and most at ease, seeking the counsel of good friends and partners, and considering the ways people you admire manage their lives. They can often demonstrate a hidden value of yours.

External forces also impinge on our well-being. Unless you choose to live as a hermit, you will almost always need to compromise. "If you have some goals that are in tension with the way the world happens to be structured, and you're not going to give up, you probably have to modify the goal to make it possible for you to meet it in the circumstances that you're in," says Valerie. She encourages enlisting supportive friends to help you stay true to as many of your convictions as you can. And if you tend to be hard on yourself, "Cut yourself some slack," says Valerie.

When it comes to mentoring, Valerie displays a sense of humility and an awareness of generational changes. "You can't just give people advice and try to coach them about how to achieve career success by drawing on your own experience because your own experience gets dated," she says. Valerie acknowledges some of her experience is still relevant and strives to stay open-minded and flexible in support of

the mentee's values.

If pursuing well-being through values fulfillment sounds appealing, you will likely enjoy Valerie Tiberius's highly accessible, philosophical perspective on figuring out what matters to you.

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