

Value Up

**By Mike Donahue
With Matt Hamilton**

Published October 2012
Second edition published January 2017
Third edition published August 2024
Copyright Mike Donahue 2012.
All rights reserved
Edited by Michael Gum and Christine Hays

Some names and locations have been changed
to protect the identity of those quoted or
discussed.

No part of this book may be reproduced
without the written permission of the author
except by a reviewer; who may quote brief
passages in a review; nor may any part of this
book be reproduced, stored in a retrieval
system or transmitted in any form without the
written permission of the author.

I want to dedicate this book to all of those who have walked down the hallways of their schools, past and present, and never felt like they quite measured up. They looked around and compared themselves to a standard that wasn't real. They were judged on things that were totally out of their control. I think of people like my brother David, who is an incredible person. He is smart, funny, and very caring, but was misunderstood and socially diminished because of our family dynamic. You guys are my heroes!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword: By Craig Scott	5
Introduction	9
Chapter One: The Coat Room	15
Chapter Two: Dirty Mirrors	24
Chapter Three: Irreducible	32
Chapter Four: Hurt People, Hurt People	42
Chapter Five: Four and a Half Minutes	55
Chapter Six: Sticks and Stones	70
Chapter Seven: Failing Correctly	84
Chapter Eight: The Top Shelf	94
Chapter Nine: Value Up	110
Chapter Ten: Lets Talk Tik Tok	125
Chapter Eleven: Walk a Mile	141
Chapter Twelve: Twenty-One-Day Challenge	157

Foreword

On April 20, 1999, I was a freshman at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. That day, two students killed 12 of my classmates and one of my teachers. One of the students killed was my sister, Rachel Joy Scott. I heard bullets outside the room that I was in, but I was totally unaware that one of those bullets would end my sister's life that day. I was under a table in the library where most of the violence took place. The two friends that I was sitting with that day lost their lives before I helped lead the remaining students in the library to safety.

That day changed my life in so many ways. I have dealt with a lot of personal trauma from losing my sister and reliving the horrible events of that day. I have also had numerous appearances on such shows and networks as The Oprah Winfrey Show, The Today Show, Good Morning America, Dateline, 20/20, MSNBC, CNN, FOX News, and many others. I have met several celebrities, I have been invited to the White House on several occasions, I have spoken in live settings to over 2 million people, I helped create a school assembly program that has reached millions of students all over the world. Since that day, I have dedicated my life to speaking to teenagers about kindness and compassion and remain one of the leading voices in stemming school violence.

There have been thousands of articles, interviews, books and even movies produced to try and tell the story about what happened that day at my school. I have heard all kinds of reasons and explanations of why those two shooters did what they did, and I guess we will never completely know what motivated them to do such a horrible thing. All I will say is that when I was lying in the blood of my deceased best friend, to make it look like I was dead so they wouldn't shoot me, it was

clear that we were all victims of two boys that didn't see value in human life, including their own.

What happened to them? What got them to the point that they didn't care at all about their lives and the lives of others? G. K. Chesterton wrote, "He who kills a man, kills a man. The man who kills himself kills all men. As far as he is concerned, he wipes out the world."

In my opinion, those two shooters died long before they walked into Columbine High School that day. They had already decided that they were dead, that there was no value left in them, so in their minds, if they were dead, then everyone was dead. It didn't matter at that point who those people were or if they knew them. To them, no one mattered because they didn't matter. I'm in no way trying to evoke any kind of sympathy for those two guys who committed this awful crime—they murdered my sister—but I think we can all agree that they weren't born wanting to do that.

You might be thinking to yourself right now that this is a little intense for a book that teenagers will be reading, but the sad reality is that Columbine was not the last school shooting and unfortunately there will probably be more. Your world has been affected by the reality that these things keep happening. One of the reasons I continue to speak in schools is to bring awareness to the fact that value, and how one sees themselves, has a huge impact on school culture and potential violence.

Before the shooters at Columbine murdered those thirteen innocent people and then committed suicide that day, they were what I would call members of the walking dead. They're still out there, you know. I've met them in some of the schools where I have spoken over the years. I have made my way to counselors and school officials after talking to a student and have said to them, in essence, "I am worried about this kid. They said some

things that indicated that they might hurt themselves or others. They are dead or dying on the inside, and we'd better pay attention." I don't ring that bell often, but when I do, it's because I sense that something is very wrong with that student. They can't see value in themselves or others and that is dangerous. I know for a fact that our programs have stopped several school shootings and many suicides.

In 1994, five years before the Columbine shooting, Mike Donahue and his family moved to Colorado to start a youth program that focused on inclusiveness and knowing one's true intrinsic value. I, and two of my sisters, including Rachel, were members of that group. Mike had left and moved to Nebraska just as we started to get very involved, but I can honestly say that Mike Donahue has changed my life. One of the leaders that Mike personally mentored, mentored me. After the shooting, Mike and I connected and have remained very good friends since then, working on several projects together.

I have heard hundreds of speakers over the years and in my opinion, Mike Donahue is one of the most effective youth communicators in the country, because as an adult, he has the unique ability to connect with and speak to teenagers because he lives what the pages of this book teach. Whether he's on a stage in front of hundreds of people or sitting with a fourteen-year-old, one on one in a gym, his passion has always been to help people see and understand the intrinsic worth inside of every human being.

One of the statements in this book that I really like is, "Most people know that it's wrong to socially diminish someone's worth, but if you don't value yourself, you won't value others either. It becomes almost natural to pick on people or try to diminish their value when you don't see value in yourself." Obviously, my experience at Columbine is an extreme case, but

over the last 20 years that I have toured this country and been in hundreds of high schools, it's obvious that there is a crisis of value. Young people measure their worth on very shallow and weak criteria. Another quote from this book that I like is, "When people don't feel valuable, they don't act valuable." How many young people have accepted a life that is not worthy of their true value? They allow themselves to be abused and diminished because they think that's all they deserve. Maybe you have accepted a lesser version of yourself.

When I read the pages of this book, I get excited because it is a very logical and practical approach to understanding your value. It's not a bunch of psychobabble that tries to make you feel good for a moment. Value Up gets to the root of why you might not feel so valuable and then gives you the tools to see your value clearly. I really believe that if you can grasp how valuable you truly are, it will translate into you seeing the people around you with value as well, and it might just start a revolution.

I believe that America needs to experience a revolution of value and that it will begin in the hearts and lives of teenagers. Value Up might be the spark to start that revolution inside of you. Imagine if a generation of young people collectively chose to see value in themselves and others. Imagine what that generation could do as it came into adulthood. Stop imagining and begin to Value Up.

Craig Scott

Introduction

She stared right at me and said, "You're wasting your time talking to me, I'm a piece of sh** and that's all I'll ever be." She was dressed in all black, standing in the middle of the gym after my assembly at a large high school in Missouri. The school counselor had just asked me to go over to her and talk to her. Her name was Chelsea, and she was a senior. The counselor told me she was one of the smartest students in the school and had a full-ride scholarship to whichever college she wanted to go to in the state of Missouri because she had straight A's. Apparently, she had decided she wasn't going to go to college and the counselor wanted me to take a stab at trying to convince her otherwise. He told me he was watching her during my talk, and she was tearing up during parts of it, and he said, "She never cries."

I asked her what her name was, and she just ignored the question and said, "I hate truck stops." I knew right then that this was going to be a hard conversation and by the way she was talking to me, she was letting me know she was in charge of this little talk we were about to have. I said, "Why do you hate truck stops?" She said, "because my mother is a truck stop whore, and I have spent too much time in those f***ing parking lots." That was the first time she looked up at me. I sheepishly asked, "What's a truck stop whore?" I knew, but I wanted her to say it to keep the conversation going. She told me that she caught on early that when her single mom said she needed to "go talk" to some of her friends down by the trucks, there was something else going on. She said, "It was always when we needed money. The rent was due, or an appliance broke or something like that." Her mom would load up the car with her and her two younger brothers and head down to the truck stop near her house. She

said it was her job to keep her brothers busy while she was “talking” to her friends.

That same year, I was speaking at one of the most prestigious private high schools on the east coast. After my presentation, a young man named Cory came up to me and wanted to talk privately. He was about six-foot-five, and I found out later that he had a full-ride scholarship to Holy Cross to play lacrosse. He said to me, “I’m self-medicating.” I asked, “With what?” He said, “Mostly pot and alcohol.” Here was a kid, who by anyone’s standards, had a great life. His parents were very wealthy, he was going to be attending an Ivy league university, and it would be easy to guess that he had a strong self-worth. I said, “Why are you self-medicating?”

He said, “Most people would look at my life and think that I had it made. My family is probably one of the richest, if not the richest, families in our school. For my birthday my dad bought me a brand-new Mustang GT. I have everything I need. What they don’t know is that just about every night, I go home to this huge expensive house that is empty. My dad golfs a lot in the afternoon and just stays at the club and drinks with his friends; even if they don’t golf, they hang out there ‘til late at night. My mom goes from one meeting to the next trying to save the world, but she’s never home. There’s usually a fifty-dollar bill sitting on the counter with a note that says, ‘We’ll be late, go get yourself something to eat.’” He had tears in his eyes when he said to me, “I don’t want the fifty-dollar bill; I want to be with my family.”

To me, it’s obvious what this guy was saying. Quality time with his family meant more to his value as a person than any amount of money they were giving him. His parents may have not even realized that they were sending him the message that he’s not valuable enough for them to stay home and care about what’s going on in his life. They just threw money at him,

thinking that was what he wanted. Here he was, abusing substances to numb the pain of not feeling valued and wanted by the people who were supposed to be showing him that. He showed the most emotion when he said, "It's like they forgot all about me."

I usually have about 5 or so minutes to respond to stories like this and try to say something that might make a difference. I mean, I feel like they trusted me with this vulnerable information, so they deserve to hear something from me that is more than some pat answer, so I really try and dig deep in every situation to bring some kind of resolve to what they just said.

Over the years, what I have come to realize is that there is a common thread in every story that I hear. Whether it's extremely abusive stories like Chelsea's, or not seemingly as tragic as Cory's; what happened to them sent them a message. Whether it's neglect or verbal, mental, physical or sexual abuse, the message is the same for both, you are not that valuable. Think about it, when those things happen to us, we are getting the message in our heads that there is something wrong with us, and so somehow, we deserve this treatment that we are receiving or not receiving. It can be a very damaging message that slowly creeps in and sometimes we don't even know it's happening.

Lingchi is the name of the Chinese torture technique that kills a person by making hundreds of small, sometimes larger, cuts to their skin that slowly drains the lifeblood out of its victim.

Hundreds of young people all over this country are experiencing emotional *lingchi* right now and we don't even know about it. It's "death by a thousand cuts," small and sometimes big messages that communicate to a young person that they don't matter. Many of them suffer silently as they go through their lives.

Another thing that students typically do when they are telling me their story is, they scale their pain and experience by comparing it to others. They measure how important their story is based on how tragic it is. It's almost like some of them don't feel like they have a right to be hurting unless their story is as tragic as mine or others that they know. I even make it a point now in the assemblies to say, "You have a right to your pain, and everyone feels things differently. Don't scale your pain." Just because someone lives in a five thousand square foot house, that doesn't guarantee that it feels like a home.

I have spent the last 25 years of my life speaking to thousands of teenagers every year in schools across this country. I try the best I can to convey, in a public setting, how valuable each one of them are. I share my story, I tell jokes, I make them laugh, I tell emotional stories to make them feel for themselves and others. I talk about the messages they may have received from important people in their lives that have told them that they are not valuable.

Do you know what I wish I could do? I wish I could sit down with every one of those students and help them see what I see. I would tell them that I see a young person whose value is so great that it cannot be measured. I would tell them that no matter what they have done, their value cannot be diminished.

I wrote this book to do just that, to sit down with you and let you know that you are not alone. Every day I hear stories about how young people get the message that their value is dependent on what they do or who they impress. I watch them struggle with a world that assigns value based upon temporary things.

One of the words that you are going to hear a lot in this book is the word "intrinsic." Essentially it means "something that is built

in.” It belongs to itself. Your value is like that: it is intrinsic, it is built in. It belongs to you. You don’t have to do anything or please certain people to be valuable; you just are.

No matter who you are, reading this book right now, I guarantee that on some level during your life, you have received negative “**Value Messages**” that communicate to you that you’re not as valuable as you know that you are deep inside. How you personally process those messages is one of the most important things about you. Your mental health depends on what you do with those messages. I wish I had an assembly program that could eliminate those negative messages completely from your brain, but I don’t—no one does. What I can do is help you see that those negative messages are lies that get in your head and keep you from knowing how valuable you really are.

Take this book seriously and do all the things I ask you to do in here. I can’t promise you that this book will solve all your issues with self-worth, but I know that after absorbing some of the truth that is in here, you will see yourself in a different light.

There is a QR code and link to a video after every chapter, including this one, that you can click on to experience a “life coaching” moment with me about the chapter. It is my way of getting more personally involved with helping you see your true value. In the first chapter of this book, I’m going to tell you my story about the messages I received about my value as child.

Answer this question, why are you reading this book right now? What are you expecting to get out of it?

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-intro>

Notes

Chapter One

The Coat Room

"We are members one of another; so that you cannot injure or help your neighbor without injuring or helping yourself."

George Bernard Shaw

I grew up in a town just south of Boston, Massachusetts. My parents divorced when I was five. My dad moved to a different state, and we hardly saw him. I grew up with two sisters and one brother. There was a lot of stress in our family because of poverty and family drama. I missed my dad, and my mom hated him because of how he treated her, so she and I didn't see eye to eye at all when it came to him. I was too young to understand the intensity of her feelings toward him. I just wanted my dad to be there, but she took that as being disloyal to her, so I endured a lot of verbal and even physical abuse from her. These were strong negative **Value Messages** that took quite a toll on me and affected the way I treated others and myself. Over time it was difficult for me to see any value in who I was as a person.

Value is often reduced to a number—the higher the number, the greater the value. This concept is familiar in scales and surveys where people and institutions typically use a 1 to 10 scale. On this scale, 1 represents the minimal and 10 represents the ultimate in whatever category is being measured. Striving for a 10 is a straightforward and effective approach in many situations.

However, the number that I want to talk about isn't derived from test scores, academic rankings, or any institutional measure of student improvement. It is not tied to your social

value, which can be easily manipulated based on what you post online and who follows you, etc. Instead, this number represents a deeper, internal value that we assign to ourselves.

It is an invisible number written on the chest of every young person who walks through the hall of a school, including you. It is what you feel about yourself based on how life has treated you up until now. When I was in high school, I probably wasn't aware of it but if you asked me back then, I'm pretty sure I knew my number. If I were to ask you what you think you are worth on a scale of 1 to 10, you most likely could tell me what you think you are worth based on how you feel about yourself right now.

The problem with this number is that it is not the real number. It's the number that you THINK you are worth based on the ***Value Messages*** that you have received. As I discussed in the introduction, there are a lot of messages we get from circumstances, and directly from key people, that contribute to what you think you are worth. In your mind your perception of your value may be your reality right now, but I promise you, it's not the truth. I thought the same thing growing up and I discovered later in life that what I thought I was worth when I was young was simply not true. Let me explain. I want to describe for you a day in my life that basically defines what I'm talking about.

It was Monday morning, and I was in third grade. I left my house at 8:25am for school. I was a mess because I had just had a fight with my mom. There was a path through a wooded area on the way to my school; it was a great cover for me to cry. This was not an unusual scenario for me. There were many mornings where I would walk to school in a lot of pain. Sometimes, it was just emotional pain because of the mean things she said to me. This particular morning was bad though. I had scratch marks on my neck, and my head was still hurting from her yanking my

hair really hard. I got to my class and went right over to the teacher and asked her if I could go to the boys' room. She saw my red eyes and knew something bad had happened at home, so she said yes. When I got to the boys' room, I found a stall, went in, and just buried my head in my hands for a while and cried. That incident was just one of many that sent me the message that I was not valuable.

I had a lot of emotion that I didn't know what to do with, and emotion is never satisfied until it is expressed.

Emotion will be expressed. It will eventually come out one way or the other. There are ways to express emotion that are constructive and positive, but as you know, there are also ways to express emotion that are not so positive. I wish I could tell you that I took my pain and poured myself into a sport, academics, or something positive, but I didn't.

As I look back on those days, I am not proud of some of the reactions I had to the pain I was feeling on the inside. That Monday after I stopped crying, I put water on my face, dried myself off, went down the hall, put on a fake smile and acted like nothing was wrong. No one had a clue that I was angry and confused on the inside. The person that I was furious with was obviously my mom, but she wasn't there. Later, that day, when the sadness was replaced with anger, I found someone on which I could take out my rage—it was Randy. He had a speech impediment, so we all saw him as an easy target and made fun of him on a regular basis. He was no match for me physically, and he couldn't easily fight back socially because I was more popular than he was. He was the obvious choice.

Most days it was just a little bit of teasing while we were in line for the bathroom or in the cafeteria at lunch. This day was different. I was angry because of the violence that I had endured

that morning, so my teasing was more intense. I still remember his face. We were in the coatroom, and I had him cornered. My friends, who were in abusive situations like mine, were all standing right behind me. My teasing was cruel and relentless. I made fun of the way he talked. I mimicked him, and everyone laughed. I have never spoken to Randy about this, but I'm sure that those days were very traumatic for him and probably did some lasting damage to his mental health. Randy was not the only object of my wrath. My brother David took a lot of abuse from me as well because he had a relationship with my mom that I was jealous of, so I took it out on him at times.

In no way am I writing this to justify my actions—everyone is responsible for their own behavior—but there seems to be a correlation between devaluing yourself and devaluing others. I look at it like this: when I went to school, most mornings I felt small and powerless, like I had very little value because of the abuse I was experiencing at home. Instead of finding power in bettering myself slowly through focusing on school and better choices,

I grabbed immediate gratification (value) by humiliating socially weaker kids.

I went for the cheap laugh. All the other kids thought I was hilarious, and I got to feel powerful for 10 minutes. That's the problem with the cheap laugh, though; it doesn't last very long, so you must keep doing it over and over to feel valuable again. The other problem with the cheap laugh is that although the other students may think you're cool at the time, there is a huge difference between popularity and respect. Those kids didn't respect me at all.

They laughed because they were immature and afraid to be the victim themselves, so they sided with me, the guy that had the social power for that moment.

Before you get too upset with me, you need to understand something. I was definitely a bully in those days, but I was also a victim—not just in my family situation, but in my school as well. All throughout my school career, I watched kids with more social power put others down and use power to control them. Some of them came from abusive backgrounds and took it out on my friends and me because we were younger than they were. As we got older and gained social power ourselves, we did the same thing. We were just imitating what we saw. The social culture of the school produced bullies. We all knew the kids in the school who had the power, and we did everything we could to be one of those kids, mostly out of emotional survival.

I have spoken in a lot of schools in the last twenty-five years, and what I have described here happens every day in schools all over the country. In the last few decades, there has been a big push to bring awareness to the issue of bullying and social profiling in response to all the school shootings and suicides that are happening. As more young people take their lives because of this cruelty, I suspect there will be a lot more education on this in the future.

I have seen reactions from educators that mostly involve policing the actual bullying that takes place in the school: putting up cameras, passing bills for stricter laws, and creating anti-bullying policies. I applaud these efforts, but if we don't address the culture of the school that produces bullies and causes intense social anxiety for thousands of students, we are just wasting our time. Kids in your school, and schools all over the country, will find ways to belittle others if we don't help them see the root of all of it, which is value.

In my opinion, I don't think it works to just look at certain behaviors of students and then come up with a plan to stop that behavior. It's deeper than that.

Behavior follows belief. Belief is formed by repetitive thoughts that are reinforced by experience. (*Value Messages*)

When I was young, everyone wanted my behavior to be different because I was so out of control, so they zeroed in on my actions and ignored the core of what was really happening inside of me. It wasn't a behavior issue for me; it was a value issue. I didn't see much value in me, so I didn't treat myself like I had value. It was that simple.

When I'm speaking at a school and there are students in my audience who are destroying their lives with drugs, alcohol, or other destructive behavior, I'm not assuming they don't know it's bad for them. I'm assuming they do know, and they don't care. Somewhere down the line, they stopped **believing** that their lives were valuable enough to treat with care. It's the same thing with bullying: most people know that it's wrong to socially diminish someone's worth, but if you don't value yourself, you won't value others either.

It becomes almost natural to pick on people or try to diminish their value when you don't see value in yourself.

I know that not all bullying comes from people who have been bullied in the past, but a lot of it does. My personal bullying, and overall lack of respect for others, was a byproduct of that number we all give ourselves. My perceived (not real) value was low, I thought I was like a one or a two, so naturally, I treated myself like I wasn't valuable, and I treated others that way as well.

This book is about changing that invisible number on your chest, it's about you understanding how valuable you truly are and how valuable the people around you are as well. I am going to challenge you to take a hard look at yourself on two levels. First, I will try and get you to look at how you truly see yourself. How valuable is your life to you?

I can challenge you all day long to treat others with respect, but if you don't first respect yourself, you will have a harder time naturally respecting others.

Second, I will show you how to truly value others and treat everyone with dignity and respect. I am going to challenge you to go deep inside yourself and discover any prejudices you may have and why. Everyone has a story, and when we walk in each other's shoes, we discover that our story is not significantly different from everyone else's stories. A lot of prejudice and hate comes from ignorance. Have you ever truly asked yourself what it would be like to be that person? What *Value Messages* has that person received? What if I walked in that person's shoes? There are reasons why we treat some people with dignity and not others. We are going to look at those reasons.

I was speaking with my brother once, and he told me that he remembers when I changed. He said, "You looked at me differently. You used to hate me (I never hated him, I hated myself and took it out on him) but you looked me in the eye and really wanted to hear what I had to say." He described the timeframe, and it was right around the time when I began to have a newfound respect for myself. Some very important people in my life began to coach me to help me see my true intrinsic value. I want to coach you to do the same. The natural byproduct of gaining a renewed sense of value is treating everyone else with respect as well. This could happen to you.

Don't take this book lightly. Grab a pen and answer the questions at the end of the chapters.

Let's start by giving yourself a rating on how much value you think you have at this moment. Pick a number between 1 and 10 that best reflects the value that you feel you have right now. Even though there are only 5 descriptions, put yourself on either the low or high side of the description that best fits you.

1-2 I don't like myself. I see very little value in my life. I get very irritated with people who act like they are better than me.

3-4 I don't like a lot of who I am, but there are some things I know are good. I often compare myself to others.

5-6 I feel okay about my life. I'm not really happy. I have some doubts about my worth. I feel like most people are better than me.

7-8 I know I'm not perfect, but I'm aware of my strengths. I see value in my life. I get along with most people.

9-10 I have a healthy perspective about who I am. I like my life and where I am going. I'm healthy enough not to be threatened by other people's differences because I'm comfortable with who I am. I like most people.

Write a paragraph on why you chose that number.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter1>

Notes

Chapter Two

Dirty Mirrors

"Each second we live is a new and unique moment of the universe, a moment that will never be again. And what do we teach our children? We teach them that two and two make four, and that Paris is the capital of France. When will we also teach them what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all the years that have passed, there has never been another child like you. Your legs, your arms, your clever fingers, the way you move. You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything."

Pablo Casals

When I first started speaking in schools, I spoke at a high school right outside of Des Moines, Iowa, and afterwards, a senior girl wanted to chat with me. She explained that she didn't see much value in herself, but when I was talking about dreams and not giving up on them, and I explained the difference between social value and intrinsic value, she began to see that she really did have value. We talked for about thirty minutes and as she shared some of the **Value Messages** she received growing up, I could see that the lights were starting to come on. Right before I got up to leave, she reached into her purse and gave me a dirty, cracked mirror. She explained that it had been in her purse since she was a freshman. She told me that the smudging on the mirror would never let her get a true image of herself, and that was the way she saw herself: dirty, broken, and incomplete. She wanted me to have it because it represented the old way in

which she looked at herself, and she was going to start to see herself with value.

I really wish it was that easy to convince people of their true value. Unfortunately, those negative ***Value Messages*** can be incredibly strong and hard to replace. It usually takes more than a thirty-minute conversation with a motivational speaker to reverse some of those negative thoughts that stick in our heads. Like I said earlier, I find myself wanting to sit down and unpack everything I know about a person's value when I'm talking to them after an assembly, but there just isn't enough time. She is the inspiration for writing this book and giving it away to everyone who will read it instead of selling it. That's how much I believe that everyone in the world should know and understand how truly valuable they are. That knowledge changes everything.

I want to share with you why those negative ***Value Messages*** are so lethal to your mental health. Those messages come from experiences that create beliefs, which in turn, create negative feelings about our value.

When people don't feel valuable, they don't act valuable.

A very important principle when it comes to your value is that you must learn to manage the feelings that come when you get negative ***Value Messages***, just like a pilot must manage his or her feelings when flying in a small plane in the clouds.

John F. Kennedy, Jr. crashed his small airplane on July 16th, 1999, killing himself, his wife, and her sister. Without going into too much detail, there was much speculation on how this could have happened. There were reports on the news that he was not trained on his instruments, so when it got dark, and he was flying through clouds, he got disoriented and didn't know what

to do. A couple of weeks after the crash, I was flying somewhere on a commercial airline. There was a pilot sitting next to me, so I asked him what he thought happened. "Was he not trained on his instruments?" I asked. He said, "You can't have a pilot's license without being trained on your instruments, it doesn't matter who you are. The problem comes when you don't believe your instruments when you are under pressure." He said, "There are times that you will be flying, and you get so disoriented that you will swear that you are flying upside down. You're not upside down, but because of inertia, the speed of the aircraft, and the fact that you can't see anything, you can feel like you are." They call it spatial disorientation.

Your instruments are telling you that you are fine, but you don't feel like you're fine, so instead of trusting your instruments, you rely on your feelings.

You start to make little adjustments based on how you feel. He said that they usually go into a death spiral. You keep making little adjustments according to how you feel until you basically corkscrew the aircraft right to the ground. That's what happened to the former president's son.

I think the same thing happens for a lot of us when we don't believe the truth of our own value. The negative ***Value Messages*** have been so strong that we automatically believe them over the truth of who we really are. We don't feel valuable, so we make small and sometimes big adjustments according to how we feel about ourselves instead of trusting the truth of our true intrinsic value.

I have looked in the eyes of so many teenagers who have told me, with tears streaming down their faces, about a bad choice having to do with drugs, alcohol, relationships, cutting, or even attempting suicide based on how they were feeling about

themselves at the time. They made little adjustments based on their feelings that started a downward spiral.

We make so many important decisions in our life based on how we feel about ourselves in one moment in time.

I was standing around one day with a bunch of college students, and one of the girls suddenly asked, “Why do I always attract bad guys?” Apparently, she had a string of horrible boyfriends that treated her very badly, and she was seeing a pattern and blaming it on herself. My friends who were with me were trying to be nice to her, so they said stuff like, “It’s not you,” “Most guys are jerks, you will meet your prince charming someday,” etc. I looked at those guys and said, “You need to stop telling her that. First of all, you don’t know if that is true, and the second thing is, you just told her that her value is based on what another person thinks about her, like she won’t be valuable until some guy in her life confirms her value for her.”

I looked at her and said, “Your first instinct was right, the problem is you. You are attracting these bad guys.” She said, “You don’t even know me.” I said, “I don’t need to know you to answer that question. You attract what you respect. If you don’t respect yourself, you automatically attract people who will use and disrespect you, and you will repel those who would treat you with respect. The opposite is true as well.”

If you respect yourself, you will automatically attract people who respect you and repel those that wish to treat you badly. It’s that simple.” People tend to follow your lead when it comes to your self-worth. They will treat you the way you treat you.

So, the answer to knowing your value is not finding the right person who will finally treat you the way you deserve, it is in

treating yourself that way first, which will attract the right kind of friends and even a potential quality partner for your life. Do you see how low self-worth tricks you into doing things that you wouldn't ordinarily do?

I can't stress enough that you must learn to manage your feelings and search very hard for the truth of your intrinsic value!

Have you heard the phrase, "perception is reality"? What that means is that whatever you think something is, that's what is in your mind. You could be dead wrong, but to you it's right, because it's your reality. For years, people thought the earth was flat—that was their perception. They saw it that way in their minds, so they acted accordingly. Sailors would be afraid to go long distances for fear that they would fall off the face of the earth. That sounds crazy now, but that was their perception, until someone came along and proved that the earth was round. Value is the same way. You are incredibly valuable. That is a fact, just like "the earth is round." If your perception is that you are not valuable, then you won't see yourself that way, and to you, you are not valuable.

When you don't feel valuable, you don't act valuable, and people don't treat you like you have value. Slowly, the lie takes root. It is a vicious cycle.

At one point in your life, you knew you had incredible value. Think about it. You had to learn to be unvalued. When you were little, it was all about you. You were fed, bathed, played with, and taken care of at such an intense level that you couldn't help but feel valued. Your first steps, your first words—your first everything—was celebrated and most likely documented with pictures or video, or both. The world revolved around you. As we get older, those negative *Value Messages* start to hit us.

Things begin to happen that chip away at our self-esteem. We make mistakes. We get compared to others. We see limitations. We get labeled and pigeonholed into certain stereotypes. Some of us get neglected and minimized by people that should care. We used to feel invincible and capable of anything, but that feeling gets replaced with feelings of self-doubt and worthlessness.

It frustrates me sometimes to hear motivational speakers say things like, “Whatever you think you are, is what you are.” In some ways, I agree with that, but the motivational speakers always stop there. They don’t go into how you change thought patterns. I’m not a psychologist, but I know that if you have a pattern of thinking negatively about yourself, you don’t change it by just deciding one day to think differently. You must unlearn some very deep things that got into your head in the first place.

If you learned to be devalued, then you can unlearn it.

Let’s go back to when you were little and thought the world revolved around you. You felt valued. Most babies and toddlers are very aware of their intrinsic value because of the attention they receive on a daily basis. If we were going to put you on a scale from 1 to 10, I’m going to go out on a limb here and say that most of you, when you were very young, knew you were loved and valued. You knew you were a 10. As we get older, the negative *Value Messages* start and begin to take root.

We must figure out exactly what happened to give you the perception that you are not a 10 at this very moment, because you are.

If you feel like a 10 right now, then you can just put this book down. But if you don’t, you owe it to yourself to do the work to help raise the value of your own life in your own eyes. (It’s already there; you just don’t see it.) In the next 5 chapters, we

will discuss the ways that you may have learned to devalue yourself: the source of self-worth, hurt people hurt people, the social government, the power of words, the power of comparing ourselves, and the power of failure.

Write down four Value Messages that you have received that you feel have become part of your perception of yourself. Explain.

1.

2.

3.

4.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter2>

Notes

Chapter Three

Irreducible

“Surrounding myself with people who love and support me has been my key to success. Once I eliminated the negative people from my circle, I was ready to soar.”

Eva Mendes

I was perusing Facebook the other day and saw this post from a very good friend named Kari, who lives in Illinois. There was a picture of her son, and she wrote, “This young man turned 7 today!! He is smiling the moment he wakes up and is a joy to all who know him! He was a gift to us 7 years ago! We love you, Caleb!”

Psychologists say that one of the main sources of our self-worth comes from what the most important people in our lives think of us.

For most of us, when we are young, those people are our parents. If they love and value us, then we will feel loved and valued. Other family connections end up playing a key role in our value as well. As I scrolled down the comments following Kari’s expression of her love for her son, there were posts from siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, all affirming the love and value that Caleb has among family members. As he gets older, he will get connected to neighbors, friends, teachers, classmates, and others, which also will contribute in smaller ways to his self-worth.

Some would say that these people (and later additions, like best friends or a spouse) will, in different capacities, be the main sources of self-worth in Caleb’s life. Though this young guy is off to a great start, I believe there must be a higher source of value

that goes beyond his parents, family members, and friends. I want to be careful not to get into a religious conversation here, but let's talk about this for a minute. As we discussed earlier, your intrinsic value is set, and if we were going to put it on a scale from 1 to 10, you are a 10. Caleb probably feels like a 10 today, and you may not, but the only difference between you and Caleb is your perception.

Remember, nothing can change the fact that you have tremendous value. It's your perception of your value that gets distorted.

People of different faiths would put God or the Creator in the spot as the main source of value. They believe that their value comes from their perception of who God is in their lives. They believe that God is the creator and that He created all of us with value. That is obviously a personal choice, and the authors of this book are not advocating any religious preference; we are merely stating that people of faith may put God as the source of their value. Others might be inclined to see themselves as a Child of the Universe, and they may believe that is the source of their value. Max Ehrmann, in his poem "The Desiderata," wrote,

"You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here."

I believe in God, and I also really like that quote. But, regardless of what you would say is the source of your value, I want you to understand that you have a source of value that goes beyond your parents or any other resource in your life. You are a human being, and you have a right to dignity and respect, no matter your race, gender, or anything else that makes you different from other human beings.

Here is why that is very important. Ironically, I met another little guy named Caleb a couple of years ago. He was a few years older

than Caleb from Illinois. I was in Oregon speaking in some schools when a teacher pointed out this young sixth grader to me. He said that last year Caleb came up to the library after school in a panic, getting on the computer right away. The librarian went over to see what he was doing. Caleb had pulled up Google Maps and was searching for a satellite picture of his house. When she asked him what he was doing, he said he wanted to see if his dad's truck was in the driveway because if it was, he was not going to go home right away. He was afraid that his dad was going to beat him, so he was going to wait until his dad went to work. He didn't know that those pictures were not in real-time.

At some point, Caleb from Oregon desperately needs to know that no matter how he gets treated by one of his main resources of value, he still has value. Caleb from Illinois won't have to struggle with that as much.

Therefore, it is important to realize that your value is not outside of you.

For some of you, this may help you to understand why you have this constant need to please people. Your personal value is tied to a person or a group of people. Can you see how that can be a trap? If those resources break down for whatever reason, and if you see them as the only source of your value, it can throw you into a helpless situation.

Let's look at what a resource really is. I call important people in your life resources because they are not the source of your value, but they are important because they serve as ambassadors of your source. Ambassadors are representatives. The United States has ambassadors to different countries all around the world. Ambassadors can't make policy; they just represent the policies of the United States to different countries.

In the same way, our resources are not the source of our value—they represent the source (Truth about your true value).

The resources are there to confirm your value, not create it.

It is important to know that they don't create your value because, if for whatever reason, your resource decides not to see you as valuable anymore, in your mind, you will still maintain your value. If one of the United States' ambassadors to another country decided to act independently and say something that was not aligned with what the source believed, the United States would have that ambassador removed. That is what Eva Mendez basically said in that statement I quoted at the beginning of this chapter. She removed the negative people from her inner circle because they were not confirming her value.

Good ambassadors know what the source believes, and they represent that source faithfully.

I am a parent of five children. I understand my role as a resource in my children's lives. I'm not perfect, but I have tried to be a good ambassador for my children's intrinsic value. I am not the source of their worth, but how I treat them is very important. I am a Christian, and I believe that my value and my children's value comes from the unconditional love that God has for us. (That is my opinion, and I am not saying that is what you must believe.) My children naturally look to their mother and me to nurture and confirm their value as their main resources.

When they became teenagers, I knew they would start to look to their friends and social circles to confirm their worth as well. (We are going to discuss this in detail later) That is very normal, and I would say that by the time my children reached adolescence, they all had a healthy view of themselves. If one of their peers (who becomes a big resource in their teen years) decided that they are not worth a lot socially, it wouldn't matter

as much because my kids have a healthy perception of their intrinsic value. My heart goes out to the Caleb from Oregon because he obviously has received a lot of negative ***Value Messages*** from a very important resource.

Knowing what I know now, this is what I would say to Caleb from Oregon if he was sitting right in front of me:

“Hey buddy, I am sorry that you are getting treated the way you are by your dad. I’m sorry that he is scaring you like that. You may or may not realize this, but you are getting the message from him that you are not very valuable, and because he is your dad, it may affect you more than if it was someone else. You may even believe it right now. How could you feel valuable when he is physically and, I assume, verbally abusive toward you? You may think it’s your fault like you did something to make him that mad, or like you are a bad child.

It really isn’t your fault, Caleb. He probably has things from his past that bother him, and he takes it out on you. I really want you to understand that even though he is treating you like this, you are incredibly valuable. Caleb, I came from a situation like that where the most important people in my life didn’t see my value. I had to fight in my mind for my value. You can do that too. You must get around people who see your value and treat you in a way that confirms that value.”

The two Caleb’s have the same value. Caleb from Illinois won’t have to fight in his mind as hard to know his value, but Caleb in Oregon will. You might have to fight as well. That’s why I want you to read this book. We make it available and free to everyone who will read it because we know that there are a lot of people out there who are getting the wrong message about their value

from very important people. They are going to need tools to fight internally to confirm their true intrinsic value.¹

A few years ago, I was speaking in Duluth, MN, at a foster care conference where I have been a speaker every year for over ten years. A lady named Angie Skogstad and her staff do an amazing job up there. It's my favorite place to speak. These kids are all in foster care and getting ready to age out of the system. Their stories are unbelievable. The conference brings in speakers like me and others to reaffirm that these kids have value. They have workshops that give them life skills to walk out of that value.

One of the groups that came that year was from Minneapolis. They performed a skit with a song in which this young guy was rapping these words repeatedly, "We are irreducible." I'm going to be honest with you. I didn't even know that irreducible was a word (I'm not a math guy). I looked it up on Dictionary.com:

Not reducible; incapable of being reduced or of being diminished or simplified further.

The whole group started to sing it as well, and I was watching their faces. These were kids who had most, if not all, of their resources send them a lot of negative ***Value Messages***. They were basically singing that we have value, no matter what people have done to us. You can't reduce our value. "We are irreducible." It was powerful!

The same goes for you, my friend. You are irreducible. Whether it was a severe situation like my friend Caleb from Oregon or just an honest evaluation that some of your resources have not really affirmed your true value the way they should have, you

¹ The teacher that told me about Caleb from Oregon was able to get him some help. The counselor of the school was notified, and they contacted DHS, who started working with that family.

must go back to the source. You have a choice. You can mask the pain of not feeling very valuable by choosing to self-medicate with substances or getting into an unhealthy relationship, or you can start telling yourself the truth about your value. Taking steps toward this knowledge is going to take some work, but I can promise you that it is well worth it.

To get started on your journey back to the source, you must take some deliberate actions. I'm going to give you seven specific steps that I know will help you discover your true worth. Don't blow these off. It's very important that you do this.

1. Take an honest assessment of your resources. I don't want to turn you into little whiners and have you blame everyone else for all your problems, but seeing yourself as valuable starts with taking an honest look at how much your personal resources truly represent the source of your worth. Are they good ambassadors? The people in my inner circle see my value and that really helps my mental health.

2. Find better resources. Stop putting up with people who treat you badly. Resources are not the source, but they are important. Find people who truly appreciate you for who you are. Don't change for anyone because that slowly brings down your perception of your self-worth. You may need to break away from negative people which means you might be lonely for a while, but you will eventually attract the right people around you as you treat yourself better.

3. Go to the source; don't self-medicate. You may need to take a hard look at how much you might be masking your low self-worth with substance abuse or self-medicating in other ways. Make a commitment to abandon that way of dealing with your low self-worth. Substance abuse just prolongs the real issue. Eventually, you are going to have to do the work to get back to your true intrinsic value.

4. Start to make some small investments in yourself. Warren Buffett, a very rich financial investor, said, “The best investment you can make is in yourself.” Working out, doing your homework, cleaning your room or your car, studying a little harder on a test than you usually do, dressing a little sharper—all these things are good choices. They seem like small things, but I’ve learned something about small, right choices. They slowly bring big feelings of self-confidence. Start to change your game a little by changing how you invest in yourself.

5. Write out your dreams. Seeing yourself accomplish your dreams is very important. If you don’t see yourself in your mind living out your dreams, it won’t happen. Seeing it first in your mind starts with writing it down. Visualize yourself accomplishing these things. If you can’t see it in your mind first, you won’t do it. My friend Joe Washington once said, “The me you see is the me you’ll be.” Visualize yourself winning.

6. Become more devoted to your faith. If you are a person that believes your source is God, then don’t be casual about it. Find a group that believes the same way you do and pour yourself into it. Be careful because church people are not the source; they are resources. Some people get messed up with this because they have been disappointed by a person in their church that they feel didn’t represent their source in the right way. Just because someone has “Pastor” in front of their name does not mean that person is perfect. If you go to church for more than a month, you are going to be disappointed. The point of church is for you to be closer to your source.

7. Do the work in the remainder of the chapters. There are four more chapters that specifically address where these negative “value messages” are coming from. Take the time to answer the questions at the end of the chapters. Doing the work is an investment in yourself and will greatly help.

As you start taking steps toward the source of your value, you will begin to feel differently. You will see yourself the way you really are—**INCREDIBLY VALUABLE!**

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter3>

Notes

Chapter Four

Hurt People, Hurt People

“One’s dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked, but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered.”

Michael J. Fox

As I entered my teen years, my relationship with my mom became increasingly hostile. The tension reached a head one night when we were fighting. Unknown to me, my mom put a knife next to the stick she was hitting me with. When I grabbed the stick to get her to stop hitting me, the knife cut my hand. I wish I could tell you that that was the end of the story, but it’s not. The stick hit the ground, and I was looking at my hand because it was bleeding and the next thing I knew, she tried to stab me in the head with the knife. I lifted my arm to block the knife from going through my head. I ended up in the hospital that night with several stitches in my wrist.

The nurses in the emergency room knew my mom because she worked there as a nurse, so they didn’t ask questions when I lied and told them I put my fist through a window. There is a big difference between the seventies and today when it comes to adult intervention with children: Today, those nurses would have been asking questions and calling social services no matter who my mom was. Clearly these were knife wounds on my wrists, but the nurses just stitched me up and sent me on my way.

When I share that story publicly, I say that the day that the stabbing happened was not the worst day of my life, it was the next day when I had to walk down the hallway of my school and

pretend that it didn't happen. I couldn't stay home, my mom was there, so I went to school with my wrist bandaged up and walked around like a zombie all day.

Eventually the State of Massachusetts intervened and filed a Child in Need of Services report on me and removed me from the home. It's still a mystery to me how that happened, or who intervened on my behalf, but for the rest of high school I had a counselor checking on me all the time to see how I was doing. There were no consequences given to my mom for what she had done, I was just removed and mandated to not have any contact with her. I was too old to go into a foster home, so they emancipated me during my Junior and Senior years of high school, which meant I lived on my own and paid my own bills. I never lived with my mom or my siblings ever again.

There is a lot to be said about what physical, verbal, sexual, or emotional abuse can do to a person's perception of their value, but, obviously, any abuse is a huge negative **Value Message** that can do a lot of damage to your self-worth. The students that I talk to who have suffered from abuse almost always have issues with self-esteem. These and other experiences with abuse certainly clouded my view of my intrinsic value. The toughest thing for me was thinking that if she hates me that much then I must really be a bad kid. I put it totally on me even though I knew something wasn't right with her.

As I look back at some of the more significant people in my life who were supposed to be giving me positive **Value messages** but did the opposite by treating me badly, I can see where their paths were severely affected by negative **Value Messages** that they received growing up. My brother has done extensive research on both sides of our family going back to the 1800s. My personal family history includes mental illness, incest, alcohol and substance abuse, arson, rape, and many other dysfunctional

and sometimes criminal behaviors. It's no wonder that when I was born, I landed right smack dab in the middle of a world of serious dysfunction and pain. One of the things I often say to students in schools is that we are all part of the genetic lottery.

We don't get to choose our history, nor is any of that history our fault. We get what we get when we are born, and we must deal with whatever that is.

I got Paul and Alice for my parents; they got their own lot. No offence, but if I had to pick parents, I wouldn't have picked either one of them. As my brother and I discovered, looking at my family's history, their own personal history was incredibly tragic.

My dad was put into foster care when he was two. The people who took him in never adopted him because the state provided money for foster parents, and they wanted to collect that money. If they adopted him, they'd lose the cash. I doubt my dad ever felt a sense of belonging to that family; probably he felt more like a financial asset. Both of his foster parents were alcoholics, and I know for a fact that many events in his childhood sent him the message that he was not valuable.

My mom's past was equally dysfunctional. Her father was an alcoholic and was sexually inappropriate with her and her sisters. My mom told me a story about a time after she divorced my dad, when she was at her wits end. My grandfather came over to our house while we were at school to help fix something. They were both sitting on the couch, and she put her head on his shoulder because she was looking for emotional support, and he turned toward her and put his hand up her skirt and tried to kiss her. That was the last time she asked him to help with anything around the house. I know that had to have sent a devastating message to her: That her value, in his eyes, was only what he

could get sexually from her, his own daughter. I can't even imagine what she must have felt at that moment. She told me about more stories like that from her childhood that included inappropriate behavior toward her and her sisters.

I don't know much about my mom's dad as a boy being raised in New England, but I have heard that his life, growing up during the Great Depression and as a war veteran, was filled with pain and dysfunction as well. His wife, my grandmother, has a story that could be a book by itself. Suffice to say that her life was filled with lies, deception, alcohol abuse, and all kinds of tragic things that I wouldn't believe if it wasn't documented by the State of Massachusetts and confirmed by the research that my brother did.

The expression, "hurt people, hurt people" is widely used to describe patterns of family abuse and dysfunction like this. I have heard that expression in both religious and educational settings. There are only four words in that phrase, but I think there is a lot of wisdom and truth to those words.

Everyone gets hurt in some capacity in this life. It's what you do with that hurt that determines how healthy you become and what *Value Messages* you give off to people who are close to you.

I'm not trying to make excuses for anyone, but I think it's important to know that if you have received negative ***Value Messages*** from someone, then most likely they are victims themselves who never got adequate help for the pain they suffered and the messages they received. This means they are reacting to pain from their past when they are dealing with you. Doing a little historical research on your family might give you a broader perspective on why there is so much pain in your

family. I think you will discover that very little of it, if any, has to do with you.

A couple of years ago my mom came out to visit my wife and me in Colorado. She was mean and nasty just about the whole time she was there. She kept trying to pick a fight with me, but I didn't take the bait. After we dropped her off at the airport, my wife asked me how I was able to keep my cool the whole time and not react to her words (negative **Value Messages**). I told her it was because I don't believe her anymore. In other words, I used to believe that she meant those mean things directed toward me, but what I've come to realize is that she has a lot of pain from her past that she never dealt with, and that spills out in her everyday dealings with people, including me. She's not angry at me, she's angry at her dad and my dad and life in general. She is in a lot of pain that has nothing to do with me.

Her pain is doing most of the talking, not her!

If abuse is part of your reality, then I'm going to give you a couple of things that I have learned that might help you to rediscover your worth. If it's not part of your reality, but you know someone who has been abused, this section will help you understand that person better.

1. Abuse is a direct hit to your self-worth.

Most people experience a slow deterioration of their perception of their worth because of the negative **Value Messages** they get over time. Abuse victims take a direct hit to the perception of their value when they are abused. When a family member hurts you in any of these ways, they are communicating to you a very harmful message. The message that you can't help getting is that you don't matter to this person, that you are not valuable enough to be protected. This person is telling you that you must

not be worth much. If this person is one of your main resources, like a parent or relative, then that message can be very damaging.

Tragically, many abusers are the very people who are supposed to be a strong resource of one's worth, so their abuse is even more magnified.

It is so important in these cases that you are committed to bypassing these resources as quickly as possible and make a serious effort to get back to the source of your worth. It's what I did with my mom. I stopped believing that her abuse towards me was about me. It was bigger than me and it went back to *Value Messages* she got before I was even born.

2. There is nothing you could ever do to deserve to be abused.

No one deserves to be abused. It is the right of every human being to be treated with dignity and respect. I don't care what you have done or what you have said that may have triggered this person. No one ever deserves to be abused. Don't buy into the mindset that it is your fault in any way. You may have responded in a negative way, which brought on the abuse, but it still doesn't matter. Gaslighting someone essentially means that some people blame the victim of the abuse for the abuse. "Look what you made me do." They do this to feel justified for abusing others. No one, not even a parent, has the right to rob you of your dignity. If this is happening in your life, please tell an adult that you trust as soon as you can.

3. The person who is doing the abuse usually has unresolved issues that have nothing to do with you.

Unhealed wounds still hurt even if you are an adult. I have a scar on my left arm from a cut that I got in my garage while I was working on my car. It has healed, so it doesn't hurt anymore. In fact, unless I look at it, I don't know it's there. I can slap it as hard as I want, and it won't really hurt. However, let's say it never healed, and it was an open wound. All I would have to do is barely touch it to feel pain. It would hurt like crazy. When someone has an open emotional wound from their past, little things can make it hurt and trigger a reaction. That is most likely what a lot of you have experienced. The people who have abused you may have a history of pain in their lives. Like I mentioned before, they could have wounds that have never healed. You come along and touch these wounds by being a normal kid or teenager, and it sets them off. That is not your fault. I will guarantee that a lot of them have a low perception of their own value. They may have never had the chance to do what you are doing right now, working to rediscover your intrinsic value.

4. People can't keep hurting you without your permission.

"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

Eleanor Roosevelt

You may have experienced abuse that you had no control over at all, but you don't have to stay the victim. Abuse victims sometimes don't believe that they deserve anything better than the abuse that they have received. It has become their normal. Consequently, they keep putting up with the abuse, or they even attract new people who are abusers. One of the horrible realities of life is that abusers exist, and they prey on people who don't have a strong self-worth. They look for people who will put up with abuse. If you keep being abused, then you must ask yourself this question, "Am I allowing this to happen to me, and if so, why?"

I have a close friend who is still allowing her old boyfriend of four years to abuse her emotionally. She is a very successful person in her field and makes a lot of money, but when it comes to this guy, she lets him treat her like trash. Somehow, she believes what he says to her. One day, after she let me read one of the horrible emails he sent to her, I said, "This may not be entirely his fault." She looked at me like I was crazy. I said, "If anyone ever said something like that to me, I would never talk to them again. You keep talking to him after he says those things, which tells him it's okay to keep saying it." In a way, she was giving him permission to abuse her. She was agreeing with him that she was not valuable enough to treat with respect.

I watched the movie *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* with two of my kids. There a was great line in it that I loved. Charlie asked his teacher why people put up with others that abuse them or put them down, and the teacher replied:

"We accept the love we think we deserve."

It's probably the same way with some of you. Because of your low self-worth, you don't stick up for yourself, so that person just keeps doing it with your permission. In a way, you have agreed with them that you are not valuable. If you are letting them treat you that way, then you are contributing to your own devaluing.

****Obviously, there are some abusive situations that are completely out of your control. If you are involved in that situation, you need to seek help from a teacher or counselor at your school right away.***

5. Abuse can create an emotional vacuum.

I remember a moment in my twenties that changed my life. I was trying to sort all this stuff out in my head concerning my own abuse and self-worth. I was sitting in an auditorium, and a woman was talking and said, “A hungry need is a dangerous need.” Her statement rocked my world. The hunger for love and emotional connection is a fundamental aspect of human nature. We all desire to feel valued, significant, and appreciated by others. However, when this need remains unmet or is consistently denied, it can create an emotional void within us. This vacuum becomes a powerful force, compelling us to seek validation and acceptance from any source available, sometimes even resorting to unhealthy and irrational means.

We were born to love and to be loved. The danger in that need is that if it is not being met in a healthy way, then it becomes easy to fill it in an unhealthy way. I have seen girls put up with guys who abuse them and guys who will put up with being cheated on and used. Their low self-esteem created a vacuum. They tolerated abuse and neglect so they could get love. My friend with the abusive boyfriend told me that after he says the mean things to her, he will apologize with flowers, tell her how much he loves her, and promise he will never do it again. Her hungry need for love keeps her from seeing through the game he is playing with her. Her low self-worth has created a vacuum. She gets sucked right in every time. If she knew her true intrinsic value, she wouldn't tolerate that.

6. You must separate yourself from people who don't treat you with respect and dignity.

It goes without saying that people who abuse you in any way are not good for you. You would think that would be a no-brainer, but I have looked in the face of many people who will keep going back to the same person who puts them down and belittles their existence. Separating yourself from these people is one of the

most important things you can do in your life. I'm not saying you don't give people a chance if they truly want to change. I'm saying that if that person has a history of continued abuse, then you must get out of that situation as fast you can.

The good news is that the more work you do in seeing what your true value is, the more it will happen naturally. I used to put up with people who didn't value me. In an odd way, I felt comfortable around them. It was my normal. When I began to see my true intrinsic value, I didn't feel that comfortable around them anymore, and I grew apart from those people. The other cool thing that happens when you value yourself is that you will eventually attract people who value you as well. You will gain new friends who will give you positive **Value Messages** and help to reinforce the value that you were born with. It's still not easy, but I will guarantee that if you make the break and separate yourself from negative people, more healthy and positive people will come your way.

7. Believe that you are special.

I have a good friend named Dave Shanahan. I used to have a bite to eat with him and his wife Linda a few times a week back when I lived in Omaha. They are a bit older than me, and I have a lot of respect for both. Dave has been a schoolteacher and golf pro, and he has worked at a very reputable accounting firm in Omaha for years. We discuss every subject that you can talk about, from politics and religion to movies and the latest trends. Dave is a very self-confident man and usually has an opinion about any subject. He is a great listener and respects others' opinions, but he comes off very confident in himself. I think that Dave is an example of someone who knows his true intrinsic value and it just oozes out of him.

One day, Dave and I were discussing the retirement of Jim Calhoun, the very successful men's basketball coach for the University of Connecticut. When he got there, Calhoun took over a program that had little to no success, and they eventually won three national championships under his leadership. He said something in the retirement press conference that made me think of Dave. He said, "I wanted everyone that played for me to know they were special. I wanted them to walk around that school like they were the elite ones on campus."

He said, "If they knew they were special, they would act like they were special, and they would expect special things from themselves." I think that is the key to Dave Shanahan, and it's one of the reasons I like being his friend. He knows he's special. He knows his true intrinsic value.

Here is the kicker though. Because he knows he is special, he believes everyone else is special as well. Dave and Linda Shanahan have helped more people to see their value than they even know. I have known them for a few years now, and I have noticed that they see value in everyone they come across. I have watched them give respect to people who were hard to respect. I think this quote from Mark Twain says it all about them and anyone that walks in the reality of their true value:

"Really great people make you feel that you, too, can become great."

Mark Twain

You are special! Don't expect anything less of yourself.

I can't emphasize enough that your intrinsic value never changes. What you think you are worth can change depending on your feelings and **Value Messages**. I have learned that you can't trust your feelings. In the next chapter we are going to talk

about how the voices of our peers can give us negative ***Value Messages*** as well. Before we do that, I want you to answer the following questions.

1. What is the most abusive thing anyone has ever done or said to you?
2. Was this person one of your resources of your value?
3. Do a history lesson on this person and try and figure out how much of the abuse that was given to you comes from hurt from their past. Try to put that in perspective so you don't blame yourself for what they did.
4. Do you have a history of attracting friends and romantic relationships that are abusive? If you do, write down how you think you might be attracting them by the way you treat yourself.
5. Write a paragraph or two that explains what ***Value Messages*** you may have received from this abuse and what your strategy will be going forward to make sure those messages don't affect you anymore.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter4>

Notes

Chapter Five

Four and a half Minutes

"Be yourself; everyone else is already taken."

Oscar Wilde

I got an email from a student in New York who described her everyday life in school like this. She wrote,

*"Walking into my school every day is like walking onto my own personal stage. I have about eight hours to make everyone in that world happy. It's not just one audience either, the whole school is watching me, and they all need me to be perfect. My friends, teachers, coaches, it feels like I have to put on a show for all of them every freaking day. Even people that I don't know have expectations for me. The whole thing is just exhausting. That four and a half minutes it takes for me to get from one class to the next is loaded with so much pressure and drama. I just f***ing hate it."*

Wouldn't it be nice if schools were just schools? You go in, you learn, you go home. It's not like that, though, is it? As soon as you walk on to your campus, (actually, it is happening before you get there) you are being judged by your peers constantly and relentlessly. The intensity and severity of that judgment is not like it was for your parents. That's why a lot of parents will blow you off when you try to explain the pressure you feel.

Like I said earlier, Psychologists say that part of where we get our self-worth from is caring about what the most important

person in our lives thinks of us. For most of us, when we are young, it's our parents and immediate family. We put some (but very minimal) focus on our social world in the elementary school years because it doesn't matter that much to us at that time. However, the magic happens when we turn 12 or 13, right?

We start measuring what we are worth according to our specific social environment. It's like a whole new world opens up to us so the **Value Messages** are not just coming from our family now, the opinion of our peers has a lot more weight to it as well. We don't completely blow off what our parents think of us, but during our teenage years, what they think pales in comparison to what people in our social world think of us.

The social pressure that teenagers face today is incredibly strong and very different from what most adults faced when they were in school.

Sometimes, I present to parents after I do the assemblies at schools, and I always get that one parent that will say something like, "Well, we had social pressure when we were in school." I just take out my cell phone, hold it up and say, "No, you didn't. Not like they do. Not even close." If you have a cell phone, it automatically means you are connected to thousands of people. I spoke at a school in Iowa this year that had 38 students in their senior class. I graduated with 500. That class of 38 has a bigger and more influential social audience than I ever had. In Chapter Nine, I'm going to delve deeper into social media and its effects, but it goes without saying that social media has put tons of social pressure on teenagers because it creates a much larger audience for you now.

I didn't grow up with social media, so if I made a "social mistake" in my high school, maybe fifteen kids would know about it. Other than their home telephone, they would have no way to spread that information, so the severity of that information

would most likely die overnight. The next day no one would care because everyone had moved on to the next thing. You don't have that luxury in your world. If you make a "social mistake," it spreads faster and wider, and it lives longer because it is now in cyberspace and can reappear at any moment. On top of that, you don't get a break like we did. I could go home at three-thirty in the afternoon and completely disengage from my social world. I know it's hard for you to understand that because it's never been like that for you, but that really did take a lot of pressure off of teenagers back then.

You can't do that. You could have drama at 11 am at school, and it will stay on your social radar until you go to sleep that night. The next day it could take on a whole life of its own because it is alive on the internet. That is way more pressure than what most of the adults in your life faced when they were your age.

When we book a school for an assembly, we send out a school information sheet to the administration, asking for a few details about the school and the students. Most of them come back with the word "apathetic" on it when describing their students. The word "apathy" essentially means not caring. So, the school officials are describing the kids in their school as students who don't care and are not engaged with what the educators care about or what they think they should care about. No offense to the school administrators, but I don't agree with that exactly.

I think most teenagers care greatly about the right things, but the intensity of their social world overpowers whatever emotional energy is needed to put into schoolwork and their futures, which gets translated as apathy to some adults.

What those adults don't understand is that today's middle and high school students must deal with two very strong

governments. Yes, I used the word government because it is exactly what it is. The word government means:

**“The control exercised over the actions of the members.”
(Dictionary.com)**

To be governed means to be controlled in certain matters. When you walk onto your campus, there needs to be physical control for safety reasons. No one likes to feel like the place is out of control. That is part of what the adult government is supposed to provide. They create an environment that you can feel safe in. They have rules and guidelines to create order and ensure physical safety, and there is a structure that governs the learning environment for the students. That government is very important, and schools spend a lot of money and time to make sure that government is working well.

Again, if schools were just schools, then that would be enough to control things, but most schools don't have a problem with physical safety. The CDC has reported that 65% of middle and high school students don't feel emotionally safe in their school. They say that over 160,000 students in the United States stay home from school every day not because they feel physically threatened, but because the social pressure is just too much for them at times. Here's why.

There is another government at play in every school. It is the Social Government. Even though there is essentially no funding for this government, in my opinion, it is stronger and more influential than the adult-run government. It is the natural leadership that happens organically in the hallways of every school. It's what determines who can talk and who can't. I saw this government dynamic play out right in front of me at a school in Pennsylvania. I facilitated a leadership breakfast at this school for students before my assembly that day. At breakfast, a student raised his hand and shared an idea about something the

students could do to make the social climate better. I thought what he said was good, but as that boy started to share his idea, the other kids looked to see who it was and then ghosted him.

They were not rude, but they basically blew him off. About five minutes later, another kid raised his hand and said the exact same thing. Not something similar, the exact same thing. They did what they did before, they looked to see who it was, but this time, all the kids bought right in, saying stuff like, “Yeah, that will work. Write that down.” I looked at the first kid as if to say, “Dude, aren’t you going to say anything? This was your idea.” He just looked away. He knew his place in that social government. It was a good idea that he had, but he didn’t have the right to say it in that specific social government.

I don’t even need to explain to you what happened, because you already know. It’s what happens in your school. There are certain kids that can say things and certain kids that can’t. It’s the painful reality that there is a social government that is very real and, in most cases, gets obeyed more than the traditional school government those teachers and administrator’s control. I’m sure there are kids in your school that have no problem breaking the written rules of the school, but I think most of the kids in your school won’t break the unwritten social rules. Let me explain.

If you think about it, the first kid was getting a ***Value Message*** from his peers in that moment. “Good idea dude, but you don’t have the social value in this government to say it.”

Every school is different, but I guarantee, in every school, there is a pecking order and a set of social rules that must be obeyed, or there will be a social price to pay.

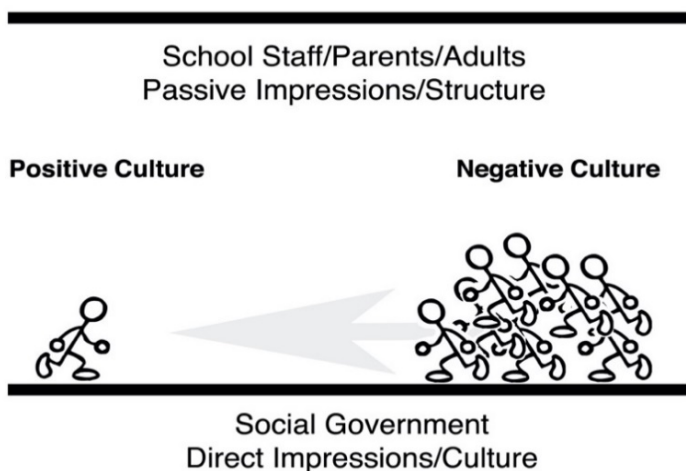
Just like there are consequences for not following the rules in the adult government—whether it’s at home with your parents

and their expectations for you, or with your school—your social world has rules and consequences as well. If you break their “laws” there could be a price to pay.

In that same school, after the assembly was over, a sophomore girl came and sat down next to me in tears. She said, “All the kids in school are calling me a freak.” This girl was cute and dressed trendy, so I was a little confused. I said, “Why are they calling you a freak?” She said, “Because I stopped going to the cool kid parties.” I said, “How come?” She said, “Because I know what happens to sophomore girls when they go to parties with senior boys.”

Somewhere along the way, this girl picked up a personal value that was important to her. She didn’t want to go to the party because she didn’t want to put herself in danger, so she said no when they invited her. I’m sure her parents would have been proud of her, because, in her adult government (of which she also is a part), that is a huge win. She developed a healthy value and then tried living out that value in her social government. That is the problem, though. She broke the law in her social world by adopting something that the adult government would support, so they gave her a consequence. They shunned her and called her a “freak”.

Look at the illustration below. This is probably what it felt like for this girl and some of you who are reading this right now. She had a personal value that went against the social flow of the school. I don’t think she was prepared for the backlash she got for making a personal choice that went against her social government.



I really want you to see that being a teenager means you are part of two opposing governments that are basically demanding that you obey their rules or there will be consequences. Most parents don't truly understand that asking you to live out some of the values that your family believes in will probably cost you some credibility socially if you truly live those out the way they expect you to.

Teenagers find themselves managing two worlds. It is an internal battle that you are constantly fighting to keep both worlds happy with you. I think that battle is wearing a lot of teenagers out.

Even before social media platforms were popular, many pediatricians and child psychologists agreed that a driving motivation for teenagers is to avoid public humiliation at all costs. Even if you don't agree with what the other kids are doing, you feel compelled to do it because of FOMO (fear of missing out).

The social price to pay for not at least pretending to fit in publicly, can be very high for you.

A classic example of having to manage the two governments happened to a teacher friend of mine. He told me about a student who came and asked him to stop praising him publicly for his grades when he got an A on a test or an assignment. He said, "You have no idea how much sh** I get from the other kids out in the hallway after you do that."

Here was this teacher thinking he was doing this kid a favor by reinforcing this great behavior of studying and doing well in school by praising him publicly, but the compliments were costing that student too much socially. He obviously cared about school because he got a good grade, but he is also forced to care about what others think because of the social consequences that might come his way if he doesn't. So, by talking to the teacher and asking him to stop praising him publicly, he was managing the two governments and the expectations each government had for him. That's why I don't think the word to describe teenagers would be "apathetic." I think I might use the words "fearful," "exhausted," or maybe even "desperate."

I got this email not too long ago: "I feel so worthless like no one knows or cares that I'm alive. I get good grades. I have parents that love me, so why do I constantly feel like I'm not good enough?" Because managing the two governments means you'll never be good enough for both.

In our specific social governments, there are important people who rule in those governments. Whether we know them personally or not, they are important in our world because they are like measuring sticks. We measure our worth based on what they think of us. I can still remember who those people were in my life. I went to Hunt Elementary School in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Brian Solano, Peter Murray and Steven Parker, just to name a few—these guys had power. They were like the sheriffs. They enforced the rules in our social world. If these guys accepted you, it went well for you socially; if they didn't,

you were in trouble. If you dared to go against them, it was like breaking the law. That's why I call that social world a government. You will pay a price if you break their "laws." You could put your own names in there, couldn't you? Most likely, there are people in your world that control what others say and do. In a way, these people are like the resources of your social value. Let me ask you a question. It's the same question I asked you in chapter three about the people who are resources of your intrinsic value.

Are the resources of your social value credible?

Whether you are aware of it or not, you are probably basing a lot of your own value on what they think of you, so it's a valid question. Do those people really care about you, and what is going to happen to you in your future? Once, I was talking to a girl who told me that everyone was calling her names and making her feel bad about herself. I asked her to name them. She couldn't. So, I said, why does it matter? You are internalizing these people's words to the point where it is affecting how you feel about yourself, but you hardly know their names. Why? Why are you giving these people that much importance? What makes them credible to you?

That is a good question. What moves people into the "most important person" category in our lives? Why do we base our personal value on what complete strangers think about us? Why do they become the measuring stick? It's very common, but if you really think about it, it doesn't make a lot of sense. I want to illustrate this point with a scenario.

Let's say tomorrow you have two new students in your school. The first kid is a pretty good-looking guy who can throw a football a long way, and your school needs a quarterback. Without knowing much more than that, he most likely will have

a high social value right away. We know nothing about his personal life—in fact, he could be abusing his girlfriend on the weekends—but it wouldn't matter in that social government, because he has what it takes socially to have a lot of influence on his campus. This is only because of the two things we do know about him: he's good looking, and he can throw a football.

On the same day, a freshman girl comes to your school from another town. She's not particularly pretty, and she moved in with her grandmother because of some family issues that have nothing to do with her. She will probably not get a high social value and have very little influence on the campus. She could be doing great things with her life, like feeding the homeless on the weekends, but the initial judgment will be negative because she doesn't fit the social criteria for being popular.

If you ask me, the person that would make a better friend, is probably not the quarterback, it's the girl who is desperately trying to make something out of her life with a lot of family drama going that, for the most part, is out of her control. Most of you would probably agree, but she is not going to get the time of day because of her social status. That is so unfair and can be very confusing for people. It's confusing because the standard we use to measure someone's value in middle and high school is very shallow. Do you see what I'm getting at here? We place an immense amount of importance on the opinions of people we hardly know and who hardly know us.

One of the biggest breakthroughs in my mental health came when I realized the difference between my social value and my intrinsic value. Social value can change, and it usually does change quite a bit depending on your specific social government. In contrast, your intrinsic value never changes. That's the whole point of this chapter. I need you to see the difference between your social value and your intrinsic value,

and I need you to see that your intrinsic value is much more important than your social world is to you right now. One of the things that I say now in my talk with teenagers is, “I want you to like me because I’m human, but I don’t need you to like me.”

The moment my self-worth is tied to your liking me or not liking me, is the moment I give you too much power.

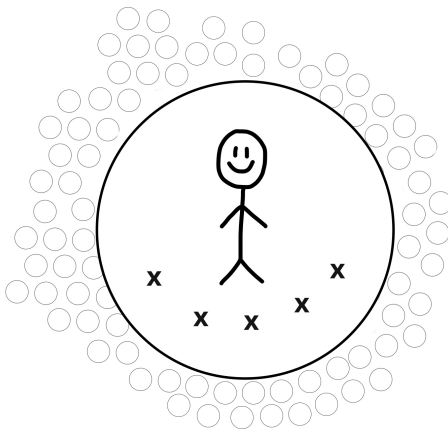
I know that seems like what an adult is supposed to say to you but trust me when I tell you that you must put your focus back on what you are worth intrinsically not socially. Eventually you are going to end up doing that anyway. Your life will take on a lot more meaning if you can do it sooner, rather than later. I have not seen or heard from Brian, Peter, or Steven for a couple of decades now. These guys that dominated my life back in the day, now have absolutely no influence on my life whatsoever. That will happen to you, too.

You must pick friends (influencers) that know and respect your intrinsic value.

The less you know your true intrinsic value, the more you depend on what others think and say about you (social value) for your worth.

Look at the illustration below. The person in the middle is you. There are five people in the inner circle that represent the five people in your life that truly value you. You may have more, or you may have less. None of them are perfect, obviously, but they represent your intrinsic value. The figures on the outside of the circle are the people (sheriffs) in your social world who don’t know you very well. I want you to write down the five important people that represent your intrinsic value.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.



**X = People who
represent your
Intrinsic Value**

**○ = People who
represent your
Social Value**

If you want a life that pleases these “sheriffs,” then you need to do everything you can to please them. Go to all the parties, hate who they hate, like who they like, don’t ever think for yourself, and you will have a smoother social life.

If you can see the absolute futility in that, then you need to decide now to stop worrying about them. You need to look at the people on the intrinsic list and invest in those friendships. Don’t worry about how many it is. If it’s only one or two, it’s okay. I would rather have a couple of close friends that I can confide in and trust than a whole bunch of shallow people that I must

please to stay in good standing with them. What a lonely feeling that must be.

I'm going to give you seven things that you can do right now to make the friendships in your inner circle stronger.

1. Tell these people that they matter to you. I know it sounds stupid, but you would be surprised how important it is that they know that. You can say it in a way that isn't corny or stupid. Put it in your own words but let them know they matter to you.

2. Spend more time with them. Prioritize them. I'm not saying you ignore everyone else but spend quality time with your closest friends and family.

3. Make memories. I just got off the phone tonight with a guy that was in my inner circle back in the nineties. We both moved away and have different lives now, but we spent about an hour and a half sharing memories from back in the day. I was wiping tears from my eyes from laughter reminiscing with this guy. Make memories with these people, because that's what lasts.

4. Commit to being a good friend to those people. I learned something very valuable in my twenties. If you want a friend, then be a friend. The quality of friends in your life depends on the quality of friend that you are willing to be. What goes around comes around. Listen to your friends, and be there on the bad days, not just the good days.

5. Don't blow off your friends when you get a boyfriend or a girlfriend. That is a very common mistake that teenagers make. The very people that you may need to support you if things go bad are your best friends. The other important piece is that you will have a much more quality relationship with your significant

other if you are not spending every waking moment with them. Make time for your friends, and it will keep everything fresh.

6. Be picky about who gets into your circle. Don't pick people based on their popularity or social status. Pick people of character, people that you know you can trust. If someone is always putting others down around you, you can probably bet that they will put you down when you are not there. Be picky.

7. If one or more of those people in your inner circle are your parents or siblings, I would say it is a very good idea to keep that relationship strong. There may be a bit of a gap in communication right now, but if you think about it, your family really does love you and have your best interest in mind. They may not always communicate it in the best way, but these are the people that believe in you the most. Friends will come and go, but family is forever. Let them know that it matters to you.

Answer these questions:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 (ten being high), how much social pressure do you feel when you are at school?

2. Write down the initials of the "sheriffs" of your social world and then rate them on a scale from 1 to 10 according to how well they really know and care about you.

3. Write a paragraph describing what you can do to minimize their influence in your life and increase the influence of people who really care about you.

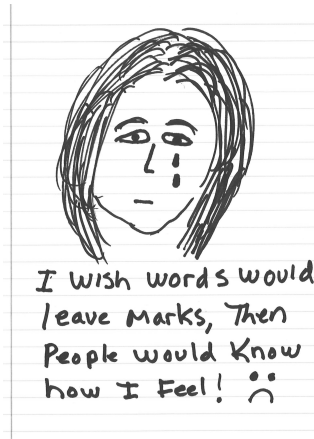
Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter5>

Notes

Chapter Six

Sticks and Stones



A girl from a high school in Ohio gave this to me after I spoke at her school. We sat down on the bleachers in the gym, and she told me her story; most of it had to do with some devastating words from a few important people in her life who had dramatically affected the way she saw herself. After she walked away, I looked down at the paper again and thought about how true it was.

If words were a blunt instrument, there would be a lot of bloody people walking around the earth.

Let's face it, many people use words like weapons—carefully crafted words that are designed to hurt another person. I wish there was a chapter that I could write in this book, or some other book, that would have the power to stop words from doing so much damage. I wish there was some mind-blowing truth that would completely prevent all words from doing harm. You and

I both know that we can't keep the words from coming, so maybe this chapter will help keep you from letting other people's words get into your head and sending you negative ***Value Messages*** that will discourage you from knowing your true worth.

We listen to so many words daily: instructional words, motivational words, random words, words from reels, words from parents, words from your friends, words from people you like, words from people you don't like, etc. Many words fly right past us, but some words have incredible sticking power, don't they?

It's the negative words that stick in our heads that have the power to do damage.

I will guarantee that if you have low self-esteem, we can point back to some words or a label that got stuck in your head and is constantly sending you the message that you are worthless. The crazy thing is that some of the words that have done the most damage can be traced back to when we were very young.

One day, I was speaking to about two hundred fifth graders in a town up in Wisconsin. I asked the boys to raise their hand if they had ever been called "fag," "gay," "queer," or "retard" or any other negative words from others. Just about every boy in the gym raised his hand. Then, I asked the girls to raise their hand if they had ever been called a "slut," "hoe," or "bitch etc." Again, most of them raised their hands. Keep in mind that these were fifth graders, eleven- and twelve-year-olds. I asked a few of them to describe how they felt when those things were said to them. It was unbelievable how honest they were. They said things like, "It made me cry," "I wanted to hurt myself," "I felt worthless," "I wanted to crawl in a hole," and "I got very angry and wanted to hurt someone." I got a note from one of them that said,

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words have ruined my life.” She was in fifth grade.

Whether you are a fifth grader or a junior in high school, you must admit, there is tremendous power in words. I found some interesting quotes about words that reinforce the fact that we should take them seriously:

**“A knife may scar a body, but a careless word will wound a soul.”
Bangambiki Habyarimana, *The Great Pearl of Wisdom***

**“A strange thing, words. Once they're said, it's hard to imagine they're untrue.”
Sharon Biggs Waller, *A Mad, Wicked Folly***

**“Words have power, and all things of power are dangerous.”
Ellery Adams**

**“Words are living force. The words you use create your life.”
Lailah Gifty Akita**

“Words are potential weapons, so use them wisely.” Joanne Madeline Moore

“Take care what words you speak that follow ‘I am.’ In so speaking, you create your life.” Alan Cohen

“Life and death are in the power of the tongue.” The Bible

“I've always told people that for each person there is a sentence—a series of words—which has the power to destroy him.” Philip K. Dick, *VALIS*

“Watch your thoughts; for they become words. Watch your words; for they become actions. Watch your actions; for they

become habits. Watch your habits; for they become character. Watch your character; for it will become your destiny.”

Frank Outlaw

“If you realized how powerful your thoughts are, you would fight to never allow another negative one.” **Peace Pilgrim from *Pilgrim’s Progress***

This last quote from *Pilgrim’s Progress* is one of my favorites. I like that the author uses the word “fight” when it comes to not allowing negative thoughts to dominate our minds. I bet if you stopped and thought about it, there are numerous words that go through your mind completely unchecked. Psychologists say that we talk to ourselves at the rate of 1300 words per minute. The average conversation we have with another person is about 200 words a minute. It is quite possible, then, that you could be having a conversation with yourself while you are having a conversation with another person. A lot of negative thoughts could be getting in there without you even knowing it.

If you are not putting up a good fight to defeat negative words that stick in your head, then you probably don’t realize how much damage is being done by words in your life.

As the rest of these quotes suggest, words can be a creative force, as well as the source of great destruction. You can’t blow off words, because they are very important to you seeing how valuable you truly are. After directly working with young people for over thirty years, let me say something in which I’m completely confident:

The quality of your life ten years from today depends on what you are thinking about yourself right now as a teenager.

It starts with a thought (words said silently to ourselves). What are you dwelling on when it comes to yourself? For some of you, it may seem harmless and somewhat normal to you that you dwell on negativity regarding yourself, because you developed that habit when you were in elementary school. You might be thinking to yourself that you will outgrow it, but I would be willing to bet that the negative words you are dwelling on are causing some of you to be depressed and have feelings of hopelessness. I have learned something very valuable about other people's words. I can't stop words from being said to me, but I can manage them.

I guarantee that if you are not managing the words that are said to you, those words are managing you.

I am going to give you four things that you can do to manage the words that you are absorbing—the words that are said to you daily, that have the power to affect your future:

1. You must know the difference between critical words and instructional words. We need words to make us better. I can look back on my life and tell you that there have been times where people have said some things to me that were hard to hear, and maybe even a bit harsh at times, but it absolutely changed my life for the better. They were instructional words that helped me to be a better husband, dad, and friend. Be careful, though, that you don't dismiss words just because they may not be said perfectly. Sometimes, people can have good motives but poor communication skills.

Critical words are destructive; they tear you down. They are judgmental and usually give you no room for you to improve. They are declarative statements like, "You are a loser," or, "You are a slut." The motive behind those words is not to help you at all. When I know that people in my life are saying things from

that motive, it makes it very easy for me to not be affected by them as much.

2. You must know your true intrinsic value to minimize the effect of negative words. The less you know your intrinsic value, the more you depend on other people's words for your value. Think about it. You can battle lies much more easily when you know the truth. I know we have talked about this a lot, but you must hear this as many times as you can, until it really gets in your head:

You are a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10, and nothing can change that!

That is the problem for some of you. I can't emphasize enough that you must fly by the instruments (truth) of your intrinsic value. Otherwise, you will be tossed around emotionally every time someone says something negative to you or about you.

Negative words are lies that feed your feelings, which will eventually cause you to crash the "plane." Words must be filtered through your intrinsic value filter.

If someone says something to me that is negative, I weigh it by the truth of my value. Just recently, someone from my family texted me with some pretty negative things about me. It hurt at first, but I was able to dismiss it because I filtered it through what I know about myself. I am not perfect, but I am valuable. This person was not trying to help me improve on something. They were judging me and not seeing me for the valuable person that I am. I deleted the text from my phone and my mind. I only accept words that affirm my true value.

3. Words only have the power to affect you when you come into agreement with them. A couple years ago, I heard speaker

Joe Washington say, “It’s not what people call you; it’s what you answer to.”

Someone could call me a “nasty mangy” cat, and it would have little to no effect on me, because I know I’m not. I’m not going to run to the mirror and look for whiskers. What if they called me a loser? Well, now I must think about this. I feel like a loser sometimes. Maybe they are right. Is there truth to what they are saying? If there is any doubt in me that I might be a loser, then this person’s words can influence me. I lived with a parent that constantly used words to put me down. “Loser” was the most common word. When I started to look at the effect that these words had in my life, I concluded that I allowed the words to stick. I agreed with her, that’s why it hurt so bad.

Of course, it was wrong for her to say them, but it was equally as wrong for me to believe those words and act like a loser. If I had realized that I was valuable and acted that way by investing in my abilities and talents, I would have been much better off. I eventually did that, but I could have saved myself years of self-doubt if I had realized it sooner. Because I believed her words and agreed with them, I did more things that reinforced that label. I gave her too much power.

4. Analyze people’s words before you internalize them. The amount of damage that is done by words and labels can be determined by how much power you have given to the person that said those words. You first must determine from which value system these people are speaking. Do they represent your intrinsic value, or do they represent your social value?

A. Those who have influence over our intrinsic worth. (Inner circle)

B. People who have influence over our social worth. (Outer circle)

Let's talk about hurtful words that are said by people who really matter—the people in your inner circle. Obviously, if the person saying negative things to you represents your intrinsic value, then it is understandable why you would give this person power. If that person made it to the inner circle, then they are most likely a parent, grandparent, sibling, best friend, boyfriend or girlfriend, etc. Their words are going to be powerful in your life.

The hard conversation we must have right now is probably going to hurt you, but it is necessary. The simple fact is that you must turn the volume down on their words. You must minimize their power. That's hard to do when they have played such an important role in your life, I know, but it will be a very important step for some of you. The way I did it back in the day was to try to gain a bigger perspective on the situation. Why was she really saying these things? It goes back to chapter four, Hurt People, Hurt People. It's like what I mentioned before, my mom was hurt, so she said things to me that hurt me because she was hurt. I was not the original source of her pain; my dad and her dad were. When I realized that, it helped me to turn the volume down in my head when she said mean things to me.

Why people say what they say is more important than what they say.

Did my mom really believe her son was a loser, or that I was stupid? I used to think that she did, and that's why those words were so hurtful to me. I believed them. When you're little, you

think your parents are like God (they're very influential resources). What they say has tremendous power. Getting perspective means getting the big picture. Perhaps some of the people who are saying negative things to you are hurting on the inside themselves.

Perspective is a huge key in minimizing the damage that words can have on us.

As I mentioned in chapter five, because you are a teenager, words from your social world are going to have a tremendous effect on you as well. If the words that are hurting you are from your social world, let me help you out with something. These words are affecting you because you are giving those people too much power. For the rest of your life, you are going to have to understand that people always will want to slap a label on you. It's easier that way for them. The question is, when they hand you the label (and they will), will you put it on? I like what Johnny Depp said about labels,

"People feel the need to put a label on you because that's where they put the price tag."

That's the problem with labels—they all come with a price tag attached to them. A couple of years ago, a girl named Haley came up to me after an assembly and told me that she can't walk down the hallway of her school without being called a slut. I know this is a common insult for girls, but Haley had done something to get this terrible label. She went to a party and was drinking for one of the first times, and things happened with a boy that she didn't have a whole lot of control over. (I'm sure you get the picture.)

She came back to school that Monday, and it was all over the school that she was a slut. This was her first sexual experience.

She was a straight-A student and a member of the honor society, and she had never been with a guy before that night. Needless to say, Haley was devastated by this new label that she received, not to mention having to deal with the horrible experience she had with this guy. I met her the week after the party, and this is how the conversation went after she told me about what had happened and the new label she had because of it:

Mike: Do you think you are a slut? (What she thinks matters more than anyone.)

Haley: I don't know.

Mike: Do you make it a habit to have sex with random guys for no reason?

Haley: No.

Mike: Then you're not a slut.

Haley: But I can't believe I did that.

Mike: You made a mistake.

Haley: Everyone in the school thinks I'm a slut.

Mike: Why do you think people see it that way?

Haley: I don't know.

Mike: Is your best friend calling you a slut?

Haley: No.

Mike: Do you think your mom or grandmother would call you a slut if they knew what happened? (She looked up at me, and that was the first time in the conversation that she made eye contact.)

Haley: No.

Mike: The reason your mom, grandmother, and your best friend would not call you a slut is because they know you, they care about you, and they know you made a mistake. They are not judging you based on this one night. They know your true intrinsic value. Do the people that are saying these mean things about you really care about you?

Haley: No.

Mike: Have they ever cared about you?

Haley: No.

Mike: I know this is going to sound like B.S., but I'm telling you the truth, Haley, when I tell you this: what they say, or think doesn't matter at all! It still hurts I know, but you are not the girl they say that you are now.

You who are reading this right now know that I'm right. Why?

Because this is the truth about what happened to Haley. Did she make a mistake on that Friday night? Yes. Is she a slut now? No! Did her intrinsic value change because of that mistake? No! Did her social value change? Yes. Does that matter? No! Why?

Because her social value is not her value!

I'm going to sum this chapter up in one sentence. Other people's words cannot change the perception of your value unless **you** agree with what they say. They don't have any more power than what you give them. Okay, two sentences.

For today's challenge, I want us to apply the Three C's concept to the words you speak to yourself. You must become like a detective when words are taking root inside of your brain. The first step is to "Catch" the thoughts and words that you hear. Like I said earlier, we talk to ourselves at the rate of about 1300 words a minute, so it is quite possible that a lot of negative words are hitting you that you are not even aware of. I want you to make a list of those words so you can see the dominant thoughts that are coming to you constantly.

The next step in the detective work is "Checking" the thought or words that are being said by others. You must examine the words or thoughts for truth. Here are six things to look for while you are analyzing each specific word.

1. Does the person saying these things reflect your intrinsic value or your social value?
2. Why do you think they are saying these things? Why people say what they say is more important than what they say sometimes. Knowing why someone is saying mean things to you is a huge key in minimizing the damage that words can have on us. It might be more about them than it is you.
3. How much power have you given those words, on a scale of one to ten (one being not much, and ten being a lot)?
4. Why did you give that person power? Does this person deserve the power you gave them?
5. Ask yourself how much this person or people who are saying these things really care about you. How much have they invested in you, and how clearly do they see your true intrinsic value?

Once you have mastered catching and checking, you must learn how to “Change” your thoughts. I’m going to give you two ways to do that.

1. Turn the volume up on people who really know and support your true intrinsic value and turn the volume down on people who don’t. Part of changing negative thought patterns is shutting off the negative voices, or if you can’t do that because those people are in your family, then you must turn the volume down in your head. Try not to give their words power. I personally work very hard to only allow words in my brain that reflect how my source thinks of me.

2. Gardening tip: If you pull a weed, you must plant a flower in its place, or it will grow back stronger. It's the same thing with words. Stopping negative words is important but replacing them with the truth about yourself is just as important. Don't wait until you feel good about yourself. Make the choice to start speaking life and truth about you even if you're not feeling it. When it comes to how you talk to yourself, right choices will eventually bring right feelings.

Write down a list of positive things about you to counteract the negative things that people have said.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter6>

Notes

Chapter Seven

Failing Correctly

“One of the most important decisions you will ever make in your life is what you are going to do right after you fail. It is a critical moment.”

Winkey Pratney, Author of Youth Aflame

There is nothing like making a mistake and letting yourself and others down to make you feel worthless on the inside. Failure can be a huge negative **Value Message** if you let it.

I have a very good friend who is a high school hockey coach who told me once that kids don't learn much after they win a game. He doesn't say much to them at all after they win. He says they are happy and somewhat cocky, so they don't really listen. The most crucial time to coach them, he said, is after a loss. “They are usually fragile and open to correction. If you do it right and don't humiliate them, losing can be a great opportunity to coach life-altering adjustments into their lives.” I really believe that one of the biggest ways adults have failed young people is that we have not taught you how to fail well. That's right — fail well. That sounds weird, but if you don't do it right, you will do it wrong, and that can send you the wrong **Value Message**. I think it is dangerous when adults send the message that failure is not an option.

Failure is not only an option—it is a very important part of growth.

The problem with mistakes is that they usually come with definitions and labels, and labels tend to define us with one word. When I started speaking in schools, I don't think I was

prepared for how many young people told me about some label they got because of a mistake they made or a lifestyle choice they made. Loser, slut, fag, creeper, freak, etc. — all those labels come with a price tag. I wasn't shocked that other kids labeled them, but I was shocked at how much they let a mistake they made bring a new identity to their lives. It's like they would crawl into this box that people made for them. When you let a mistake be your new definition, it will keep you in the same place, and you can't grow.

Your mistakes should never turn into your identity.

I met this kid a couple of years ago when I was working as a youth director for a community organization in Omaha. His name was Jason, and he had to come every day for a month one summer to do community service. I don't know what he got in trouble for, but we hit it off right away. I oversaw him, so first thing in the morning, I would give him duties for the day. Later, I would take him out to lunch. The first couple of days, he was kind of quiet at lunch, but I kept making small talk. That Thursday, we grabbed some fast food and sat in my car. Suddenly, he started to talk.

"I didn't use to be like this, you know."

I asked, "Like what?"

"You know, a loser," he answered.

"I don't think you're a loser."

He responded, "Well, you're the only one then. Everyone sees me like that. I'm surprised you haven't heard of me." (I had, but I didn't want him to feel bad, so didn't say anything.) "I'm considered the biggest [F-up] in my school. When I was a little kid, I was into every sport, but then I got into soccer. I loved it.

I'm not trying to brag or anything, but I was good. I was on a bunch of travel teams." He said he was on varsity as a freshman in his high school and was named captain as a junior. His team went to State every year in high school. He told me his dream used to be to play on the US Olympic team.

I said, "I don't get it, why are you considered a big 'F-up'?"

"This is my senior year, and I quit the soccer team."

"Really? Why?"

"I didn't want to do it anymore."

I just sat there. I knew there had to be more to it than that, but I really didn't know him that well. I didn't want to come off as pushy, so I just asked him, "What happened?"

"I quit because I knew I was probably going to get kicked off anyway."

"Why?"

"I got caught selling a bag to a kid in school."

"So, you smoke weed."

"Yeah, and everything else."

"Why?"

"Because I'm a f***ing loser, and that's all I'm ever going to be."

He went on and on about how he started smoking weed after his parents got divorced. I wasn't sure if he saw the connection, but I just let him talk. He kept saying he was just a big loser. After he

finished talking, I said, “Do you know the exact moment when you decided to be a loser instead of an Olympian?”

“What?”

“Do you know the exact moment when you decided to walk away from your dream?”

“What do you mean?”

“There is no way that this is your dream, Jason. I know you are having fun partying with your friends and all that, but there is no way that doing all this makes you happier than you were when you were playing soccer and having all that success. When was it that you decided to switch labels?” I told Jason about a speaker I heard a few years ago. We were both speaking at a conference, and I sat in on his session. He said something that has stuck with me ever since I heard it. He said,

“The me you see is the me you’ll be.”

“Jason,” I said, “if you see yourself as a loser, that is what you will be. You used to see yourself as an Olympian. I’m just wondering when you stopped seeing that.”

He just looked at me. Finally, he said, “It was right after soccer season my sophomore year. I was pretty pissed about the divorce and all the drama that went with it. My friend Asher asked me to smoke, so I did. I felt bad the next day because I always looked down at those kids who smoked. I didn’t understand it, but when I did it, I loved the way it made me feel.” I said, “I understand that. It made you numb. All the crap that you were feeling about the divorce—the anger, the confusion, the sadness—went away for a while, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, it did.”

“Did it solve any problems for you? Did your parents get back together because you smoked?”

He just smiled at me. “No, it created more problems. My parents and I fought all the time. It changed who I am.”

“No, it didn’t. You are still the same guy.”

“You don’t understand. I’m known for soccer. That’s who I was.”

“It still is who you are.”

“I don’t think so. I have screwed up so bad. I don’t think there is any way back.”

“Do you mean to tell me that the mistake you made to medicate yourself with weed because of your parents’ divorce is going to define you now? That’s who you are? **You have the same heart, it just got broken.** Play this out, Jason. Where is this going? Are you going to smoke pot for the rest of your life? Do you have any dreams beyond that?”

“I used to. Everyone else sees me as a pothead now—my parents, teachers, and all the kids in school. I have made so many mistakes that I feel like I’m stuck like this now.”

I feel like I’m stuck like this now. How many of us have made a mistake in life and felt the exact same way? I’m stuck like this now. I told Jason that his problem was not that he messed up. The problem was that he didn’t do it very well. Over the next couple of weeks, while Jason was doing community service with us, we chatted in my car at lunch. I taught him how to fail well, and I want to pass some of those lessons on to you.

1. You can’t consult your failure to create your future.

The moment you do that is the moment you sell yourself short of everything that you can do and be. You can't let failure have an echo. I don't deny that I have made mistakes, but if I allow them to keep talking to me, they will talk me out of dreaming and moving forward. They will try to convince me that my failure diminished my worth. The echo of failure almost always tells you to stop trying. You don't drown because you fell in the water; you drown because you stay there too long. Everyone falls. You have to get right back up. One of my mentors would always tell us, "Quick down, quick up." You are going to fall. It's how long you stay down that determines its impact on your future.

2. Don't ever wear the identity of your failure.

People love to sum up other people's failures with one-word or one-sentence explanations. It's a cheap way of offering an opinion on someone's existence that doesn't require much thought. You will never be able to change the fact that people like to put labels on you. You can decide whether you will wear them or not. You will go crazy trying to change everyone's opinion because you will have to live a perfect life so no one can accuse you of anything. You can't do that; you have to determine what you are going to answer to. Do you believe your dreams are done because you failed? Do you think your worth has diminished because of a mistake you have made? It doesn't matter what people say. You determine whether or not those mistakes become your identity. There is a lesson in every failure; you have to grasp the lesson as fast you can. There are awesome things that you can learn from mistakes. You will miss out on them if you just go with this new identity.

I would be willing to bet that there are some mistakes you have made that you can't get out of your mind. They have successfully formed part of your identity. You must stop labeling yourself.

One of the hardest things in the world to do is to forgive yourself for those mistakes. If you don't, you will be stuck with that identity.

3. Strive for direction, not perfection.

I have been telling teenagers for years that you don't have to worry about doing drugs or becoming addicted to alcohol if you keep your eyes on your dream. I always tell them that your dream is on the top shelf (harder to reach for) and all the bad stuff is on the bottom shelf (easy to access). I have a whole chapter on this coming up.

It gets very easy to reach for the bottom shelf when you have stopped reaching for the top shelf because failure is natural when success is not an option to you anymore.

Whenever I feel myself starting to be drawn to things that are bad for me, I know it's a direction problem. At some point, I stopped believing that my life and what I'm doing has value. Ask yourself this very important question: are the things that I'm saying, and doing, and dwelling on really worthy of me? Am I better than this? The reason Jason started talking to me that day was because deep down he knew he was better than what he was choosing at that point. He got stuck. Are you stuck? Where are you going? Even if you must crawl and take baby steps, do what you must do to start moving toward something that is worthy of you.

4. Put your failure into perspective.

I imagine that one of the toughest rooms to be in is the film room of an NFL team after a loss. That is where they watch every second from the prior week's game and scrutinize it play-by-play and position-by-position. It has to be humiliating to watch

yourself do something wrong that could have cost your team a victory. Great coaches know not to dwell too much on the past. That's probably why they only devote one day to looking at past plays. Still, being able to see exactly where you made the mistake and why—and then correct it—is invaluable. Failing well has a lot to do with perspective—seeing where you went wrong and why. If we were in the film room in Jason's life, we could look back and see that the pain and pressure of his parents' divorce drove him to make a mistake. He medicated his sadness with drugs. That doesn't make him a druggie. It makes him a sad teenager who wanted to feel better instantly, so he made some bad choices.

He was a broken-hearted kid that made a mistake. He wasn't the mistake.

5. If you fear failure, you will live a small life.

What most adults call apathy and indifference, I would call fear of failure. Living big may mean that you also fail big at times. History is full of people who had great failures before they finally experienced success. Fear of failure makes some people never take risks. That may seem safe, but nursing homes are filled with people that will tell you that the biggest regrets they have in life are not that they took chances and failed but that they regret never taking the chance to do something hard to begin with. Don't fear failure; embrace it. It's going to be a part of your life for the rest of your life. Do it right, so it doesn't convince you that you are not incredibly valuable.

Answer these questions and write down your answers.

1. Have you made a mistake in your life that has kept you from dreaming?
2. In what ways did that mistake become your new identity?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5, how hot is your pursuit after your dream?
4. Write a short paragraph putting your mistake into perspective. What can you learn from what happened? Go into the film room and analyze what happened.
5. What are the lessons, and how are you going to move on from here?

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter7>

Notes

Chapter Eight

The Top Shelf

*"The most important day of your life is the day you were born;
the second is when you discover why."*

Mark Twain

After an assembly at a high school in Indiana, I was talking with a senior girl named Addison and during the conversation, she told me that when she was thirteen years old, her dad "sold" her to his best friend for a night of rape because he needed money for drugs. The guy gave her dad \$168.00 to spend the night and do anything he wanted to her. I didn't have a piece of paper on me, so I wrote \$168.00 on my hand so I wouldn't forget that price. She went on to say how her mom knew about it but was a drug user herself, so she pretended she didn't know anything about it. Let's face it, some people just have crappier lives than others. I'm not trying to minimize anyone else's pain because it's like I said earlier, you can't scale pain. Everyone deals with things differently.

When I'm trying to help someone make sense out of something like that though, I must be honest with them about the potential obstacles they are going to face as they try and have a "normal" life after something that horrific has happened to them and produced those kinds of negative **Value Messages**. It's humbling when you are on my side of stories like that. She is looking to me to say something to her that is going to make this better. To you it might seem like an awkward time for me to bring up her purpose after hearing a story like this but when abuse like this happens, it is not unusual to ask yourself the question, "Why am I here?" What possible good can come out of

my life after something like this has happened to me. It would be easy to feel like your life is worthless now.”

I love the quote at the beginning of this chapter.

“The most important day of your life is the day you were born; the second is when you discover why.”

Mark Twain

That statement is so true for me. I don’t remember the day I was born, but I remember a time in my life when I discovered why I am here. It was after most of the bad stuff from my childhood happened to me and I didn’t see much hope of being successful at all. The word “discover” may be a little deceptive, though. It assumes that discovering your purpose is a one-time event, like you were walking down the street one day and, suddenly, there it was—your purpose. Many people feel that they need to discover their purpose; I believe there is a creation process when it comes to your purpose.

I think this quote from Bernard Shaw makes a little more sense when it comes to discovering your purpose:

“Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.”

George Bernard Shaw

I’m a lot older now, and I couldn’t agree more. If I was looking for myself, I can honestly say that I still wouldn’t be found yet. I don’t even know what that means.

Life is about creating who you are out of the ingredients you have been given.

Whether you know this or not, you have been given ingredients to create something with your life. For the most part, you had nothing to do with the ingredients that you have. I'm talking about things you were born with like, what country and state you're from, your physical abilities and limitations, your family dynamic, etc.

I like to do this exercise in the leadership workshops at schools where I speak. I'll break up an audience of 30 students into groups of five and distribute different ingredients to each group and tell them that they must create something out of what I have given them. Some of them get great ingredients to create something and others, not so much. Every time I have done this, the same thing happens immediately, the students look around the class and see that everyone in the room has different ingredients. They notice right away there are some people that have better ingredients than they have. Still, they have been given a task: make something out of what you have. After the initial shock of knowing that your ingredients are limited, they usually get to work and create something great.

One group in Alaska blew me away. What they did with toothpicks and olives was simply amazing. I love watching it happen because I think that is what happens to us sometimes in life. We look around and compare our circumstances to others and think that we shouldn't even try to do something with our lives because of the limitations that are on us.

Some of you look down and see that you have some good ingredients. Your parents aren't perfect, but they love and provide for you, so that's a good start. Add some other good ingredients like intellect, passion, athletic ability, and maybe good looks, and you are in pretty good shape.

Others of you, like me, look at your ingredients and see that there is not a lot there to work with. Maybe your parents were divorced at a young age, or you live with a grandparent right now. Maybe you are in foster care. Some of you may have a learning disability that you have to deal with every day. Everyone eventually comes to a point in life where they notice their ingredients. You see what you have and don't have. At that point, you must make a choice. Are you going to do something with what you have, or are you going to get discouraged and walk away?

Let me tell you what I told Addison that day in Indiana. These are your ingredients. This is what you have. Is it fair? No, it's not! But it is what it is, and the faster you come to terms with the fact that this is your life, the sooner you can get started building something out of the ingredients you have instead of the ingredients you wished you had.

Ingredients can be deceptive, though. What look like bad ingredients can turn into assets. I told Addison to look around the room. There were still a couple hundred kids in the gym. I said, "How many of these kids do you think have been through something like this?" She said, "Not many." I said, "Exactly." Then I asked if she knew what the word "resilient" means. She said, "Kind of." I said, "Essentially, it means mentally tough. How many of the kids in this gym do you think could handle what you have been through?" She said, "Not too many." I said, "That's right. You have something a lot of them don't have. You have resilience, and that's a good ingredient to have these days."

You can't erase the painful past, but what you can do is take that pain and give it a purpose.

If you have heard me speak in your school, you know that I make a big deal out of having a goal or a dream for your life and

sticking to it, no matter what obstacles get in the way of that dream. I call it the “top shelf” because it’s harder to reach than the bottom shelf. The bottom shelf is where the easy fix is. If you don’t feel good about yourself or your life in general, you can reach down and grab something like drugs, alcohol, cutting, an unhealthy relationship, or something else that will make you feel different right away.

After I get done speaking, I am often asked if I think my own kids will ever use drugs or abuse alcohol. I usually answer that question by saying something like “I don’t care.” The kids give me a weird look because that answer seems to be a contradiction, given the fact that during the assembly I talk about how much I love and value my kids. It’s not that I don’t care about my kids; it’s that I don’t worry about drug use with my kids, I worry about them not dreaming and having goals for their life. The question of them doing or not doing drugs assumes that if they are not using drugs then everything else will be OK in their lives; I simply don’t believe that. There must be more to life than just staying away from the bad stuff.

I think it’s entirely possible to be drug- and alcohol-free and still feel like your life doesn’t matter until you find a mission.

Here is the real question for my kids, and for you: are you reaching for your top shelf? Have you experienced success on that level yet? If you have not, it’s just a matter of time before you start the process of self-medication. People tend to reach for the bottom shelf when they have let go of the top shelf.

One of the saddest things about life that I point out in an assembly is that not everyone in our world fully lives out their dreams. It’s not just the homeless people on the side of the road begging for money. I can’t tell you how many “successful”

people I have talked to, who consider their lives a waste because they didn't do what gave them a sense of purpose. The reason that is sad is because when people (rich or poor) don't feel like their life is valuable, they gravitate towards things in life that are worthless.

No one starts out with wanting to be a loser or having their life not matter. I wish you could be in the room with me when I ask a bunch of kindergarten kids what they want to be when they grow up. They light up when they say stuff like, "I want to be an astronaut." "I'm going to play in the NFL." "I'm going to be the first girl president." "I'm going to create video games." They mean it, too. It gets intense when I get to that part of my presentation with them. Can't you just picture it? Their little hands are all up in the air, and their faces are glowing, because they are so full of hope.

I have never had a little kid raise their hand and say something like, "When I'm 32, I want to be passed out on my couch half-drunk, neglecting my kids and not paying my bills." Or, "I want to be wealthy but not be doing something that gives me a sense of purpose, so I'll probably waste a lot of time hanging out with my golf buddies, drinking and talking about things that don't really matter." That would be so weird if I heard that stuff come out of a little kid's mouth. I won't hear that, because that is not what we dream about as kids. Some people end up there, though, don't they? Is that because they are losers or bad people? That's what society calls them.

When they were in kindergarten, nobody called them that. They were full of hope. What happened to them? My guess is somewhere down the line they took their hands off the top shelf. They stopped believing in themselves. Why did they do that? There could be a lot of reasons from what we talked about in the previous chapters: not knowing their intrinsic value, not feeling

valued socially, mistakes that they made, some words that got to them, etc. That all may be true, but I want to focus on something else right now. I want to focus on your purpose.

I understand the temptation not to try when you have limited ingredients, because our world seems to reward and even celebrate those who start out in life with good ingredients.

What we don't talk about enough is the sense of self-worth that comes from the process of building something from what you have been given.

I am more impressed when I see someone talking about what they have and doing something positive with it, no matter what the results look like in the end. I think that is why some successful people become depressed. To the rest of the world their lives look successful, and they may have a lot of money or prestige, but deep down they know that they didn't tap their true potential. I don't want to make it sound like starting out with good ingredients makes you a bad person. What I'm saying is that you get a sense of accomplishment in life when you have done the best you can with the ingredients you have, no matter what you have at the start. That process of creating something is what builds your character as a person.

It's hard to have an easy life and a great character at the same time. Show me somebody who just inherited a bunch of money and I'll show you somebody mentally tortured. Having stuff isn't fun, getting stuff is fun. It's not the pursuit of happiness, it's the happiness of the pursuit. It's who you become on the journey. You don't get healthy self-esteem from the six-pack you get at the gym; you get healthy self-esteem from being the kind of person who goes to the gym every day no matter what you look like.

What gives your life more meaning is that it is yours. You created it out of what you were given.

Who hasn't looked at another person and wished to be him or her, even for a day? Comparing yourself to someone else is as natural as sleeping. We all do it. When we compare ourselves with others though, it distracts us from what we do well. It brings discouragement and, sometimes, keeps us from exploring our natural abilities to achieve our dreams. I have done this. I have a friend who is an incredible speaker. I have heard him speak in public schools about a hundred times. He is amazing. I will admit that when I first thought about speaking in schools, I compared myself to him often! It discouraged me quite a bit because this guy is incredible. I thought there was no way I could ever be as good as him. I even went as far as doing things just like him at first because I was insecure about what I could do.

One day, I realized that I needed to be myself, tell my story the way I know how, and stop worrying about trying to be like someone else. I have now spoken in over 2,500 schools all over the world. I still don't think I'm better than this guy, but what I have learned is that it doesn't matter. It's been such a blast for me traveling around the country over the last 24 years, taking the ingredients of my life and creating something useful with them.

When I stopped looking at his ingredients and looked more intensely at what I had, I was able to create something that I owned. It was totally mine.

That's what I want you to do. I want you to look at your ingredients today and decide to do the best you can with what you have been given. There isn't a person on the planet that does not have the potential to do something amazing with his or her

life. Remember, you had nothing to do with your ingredients. Your job now is to take the ingredients and create something useful with them. There are three categories of ingredients that we all must use: our families, sudden events and circumstances that are beyond our control, and our natural abilities and limitations.

1. The family you were born into. Wouldn't it be great if we could pick our parents? You come out of the womb and get a menu. They could be rich, good looking, from Europe or California. You get to choose like you're picking what to eat at a fancy restaurant. I wouldn't have picked my parents. No offense, but my dad abandoned his kids, and my mom was just too overwhelmed at times to be a functional parent.

Much of what we create for our own lives comes from what our parents model in front of us. If your parents were trustworthy, then most likely you will be trustworthy, because that was modeled for you. What happens if there are things in life that you want to have for yourself, but they were either modeled poorly or weren't modeled at all?

There is a difference between creating something from memory and creating something from scratch.

I asked Addison what kind of parent she wanted to be. She went on and on about dressing her daughters up in little dresses, loving them, having a strong marriage, etc. I said, "If that is really going to be part of your creation, you will have to create that from scratch. Being a faithful wife and a nurturing mom is not something you are going to be able to pull from the 'library' of memory. You are going to have to recreate it."

The good news is you can. I'm a lot different from my parents now. I'm not bragging or trying to disrespect them; I'm just

saying I wanted something different than they had, so I went out and found it. I got involved in my church, and there I discovered that there were good dads. I learned from them. I read, and I learned some things that were not modeled in my life. I am not perfect by any means, but I know that there are some things in my life that are mine. I created them out of what I had to work with, and I have a sense of accomplishment because of that. You can too.

Not everyone fits into the category of having a crazy family. Some of you reading this come from families that have modeled very good ingredients for you. I hope that my own kids fit into that category. I'm going to tell you what I told my son a couple years ago when he turned 21, though. I said, "Keegan, I know I wasn't a perfect dad, but I did do a lot of things right. However, I know I did some things that were not so right as well. I want you to eat the meat and spit out the bones. It's OK for you to look at some of the things that were modeled for you that weren't so good and change them up. It's not going to insult me.

I know I had limited ingredients at my disposal. My goal has always been to give you and your siblings better ingredients and more to use than what I had. I think I have done that. Your job now is to take those ingredients and build on them. Be better than me."

In other words, I was saying, I want you to take the good stuff of how you were raised and then add your own stuff in and create a good life for yourself. That goes for some of you that have had poor modeling as well. If you look hard enough, you can find some good ingredients in any situation. My mother was a hard worker. She modeled that for me. She was also very moral, and I know that has affected me in a positive way. Take the good stuff and pitch the rest.

2. Life events and circumstances that are beyond your control.

The guy that wrote the foreword to this book, Craig Scott, talked about the day his life changed. In his freshman year, April 20, 1999, he was in the library at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado when two shooters came in and started unleashing hell. When it was all said and done, 13 people were murdered, including his sister and best friend. Whether he likes it or not, for the rest of his life these are the ingredients that he is forced to deal with.

I have had many conversations with Craig over the years, and these events have most certainly changed his life. He would probably tell you that there have been issues that have come up because of that trauma that are very hard to deal with, like reliving that day from time to time when he tells his story. He would also tell you that there have been positive things, like meeting several presidents and being a main voice that speaks out against school violence in our country.

Darrel Scott, the father of Rachel and Craig Scott said this, “All of our problems: disgruntlement, complaining, and frustration originate from not accepting what life has put in front of us this very moment. We want it to be different. We want to change it; we want it to be something else.”

Let’s face it, stuff happens. You’re going along in life and, suddenly, boom, your normal changes. Your girlfriend breaks up with you, or you find out your best friend hooked up with your boyfriend. Maybe it was more drastic than that. There was a death in the family, or a divorce that you didn’t see coming.

That is the point of sudden ingredients that you didn’t expect. These new ingredients are part of the mix now. You didn’t want

it to happen, but it did. The faster you conclude that this stuff is a part of your life, the faster you can get on with it and build something that includes this new reality. On that Wednesday in 1999, I don't think Craig had any idea his life was going to look like it does now. You never know what's coming down the road. Life is about reinventing your normal as many times as you need to when the unexpected happens.

3. Gifts, aptitudes, and learning disabilities. Everyone is born with gifts, abilities, and shortcomings. The harsh reality is that there may be some things about you that make it hard to function in a normal learning environment. You may have been diagnosed with a learning disability like ADHD. Maybe you have a mild form of autism, or you are dyslexic. Perhaps you have some genius in you, like a friend of mine who can read a huge paragraph from a book, then put the book down and perfectly recite what she just read back to you.

Whether good or bad, these are physical and biological conditions that are outside of your control. You came out of the womb like that. I have ADHD. That is part of the ingredients of my life that I had nothing to do with but must deal with daily. What does that mean for me? Well, first, it is very hard for me to sit and write this book. I must get up every five minutes and do something different—play with the dog, check my emails, etc. I can't sit down for a couple of hours and write. I wish I could, but I can't. This caused some problems for me when I was in school. I couldn't sit still. Schools were not on top of these conditions like they are now, so I was labeled “rebellious” and out of control. I was extremely creative, but no one knew that, because I couldn't stay still long enough to create anything. I was definitely misunderstood.

Maybe you feel like that. They keep trying to put you in the box: be like this, learn this way, try to fit this mold, be like this person, etc. Embrace your disabilities and gifts, because they are yours.

It's part of who you are. They are the ingredients that you must use. The good thing about today's leaders in the education system is that they are catching on to different learning styles that fit specific individuals. They will help you with coping mechanisms, so it won't be so overwhelming. Go to your counselor and discuss this. You can take different aptitude tests to see where you're gifted and where you are limited. I have made my ADHD work for me. There is no doubt that I am limited because of it, but I also am very creative, and I have made a living with it as well.

Embrace your uniqueness. Be yourself. I love this quote from Bette Midler:

"I didn't belong as a kid, and that always bothered me. If only I'd known that one day my differentness would be an asset, my earlier life would have been much easier."

I'm guessing that one of the most frustrating things about being a teenager today is that during the time when you are wired to explore your uniqueness and experiment with different things socially, your social world is very restrictive. The unfortunate thing is that most social governments are incredibly controlling. Going out of the box and doing something that goes against the norm is not acceptable in most social situations. That stinks because this is a time when you are trying things out. My advice is not to worry about it as much. You are you. You have ingredients for greatness. Be yourself and have fun figuring it all out.

I want to wrap up this chapter by talking about racecars. I don't know if you have ever been up close to a real racecar. I have, and I was very impressed. That car was just sitting there doing nothing, and I was still blown away. Sitting there doing nothing and looking impressive was not what it was built for, though,

was it? It was built to be screaming around a racetrack at 180+ miles an hour. That car is just as valuable sitting in the parking lot, but I think it's safe to say that it is a lot happier when it is out there doing what it was built to do. You are like that racecar. Your value is set, no matter whether you are fulfilling your purpose or not. But there is no doubt that one of the greatest feelings in life is when you can take that inborn value and do what you were built to do. I know I'm valuable just sitting here, but I love feeling useful as well.

I have never dedicated a chapter of a book to anyone before, but I want to now. I'm dedicating this chapter to Addison. I hope and pray that she knows that even though her past was painful, she has the ingredients to create something awesome from it. So can you. Don't give up. Take what you have and get to work.

To help you to discover your purpose, answer these questions.

1. If you didn't have to worry about money, what would you do with your time?
2. What are three occupations that you cannot ever see yourself doing? Why?
3. What are three occupations that you would love to do? Why?
4. What are some of the good ingredients that you got from your family?
5. What are some things that you want for your life that you will have to create from scratch?
6. Name some natural abilities that you have that will be an asset in creating your life.

7. Knowing your ingredients, what you have and don't have, write out a five-year plan for your life.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter8>

Notes

Chapter Nine

Value Up

"All it takes for bad things to become normal, is for good people to do nothing about it."

Steve Hays

I walked into the men's room at the private high school I worked at in Illinois and on the wall were the words F***ing N word. I was blown away because for the most part we had a good social climate at that school, so this was not something that we saw often. One of my jobs was to teach a leadership class that challenged students to set a positive tenor for the social climate of the school. We were not perfect, but we were making a lot of progress. I believe when students in a school give the right **Value Messages** corporately, it can have an amazing effect on school culture. But negative **Value Messages** like this can do a lot of damage to the culture as well.

We were about to start our leadership meeting, so when I came out of the bathroom, I asked a couple of the student leaders standing there if they had seen what was written on the wall, and one of them said, "Yes, it has been up there for a couple of weeks now." That part bothered me more than it being there in the first place, but we'll get to that in a minute.

You're always going to have a few knuckleheads in a school; the problem comes when we let their negative *Value Messages* dominate the social culture.

I walked into the leadership class I was about to lead and wrote exactly what was written on the bathroom wall in big letters on

the smartboard. You could have heard a pin drop. What I wrote was incredibly offensive.

I asked if anyone was offended by what I wrote on the board, and most of the students' hands went up. "So," I asked them, "then why is it written on the bathroom wall?" They all looked at each other. The girls had no clue what we were talking about, thank goodness. One of the guys spoke up and said, "No one in this room wrote it." "That's not what I asked, give me two hours and I will find out who wrote it. I asked you, why is it on your wall, and why has it been up there for a couple of weeks?" One of the students said, "Maybe the administration hasn't seen it yet." So, I replied, "Whose school is this?"

Some of them knew where I was going and said sheepishly, "It's our school." I said, "Exactly." Then I said, "I guess we are racists now." Some protested hard and said, "No, we are not!" I said, "We must be. It's in our bathroom. It's right there on the wall, forty feet from where I'm standing right now." They reacted back, "That's not how we all feel." I said, "It must be. You left it there. Just because you didn't write it doesn't mean you don't believe it. How would I know the difference between you and the idiots who wrote it?" "We don't believe it," they said. "I don't believe you," I answered back. "It didn't bother you enough to get it off the bathroom wall, so you must believe it." I went on to ask them, "If a visitor came to the school and read what was written in the bathroom, how would they know the difference between you and them? They would just assume that the whole school was full of racists."

I knew they were not racists, but I challenged them. "You said it's your school, and I believe you. So, if you want what is written on the wall to represent you, then leave it there. In fact, if that is who we are now, let's take it out of the bathroom and put it all over the school like I put it up on this smartboard. We could even come up with more offensive ideas than that. If it's not who we

are, then one of you leaders better get your butt off that chair and get it off your bathroom wall.” Five guys got up and took care of it right away. It was a great leadership lesson.

Ownership. I think we have lost what that means. We want you to own the football field, own a subject matter, or own the school play. There is nothing wrong with that, but I think we can and should ask you to own the values that greatly affect the social climate of your school as well. Not to be overly dramatic, but for some students, a negative school culture is very overwhelming to them emotionally.

I knew most, if not all, of those students in that room did not like what was written in the bathroom, but the reason they didn’t do anything about it themselves was that they were waiting for an adult to do something about it. We have trained you to do that. It is the traditional outside-in approach that most schools adhere to. They bring punitive measures to a situation like that, thinking that the adult world will deliver the message to the culture that that behavior is unacceptable. WRONG! It must be the students stepping up and owning those situations. At our next assembly, I made sure the entire school knew it was the students that took the slur down, not the staff; I had a couple of the leaders, guys and girls, get up and talk about why that slur in the bathroom bothered them personally.

That is how the adult government and the social government can work together to create a positive social culture. That opportunity was created by me, the adult, but the students took the initiative to take the slur down and then publicly stood up and let the school know that it wasn’t cool to write things like that. I’m not saying that we didn’t do some punitive things as well, but the student body responded more when the students stood up and sent that message.

Let me explain this further. Even the best administrators and

teachers will never be able to change the social culture of your school, because they don't live in that culture. They exist in it, but there is a big difference between living in it and existing in it — just like you exist in their world, but you don't live in it. Remember how I talked about the two governments in your school? Basically, it's the adult government and the student government existing in the same building. The social culture of a school is what is being said, student-to-student, when the teachers are not listening. A positive social culture is not created by adults talking to kids; it is kids talking to kids.

Behavior that is accepted by students in a school will eventually become the culture of that school.

Let's say there are a lot of kids being mean to each other in your school, the only way that changes, is if the students decide they don't want that to be part of the culture anymore. Adults can have rules all day long that say you must treat each other with respect and not be mean, but their rules will not be part of the culture until it becomes the student's idea. School rules will just keep it from being in everyone's face, and that culture of meanness will happen where adults can't control it, like the hallways, locker rooms, and social media. The rules will just make it seem like there is a good culture, but in reality, it won't be.

When I joined the staff at that school in Illinois, there was a very negative culture there, the inmates were running the prison, the students were very disrespectful to the teachers and a lot of the teachers were burnt out and as a result, were heavy-handed with the students. Assemblies were horrible, partly because they consisted of mostly rants from adults trying to enforce good behavior on the students and they responded by completely blowing the adults off. I worked hard to build

relationships with key students to empower them to lead and it began to influence the atmosphere. After a couple years, we got to the point where the students were very respectful when anyone was speaking at our assemblies, even if it was boring. (It was never boring when I spoke.)

Two years after the bathroom incident, we started a new school year and had our first assembly of the year. For the first 15 minutes, we had to have a fundraising guy come and talk to the students about a magazine drive. It's incredibly boring, but it's just one of those things we must do in a private school. The freshman boys were all sitting together, and they had not been part of our culture yet. They were in middle school the year before, so they didn't know the social rules that were in place when we had assemblies. Those boys were a little disruptive and disrespectful to the speaker, and he was noticing. I was watching, and decided to address it later because I didn't think it was that bad.

The presenter didn't see it that way, and he went off on those freshman boys. It was a bit awkward because he was yelling at them and making a huge scene. I was in the back of the room wondering what I should do when he stopped himself and apologized, saying, "I'm really sorry, I'm overreacting because last week I found out that my daughter has cancer, and I'm not doing that well." He put his head down and began to get emotional. There was dead silence in the room. I was about to go up and deal with all of this when suddenly Derek Stevens, one of our student leaders, got up and stood next to the guy. Then another student got up, and then another; soon, about 20 students stood next to him to show support. He ended up getting even more emotional.

It was a very powerful assembly, and the students started a fundraiser later that year for his daughter and stayed in touch

with him and his family. On the way out the door after the assembly, a teacher who liked being heavy-handed with the students took me aside and said, “You need to punish those freshman boys. What they did to that man was wrong.” I just looked at her and said, “No, that would undermine what happened naturally today. I guarantee those boys will never do that again because Derek is the point guard for the basketball team, and those ninth-grade boys worship him. He walked right by them to clean up their mess and didn’t even look at them. Nothing needs to be said; the positive culture did the work for us today.”

That’s what makes a healthy culture. You want the students themselves to set the behavioral tenor of the school. A positive social culture naturally polices the behavior of the student body.

This chapter is about how your influence can make a difference in the social climate of a school, but before we do that, I want to show you why a negative culture can be so dangerous to a school community. A negative social climate is not just dangerous because of potential school violence.

A negative social culture is dangerous because it kills ideas and creativity, which stops people from growing.

You can’t be yourself and grow when you feel the pressure to make sure everyone approves of you. The kid I talked about in chapter 5 who felt he had to hide his grades from his peers, got ripped off because instead of celebrating with his friends and finding synergy with other students who were achieving academically, he had to shut all that down and stifle his creativity just so he wouldn’t be rejected by his social world. When you don’t feel safe socially, you tend to lock up on the inside and do just enough to get you through. When you feel

socially safe, it takes away fear and awakens the part of you that wants to create and grow as a person.

If most of the students in your school have a low self-worth, then you will have a negative culture, because when kids don't value themselves, they don't value others. I speak in schools all over the country, and as soon as I get to a school, I can tell if the school's overall Value Climate is high or low. If it is high, then there is less drama, and it is a more positive environment. If it is low, you can feel the tension in the air. It's not a safe place socially, and everyone kind of shuts down and is apathetic toward achievement.

I know when you take an honest look at the social climate of your school, you can get a little overwhelmed. You may be asking yourself, what can I do? It seems like a daunting task to try to make a difference in your social government. Don't underestimate the power of one person to change things, though. You could start a ripple effect of change just by taking your own value and the value of others seriously.

WHAT DO WE DO?

Psychologists say that the most introverted, shy person on the planet will influence over 10,000 people in their lifetime because people tend to catch more from our actions than our words. When you make one right choice it can have a ripple effect that impacts people, and you won't even know you're doing that. I want to give you four practical things that I know will make a difference in your school if you get into the habit of doing them.

1. Value Up by knowing your true value and walking in it.

I know I keep stressing to you over and over that you must grasp your true value. I have pointed out to you how positive that revelation can be for your life personally. What I want to focus on here is that not only will it affect you when you know your true value, but the world you live in changes as well. When your perceived value goes up in your own eyes, the water level of value goes up in the world around you. Your classmates, friends, and family will all notice a difference in you, and it will affect them in a positive way.

When several students individually start to understand how valuable they are, everyone in that culture gets a greater sense of their own value, which will create a more positive environment all around.

You may not be able to change how someone feels about himself or herself, but you can change you, and I guarantee that will positively impact them.

When I was in high school, I had an epiphany about myself. It's kind of a long story, so I won't get into how all this came about, but suffice it to say, I started to see my value and began to invest in my life and future. I worked out, I did my homework every night, I stopped abusing my body with substances, and my world around me completely changed. What surprised me more than anything else is how people around me reacted to my newfound perceived value. Some of my more negative friends didn't want to hang out with me as much. We didn't have a lot in common anymore. I began to attract friends that had more of a positive view of themselves. In the last chapter of this book, I give you a list of things that you can do to help you see your true value. Do something on that list every day, and I guarantee you

not only will you feel better about yourself, but you will see a change in your immediate circle of influence.

2. Value Up by seeing that everyone you encounter is valuable.

I didn't say you should just treat people like they have value, I said you must see people like they have value as well. There is a big difference. Treating people with respect but not really seeing their true intrinsic value is just behavior modification, and that doesn't change anything in the long run. It is entirely possible to be nice to someone's face but not really see him or her as valuable. (That's called being fake.) I don't want you just to change your behavior towards someone; I want you to change your heart toward them. Then, your behavior will be more genuine. It is the difference between acceptance and tolerance.

Tolerance says, "I don't think you are valuable, but in order to be politically correct, I will tolerate you in my world anyway."

Acceptance says, "I may not have a clear view of your value right now, but I accept that you are just as valuable as I am, no matter what your social status is or what your life circumstances are."

I made up my mind a long time ago that I am going to try to see people the way their source sees them. I am going to see everyone like they have value. You can't add or subtract value to anyone. No one has that kind of power. We have talked about this. Everyone's value is set. It is intrinsic.

Your interaction with others does one of two things: it either reveals their true value or covers it up.

Be the kind of person who is in the habit of noticing the value of others. People sometimes annoy me with certain behavior or an attitude, but what I have come to realize is, everyone has a story and a lot of times what you see from someone on the outside is not the real them. They are being defensive or mean because they don't trust people. Maybe they don't really like themselves because of all the **Value Messages** they have received in life. Dig a little deeper, you may find out that they have a lot to offer you.

3. Value Up by owning your culture to affect change.

Why didn't terrorism die when the United States military killed Osama Bin Laden? Because terrorism isn't a person, it is an idea that is, unfortunately, still accepted in certain parts of the world.

The only way to kill a bad idea is to introduce a better idea.

Most young people know that bullying is a bad idea, but it lives in most schools because the people who have the most influence in that culture still think it is a good idea or at least tolerable. The ones that don't think it is a good idea will not step up to the plate and own the culture. They quietly sit back in discontent while people with lesser values rule the hallways of their school. In most schools, most students are positive and want to treat people with respect. Negativity is the minority, but it becomes a huge part of the culture for one reason:

The students with a more positive outlook are afraid to own their culture and push back on the negativity with better ideas.

You must understand that you are contributing to a negative culture if you don't own it. You can't just sit back and wait for it to change. An outside-in philosophy (adults imposing more

rules) will not change culture. Like I said before, adults can't do that. They can manage behavior, but that isn't the same thing as changing culture. An inside-out approach (students talking to students) is the only thing that will change it.

There are students walking through your school today who are greatly impacted by a negative culture. I know some of you see how your culture affects other kids negatively, and it bothers you a lot. Are you waiting for an adult to make it better? It's not going to happen like that. Even though I was a strong leader to the kids in that school in Illinois, I knew I alone couldn't change what was happening in the hallways. That's why I took the approach that I did. I think some of the kids in my school wanted me to do something about that racial slur that was on the wall that day. They wanted me to have it removed, go find out who did it, and make an example out of those kids because that would make them feel better. The incident would have been resolved, but they wouldn't have had to get involved. That is the traditional outside-in approach that I'm talking about.

Me, the adult, doing something punitive about the racial slur would have taken care of the incident, but it wouldn't have affected the culture.

I was challenging them not to take the easy route and just let an adult own it. They needed to own it as well. I guarantee that those kids who were in my leadership class that day knew who wrote the racial slur. I knew who it was five minutes after I read it. They wanted me to do something so they wouldn't have to stand up to those guys, because some of them had social power. Up until that point, racism wasn't a good idea in our school, but these particular students who put that on the wall had the social power to change that part of our culture. Me imposing discipline wasn't going to stop that from happening. I'm not saying some discipline wasn't appropriate, but I knew that keeping racism

from becoming a good idea in our school depended on one of them standing up to those individuals. The leaders had to own the better idea. It's never easy to do that, but when you own something, you must be willing to fight for it.

Passive value messages and direct value messages

4. Value Up by Teaming up with teachers in your school who want to see a culture change as well.

Adults are not completely powerless in changing culture. Smart adults realize they can't change culture, but they can provide experiences for students to help them change it. They must provide opportunities and support for you to have the platform to bring about real change. Find them and together, come up with a plan that empowers you and some of your friends to make a difference.

There is an awesome school in East Jordan, Michigan. One of the teachers in the school, Matt Hamilton, decided to start a "Shoe Club" after I did my presentation there to help the students focus on going for their dream (valuing themselves) and walking in others' shoes (valuing others). The school is not perfect, but they have changed the culture to make it so that everyone feels valued. Matt Hamilton and the students at East Jordan High School and Middle School have contributed to this book in a huge way. I'm proud to call those guys my friends.

When I first spoke there years ago, there was a very negative social climate in that school. Kids were mean to each other, there was a lot of disrespect with the staff, and there was very little motivation for learning. There needed to be a culture change. When I completed my presentation, Matt was flooded with students who wanted to see change in their own lives and the lives of their friends. There were a lot of bad ideas that were just

accepted as the norm in that school, and those kids wanted it to be different. What Matt did so brilliantly was to introduce better ideas to key kids. Instead of going negative and policing all the bad ideas, he focused on the positive and provided platforms for kids to make a difference in their lives and the lives of others.

The Shoe Club is one of the most amazing things I have ever seen in a school. They have had numerous news articles written about them, and the whole town knows who they are. In 2024 Matt was chosen as Teacher of the Year for the state of Michigan and is one of the top five Teachers of the Year nationally, the winner will be announced in 2025, so he may end up being the national teacher of the year. He certainly gets my vote. I just spoke there again recently, and that culture is completely different. Bad ideas still exist in that school like they do in all schools, but better ideas are getting more attention, which is making it harder for negativity to win. The students are taking ownership, and it's making a huge difference.

When it comes to the social culture of your school, or even your world in general, if you don't like the way something is, change it. Stop waiting for someone else to do it. You have the power to make changes. You have it in you. I want to be one of those adults in your life that will provide platforms for you to do this. I want to be a support to you as well. On our website, we will be continuing to provide practical ways for you to make a difference in your school: www.value-up.org/student

Answer these questions:

1. What is the social culture of your school like? Would you say that it is positive or negative? Explain.
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being strong, how emotionally safe do you think the students in your school feel?

3. Earlier I said, “behavior that is accepted by students in a school will eventually become the culture of that school.” What are some of the negative behaviors that are accepted by the students in your school?
4. As you were reading about taking “ownership” of the culture of your school, did you think of some ways that you could do that? If so, write them down.
5. Name a few teachers or administrators in your school that you feel could help you make some changes. Make it a point this week to talk with them. Let them read this chapter and maybe some ideas will come to mind.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter9>

Notes

Chapter Ten:

Let's Talk TikTok

"Social media is incredible; it creates a community that I'm really glad to be a part of, but it also creates illusions and a false reality, and it's difficult to grow up with that."

Ella Woodward, famous food blogger

I asked my son once to help me with a social media app on my phone, and he just looked at me and said, "Dad, I feel like technology is wasted on you." Apparently, the task I needed help with was so elementary to him that it insulted his technological intelligence – if that is such a thing. In a conversation with one of my daughters' friends, I told her that the internet had taken away the need to find things in the Yellow Pages, and she honestly asked me, "Why were the pages yellow back then? Did dogs urinate on them?" (Yellow pages in the phone book were where you could look up businesses that you may need, like the local plumber.) She was really asking. The point is, we live in two very different worlds when it comes to technology; you guys know so much more than most of us adults do, especially when it comes to social media platforms.

I want to have a conversation with you about social media, but I want to say from the top that I'm not a hater and I'm not going to rant on about why you shouldn't spend so much time on it, etc. I think by now you probably know how powerful social media is in your life. It has the ability to drastically alter your emotional focus in a matter of seconds. Something that powerful should be discussed so you can learn to manage it.

I wouldn't just hand you the keys to a high-performance car without some type of driver's training, nor would I throw a child into the deep end of a pool without swimming lessons. The internet is too dangerous to just let you jump in without any instruction. Most parents are allowing their child to have at least some access to social media platforms while their social world is taking on a whole new focus. It just makes sense to have a conversation about the pitfalls that could come your way so you will be prepared mentally for the mass amount of information and influence you will be exposed to.

You probably learned this in biology, but I'm sure you have heard that the teenage brain is not yet fully developed in the prefrontal cortex where decision-making occurs; you are still forming the ability to plan and think about consequences, solve problems, and control impulses. This part of the brain fully develops around the mid-twenties for most people. Technology has given you access to large quantities of content at such a high speed that sometimes our brains cannot possibly keep up with the ever-changing digital landscape.

Just to give you a little context on how fast technology is changing, my 29-year-old son said to me, when we were discussing this, "Dad, there is a definite technology gap between you and me, but the technology gap between me and a high schooler right now is ten times bigger." That blew me away. What he is saying is that you are a lot more sophisticated and understand the nuances of social media platforms so much better than even someone that is only 11 years older than you because your whole world revolves around it.

According to psychologytoday.com, excessive social media and device usage are linked to increased depression, anxiety, lack of concentration, and other mental or physical issues. This is obviously concerning, so we must try to figure out why this is

happening and what we can do to help you navigate this powerful tool that you now have access to.

While this is very concerning, I don't want to just be another social media basher, sounding the alarm about how social media is ruining our kids' lives. There are a lot of benefits of social media for marketing, networking, and interacting with an ever-changing world. It has the ability to rapidly put very useful information right at our fingertips that can be very helpful in our lives. What used to take hours of research now takes minutes. Social media can have a myriad of benefits, and it is not going away.

It has also caused a huge shift in how we interact with one another, and those of us (old people) who have mastered the old way might be resistant to this powerful and sometimes addictive way to connect with the world around us.

A lot of adults do not totally understand social media, so out of fear, they tend to criticize what they don't understand.

Along with trying to educate you on how to manage this amazing tool for connection, I want to encourage you to posture yourself to be a key influencer in helping your parents understand it better. They need to see where this can be a benefit to you rather than attacking you for participating on social media platforms.

First, we need to understand how digital platforms are designed to interact with us. Remember, nothing in life is free, and most of these platforms are multi-billion-dollar companies that use advertising to generate income. TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, Facebook, and the platforms in the future all want our attention on their sites because the longer we are on them, the more advertising we will be exposed to. More time on their platform translates to more dollars for them. Our clicks or 'likes' and 'dislikes' provide the companies with data points

each time we interact with the site. The data is then plugged into an algorithm that determines which advertisements a person might like the most, and this “targeted advertising” is how social media companies make their money.

So how do they keep us on their platforms when there are so many for us to choose from? Christine M. Stabler, MD, MBA, said, “Social media apps and websites have the same kind of effect on the brain as playing a slot machine. Since you don’t know the content you will see until you open the app, the spontaneous results cause a feeling of ‘reward’ by releasing dopamine—the same chemical linked to other pleasurable activities such as sex and eating food.”

Big Tech companies have hired behavioral scientists to master the process responsible for the digital addiction they need to keep us on their platforms. These scientists are using psychological tactics to activate our dopamine levels to the same levels as if we were using an illicit drug. Advertisers have been doing this for years, but given the addictive nature of the internet and the lack of brain development in adolescents, this could be more of an issue for you than you may think.

For example, TikTok’s China-based parent company ByteDance uses a highly secretive algorithm to get to know TikTok users. In 2021, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) conducted an experiment to try to discover how TikTok gets to know and keep its users. WSJ created over one hundred automated accounts (or “bots”) on TikTok’s platform. One bot named Kentucky 96 gave no personal information at all but was programmed to watch ‘sad’ or ‘depressing’ videos. After only 36 minutes, TikTok figured out this user because it lingered or rewatched videos that were sad or depressing. 93% of the videos sent by TikTok after the algorithm detected this brief pattern had depressive content.

TikTok's algorithm determined that the depressive content was useful to create engagement for this user on their site, so the algorithm pushed more extreme depressive content to Kentucky 96 to get them to watch more and more. As you interact with this algorithm, it is being trained to push content to you, sending you deeper into a certain emotional direction. So, you must ask yourself the question, are we training TikTok, or are they training us?

In the case of Kentucky 96, TikTok's algorithm was pushing someone down a more concerning path of mental illness and/or suicidal ideation because that is what it "thought" the user wanted. Remember, no other personal information was utilized by TikTok's algorithm in this experiment; just the mere lingering over a video or revisiting the video changed what the end user ended up being fed on their screen. As Ph.D. data scientist Cathy O'Neil (from the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*) stated about algorithms, "They don't predict the future. They cause the future."

Secondly, we need to be aware of our biases and how they play into what we see online. Confirmation bias is another way Big Tech pushes content to us.

Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms or supports one's prior beliefs or values.

When we click on certain things that interest us, we are typically reconfirming what we already believe to be true. It is called *myside biases*. These platforms will continue to feed us content that keeps us in that same train of thought because they have determined that it is what will keep you on their site. When we do that, we will only get one side of the story or information we seek, which can put us in a kind of echo chamber in which we never see alternate viewpoints, opinions, or information.

Today, you don't need a degree in journalism to produce news on the internet, which means there is very little accountability when it comes to producing stories that are synthetic, fake, or deliberately misleading. People and organizations with an agenda will push things out that are incorrect or unreliable, often because they lack true authority to validate the information. Trolls or bots can drive a simple news story into millions of views, with hashtags and algorithms pushing the emotionally charged content across the internet in just seconds. Often, people read only the headline and fail to read the full story that would get them to question whether this information is true or not.

Stirring emotions is the key to getting people to react to the news, viral trends, or any content.

That can be dangerous because the loudest voices or most extreme voices will get the most online attention, but those voices may not provide the most factual information to us. According to the Harvard Business Journal, fake news travels farther, faster, and deeper than real news across social platforms. The issue is that we really do not know if what we are reading is true, or false, or somewhere in between.

There are ways to confuse algorithms to get a bigger variety of content viewing. Here are some examples:

1. Like everything: This confuses the algorithm about what you are interested in, giving you a bigger range of content.
2. Purposely seek opposing opinions: We need to teach ourselves not to be afraid of different points of view. Getting a full scope of opinions will help us to get a more authentic or true picture of what is going on.

3. View newsfeeds in the middle: Try to avoid news media biases. Find the news outlets that are more moderate. The big outlets like CNN, Fox News, and CNBC are primarily owned by large media companies with strong political biases.
4. Change feed settings to recent: This prevents the platforms from personalizing views.
5. Avoid posts of people who follow a few other users: These actors typically only want you to hear their agenda and opinions.

Another thing that we need to be aware of is “deepfakes.”

Deepfake: a video of a person in which their face or body has been digitally altered so that they appear to be someone else, typically used maliciously or to spread false information.

The issue with this kind of technological software is the inability to discern if it is the real person or not. The potential to cause harm is extremely concerning, so much so that Congress introduced the DEEP FAKES Accountability Act to combat the spread of disinformation in this forum. I was in a school last year where this became an issue because some boys altered a porn video and added a female students face on it to make it look like she was participating in the act of having sex. It humiliated this girl, and those boys were prosecuted for distributing child pornography because she was under 18 years old.

It is a sad reality in our society, but I must point out that in any place young people hang out online, there are also potential predators watching and hanging out as well. There has been an increase in internet deceptions (“catfishing”) where teens will think they are interacting with someone their age because they

were sent a picture, only to find out later that it was an adult with an agenda to blackmail or even lure this child into deviant behavior. I spoke at a school in Montana that had a recent suicide by the captain of the football team. What came out later was that he was being blackmailed by an adult who lured him into sending pics of himself thinking it was another young person, but it turned out to be a pedophile. The humiliation was too much for this guy, so he checked out. It is very important that you know who you are communicating with online.

Another addictive component of social media for us is FOMO—fear of missing out. TikTok challenges are very popular and are all the craze right now. Some challenges may be funny (like dance routines, photo manipulations, or other things that appear harmless) but can have disastrous consequences if you are not careful. Online challenges can put our competitive spirit to the test, and teenagers desperately don't want to be left out, so they constantly are trolling for the newest and latest challenges.

In an article from People Magazine on March 28, 2022, titled "Dangerous TikTok Challenges, When Risk Goes Viral," they shared three stories of challenges that put young people in danger. In one called the "Fire Challenge," an eleven-year-old boy burnt 35% of his body when he attempted to light rubbing alcohol on fire. A challenge called the "Blackout Challenge" ended a twelve-year-old boy's life when he attempted it. In the "Skull-Breaker Challenge," three kids standing side by side would all jump; however, the one in the middle was not let in on the challenge because they got their feet kicked out from underneath them by the peers on each side, causing them to fall flat on their backs. The young lady in this story ended up with a concussion and then returned to school with the idea of spreading positivity on social media. She created Teaching Kindness Matters and worked with TikTok to identify and remove dangerous challenges.

TikTok has figured out that these challenges are driving millions of subscribers to high levels of engagement, so they are constantly encouraging its users to come up with more enticing challenges that border on being dangerous and destructive. We need to be aware of this so we can navigate this better. Here are three things' you can do when faced with viral challenges:

- **Observe vs. participate:** We must know that every challenge will have consequences. The reason they want to participate is that it has impacted them emotionally. Is the challenge risky? Would it be more fun to observe rather than participate? Should it be reported because it is so dangerous?
- **Kindness over the controversy:** Debatable content may get more views, but at what risks? For teens, it is often tougher to be kind because you are growing up online where mean content brings popularity, views, follows, or likes; this may be difficult for you to overcome.
- **Influencer notice:** Again, realize that you are likely being manipulated by peers, online influencers, a troll, or a bot to entice you into the challenge.

Social media sites play a huge role in self-esteem issues as well. As we discussed in chapter four, when we become teenagers, our social world takes on a whole new focus so we can tend to place too much emphasis on the interactions we receive (or don't) on the content we share. For instance, if you post a picture hoping to receive likes or comments and don't get the feedback you desire, you could feel disappointed or invalidated, which may drive you to share more provocative or controversial content.

You may also experience disappointment when comparing your posts to those of your peers. There are online expectations through which the social government makes clear to you what is acceptable and what is not. There is pressure for you to constantly keep up with the ever-changing expectation that the online world is dictating to you because you know there is a social consequence coming your way if you don't keep up. All this can cause low self-esteem, distraction from other tasks, and even feelings of anxiety or depression.

Dr. Leonard Sax stated in his book, *Girls on the Edge*, “Girls especially feel like they are always performing for an audience, trying to become what we think the viewers want.” Constantly checking and scrolling social media sites can have a detrimental effect on schoolwork and study as well. The distraction can lead to procrastination, less retention of information, and higher levels of stress.

You may have started experiencing feelings of exclusion, loneliness, or anxiety when you see posts of others seemingly having more fun than you are.

One of the main themes of this book is to try to help you understand the difference between your intrinsic value and your social value. Social media has made that more difficult because of how strong and relentless the **Value Messages** are, but it is a battle that you will fight for a long time. Your online image is important but it's not the real you. Your true value is in the essence of who you are, not in the image you portray to the online world. Dove US has put together several video campaigns to point out to young people that their beauty is not skin deep but is innate and belongs to you alone, including “Toxic Influence: A Dove Film”² and “Reverse Selfie”³.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF3iRZtkyAQ>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2T-Rh838GA>

Here are six ways that technology dependence can affect you, adapted from an article on psychologytoday.com:

A. Undermines Self-awareness

More time on technology means less time with your own thoughts and feelings. As tech dependency increases, we can live in a state of self-alienation and estranged from our emotional selves, disabling self-awareness and self-reflection. Instead of thoughtful choices, we grow more reactive and less reflective.

B. Weakens Self-Regulation

Research has proven tech dependence increases impulsivity and lowers frustration tolerance. Without developing the ability to self-regulate, we can remain emotionally immature and mired in early childhood behaviors such as bullying, temper tantrums, and angry outbursts.

C. Diminishes Social Skills

Even when we play games online with others, such faceless relationships rarely lead to true friendships. In this way, tech dependence tends to breed isolation and reclusiveness. The more tech dominates, the less community develops. This leaves us with poor coping skills and limited tools for navigating relationships.

D. Undermines Empathy

When screen time replaces family or friend time, we move through the world in trance-like states, self-absorbed and detached from others. Unempathetic and unsympathetic, we lack attunement and rapport. The basic building blocks of healthy compassion remain underdeveloped. Screen time also lessens a person's abilities to use, understand, and manage their

emotions. Emotional intelligence or empathy improves with increases in face-to-face time.

E. Stunts Motivation

Motivation toward achieving personal goals in life, which requires drive, sustained attention, and high levels of frustration tolerance, declines rapidly. Like any addict, as we become more dependent, we start to neglect ourselves and our future. When tech-addicted people are suddenly forced to interact with the world, they quickly grow discontented and irritable because, unlike technology, we can't control the real world or the people in it. As a result, when we are faced with difficult life choices, tech-dependent people are likely to suffer symptoms of anxiety or depression.

F. Interrupts Sleep Patterns

Excessive technology use may change our sleep, eating, or exercise routines. Pediatricians across the medical spectrum all confirm that the number one thing for physical and mental health for teenagers is an adequate amount of sleep. You need sleep!!! Most experts say teenagers need between 10 and 12 hours of sleep a night. Lack of sleep due to being on devices all night has become a big issue.

The 2011 National Sleep Foundation's Sleep in America poll found that 90% of Americans report using an electronic device in their bedroom within an hour of trying to fall asleep. Unfortunately, screens on these devices can emit blue light that interferes with our natural sleep cycles. Decreasing exposure to light in the evening, blue light in particular, is an important way to help your body naturally prepare for sleep.

We get most of our exposure to blue light from the sun. Blue light stimulates parts of the brain that make us feel alert, elevating

our body temperature and heart rate. Blue light suppresses the body's release of melatonin, a hormone that makes us feel drowsy. While this may be helpful during the day, it becomes unhelpful at night when we're trying to sleep. Being exposed to blue light in the evening can trick our brain into thinking it's still daytime, disrupting circadian rhythms and leaving us feeling alert instead of tired. Chronic misalignment of circadian rhythms can also lead to many negative health impacts, including metabolic disorders and mental health conditions such as depression. Sleep deprivation mimics ADHD, so many children are being misdiagnosed due to their device habits interfering with their sleeping habits.

Try not to be reactive to the frustration you may feel right now after reading this and understanding that you might already be negatively affected by social media. I want to give you some strategies that could be helpful in reversing some of the effects that may have occurred and help you to bring a more balanced approach to your social media habits.

A. Identify when technology is causing emotional stress. Take periodical breaks from social media use—shut off notifications for a while. Make yourself disconnect from it an hour before you go to bed so you can get deeper sleep.

B. Identify how to be a good digital citizen: protecting your own and others' privacy, behaving in a civil rather than hostile way on platforms, and balancing in-person and online social interaction. Face-to-face time is the number one way to become more emotionally intelligent, able to read facial expressions, and understand nonverbal cues.

C. Watch out for cyberbullying, gossiping, and predators. Know who you are connecting with online. Allowing random people to view your stuff creates potential victims for predators. Predators are not always the creepy old guy living in a run-down

home at the end of the block. Fellow students can be predatory today as well, especially when it comes to sexting, sextortion, and human trafficking. Turn off geolocation services on phones, apps, and sites that reveal to predators your current location.

- Set privacy settings to the highest level on social networks to keep strangers out.
- Create unique passwords—use a common phrase with the first or last letters in the phrase as the password—letters in upper & lower case, numbers, and, if permitted, special characters.
- Block bad influencers: Block negative or inappropriate content or users.
- Report on the site: Find out how to report on websites, social media sites, and other search engines or platforms.

D. Prioritize a balanced social life. Try and have more quality, one-on-one social encounters with your friends than online interactions. Do physical activities with your friends rather than just communicating online. Take advantage of personal moments that could deepen your relationships with good friends.

Here is a great acronym to keep in mind while you are trying to manage your online presence. G.R.I.T.

G.R.I.T. is:

Guard our emotions against getting infected by digital influences.

Recognize the goal of the platform, media, or author behind the post.

Investigate for truth/lies or fact/fiction to limit disinformation and bias intrusions.

Think before participating on any platform. Be mindful before a comment, post, picture, or video is put out on the World Wide Web for everyone to see.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter10>

Notes

Chapter Eleven

Walk a Mile

"Just when you think that a person is just a backdrop for the rest of the universe, watch them and see that they laugh, they cry, they tell jokes.... they're friends waiting to be made."

Dr. Jeffery Borenstein



This is a picture of over 500 shoes that I have collected over the last ten years from teenagers across the country. It looks a little creepy if you don't know the reason I still have them all. A few years ago, I decided to take them out of the garage and put them all out on the driveway so I could take a picture of them and put it on Facebook. It was supposed to be a 20-minute project. Five hours later I was still out in my driveway looking at the shoes and taking pictures of some of the things that kids wrote on them. I decided to put a slideshow together that I show when I present the Value Up program in schools. They take up a lot of

space in my garage, but I won't get rid of them, because they represent so many people's stories. If you have heard me speak, then you know that those shoes mean the world to me. Everywhere I go, I bring a bag of shoes and the stories that go with them. I start my presentation off in a school by standing up, holding a shoe, and saying:

"Everyone in this room has a story, and your story matters."

I got the idea about twelve years ago when I was at a church thing, and a guy was talking about his personal hero who had passed away. He held up one of his shoes and talked about all the places that this guy had walked. He talked about the good times, the bad times, and all the lives that this man had impacted. I really liked how he pieced it all together with the guy's shoe. As I was listening to him, I thought about some of my heroes, the people who have made an impact on me. I certainly have a long list, but when I stop and really think about it, my hero is you.

Over the last thirty years or so, it has been my absolute honor to present young people with truth that has been life changing for some of them. I've been everywhere from Alaska to Florida. Over a million students have heard our message of hope. I have been called a hero many times by kids across the country in Facebook messages, personal emails, and some kids even wrote it on their shoe and then gave it to me. Here is the raw truth of it all, though. I'm not a hero because I present truth to young people. People become heroes when they take that truth and apply it to their lives.

You are reading a book right now to try to be a better person, and if you follow through with the things I'm advising you to do, it will take guts and personal courage.

That is heroic—not in a Hollywood kind of way, but in a real way.

The truth is that you have impacted my life in ways I would have never imagined. My life is so rich because of you. This chapter is not going to be about principles that can change your life. This chapter is about the people who have changed mine. Please indulge me while I tell you some shoe stories.

The first shoe I got was from a girl that toured with us speaking in various places. Her name was Mandy. When I first started speaking in schools, I had a team of college students with me who told their stories and performed skits during the assemblies. Mandy was part of that team. The students who traveled with us wanted to be there and actually paid tuition to be there. Mandy was different; her parents paid the tuition, but she didn't want to be there. She was very defensive, and we all knew there was a story there, but she was closed to all of us. All I knew about her when she came on our team was that her parents were wealthy, and she was a model student in high school. She was captain of the tennis team and received a scholarship to a D1 college, so she was a talented tennis player. When she got to college, she unraveled and started participating in very self-destructive behavior. She lost her scholarship and got kicked out of college. No one had any idea what happened to her. That's when I met her. She travelled with us for about three months before we saw any signs of her making any real progress for change. We just loved on her.

One day, it was finally the right time and the right place: Burger King in Wisconsin. I'm not kidding. We were coming back from a trip, and we stopped there to have lunch. She was sitting with the other kids, and I asked her to come sit with me at my booth. She came over with her food, and I asked her a question.

“Mandy, why did you walk away from your dream?”

“What?”

“This can’t be your dream. The guys you’re with are just using you. You know that, right?”

“Yes.”

“The things you’re doing can’t make you feel good about yourself. There’s no way this is your dream.”

She started to tear up. “It isn’t,” she said.

“Then why did you walk away?”

“Do you want the real answer, or do you want to hear what I tell everyone else?”

“What do you think?”

At that point, I went for a walk in her shoes, and to be honest with you, her story blew my mind. She said, “You are the first adult to ever hear this story. When I was eleven years old, my older brother brought his friends home. They were all about fourteen or fifteen. They had been over a ton of times, so I didn’t think anything of it. We were wrestling around like we always did, but my brother wasn’t in the room this time. For some reason, he left. Suddenly it got weird, and they did things to me.” She explained it further, but let me just tell you, she was raped.

I asked her why she didn’t tell her parents, and she said she didn’t want to get her brother in trouble. She said she didn’t know what to do. Of course she didn’t. Eleven-year-old girls are not supposed to know what to do in that situation because they

are not supposed to be in that situation. My youngest is twelve right now, and I don't even want to imagine what she would be thinking if something like that happened to her.

I asked, "What did you do?"

With tears rolling down her cheeks, she said, "I went down in my room and took the longest shower of my life. Then, I went around my room and collected all my Barbie dolls, stuffed animals, and all the things that represented that little girl and put it all in a box in my closet. That's where it is right now."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I grew up that day; that was the moment I lost my innocence. I became an adult that day."

That story will stay with me for the rest of my life. I will never forget her face and all the pain and fear that I saw as she told me the story. I don't think that was the only thing she packed up in that moment. She packed up trust, hope, and maybe even her dreams. Then, she did what a lot of people do: pretend. She put a big smile on her face and smiled her way through middle school, then high school. By the time she got to college, she was done pretending. The pain of that day came crashing into her reality.

I have Kylie's shoe. She told me about an incident that happened in her school. It seems that a bunch of girls in her class decided to go on this hate campaign because Kylie liked one of their former boyfriends. Kylie lost her mom to cancer about six months before this. The girls would follow her from class to class and say really mean things to her when there were no teachers around. Kylie stopped at her locker and one of the girls said, "Do you know what's awesome? Having a mom."

I have Jason's shoe. He is a sixth grader from New York who has cerebral palsy. He was crying after I spoke at his school. I went over and chatted with him, and he told me that every day the kids in his school call him cripple boy. They try to trip him when he is walking down the hall. One boy shoved him down one day and told him that girls would never like him, because he was a freak. Jason didn't ask to have cerebral palsy. With tears streaming down his face, his dad told me that night at our parent meeting that Jason is his hero because every morning it takes him half an hour to eat his breakfast because he doesn't have the same motor skills that other sixth graders have. It takes him that long because he has to lift the spoon over his mouth and dump it in like a dump truck. His dad said that Jason wouldn't let anyone feed him because he wants to be like all the other boys.

I have Anna's shoe from Kansas. I met her at her school because she wanted to talk with me after the program. She made a mistake with a senior boy. She liked this guy a lot and ended up dating him. He failed to tell her that he had an STD, and she got it. The kids in her school found out and harassed her in the hallways daily, to the point where she eventually had to leave the school because she was suicidal. In tears, she told me that she didn't even have sex with him; they were doing other stuff, and she got it. I asked her if the guy was cool with her, and she said that he was the one spreading the rumors around the school saying that she had it first and gave it to him. The other girls who were jealous of her just ran with it.

I have the shoe of Joe D. He is a teacher at a school in Connecticut who grabbed me on the way out of the gym and, with tears in his eyes, he said, "If I had heard this message when I was in high school, it would have saved me from so much personal pain. I let too many people label me and try to define who I am." He went on to say, "Don't stop telling people it is OK to be different."

I have Eric's shoe from Illinois. After I got this shoe, and this guy went back to class, I called my wife and said, "I'm pretty sure I just heard the worst story I ever heard." Eric waited until everyone was out of the auditorium before he would tell me what happened. He was a senior and a pretty tough-looking kid. He said he grew up in a pretty rough home. His dad and mom are both alcoholics. He said, "I want to tell you the worst day of my life. It was when I was in 6th grade, and my dad came home from work and asked me if I had remembered to feed my dog." Eric had forgotten that day, so he was going to go do it, when his dad grabbed him by the back of the neck and dragged him down to the garage with the little dog. He told me his dad said, "If you are not going to be responsible enough to own a dog, then you don't deserve to have one." And then his dad hooked up battery cables to the dog and killed him in front of Eric. He said the worst part of it was that his dog was his only real friend.

I have Jade's shoe from Pittsburgh. She came up to me after an assembly and was crying. She said all the kids in school are calling her a freak. She looked pretty trendy to me, so I was a little confused, so I said, "How come?" She said, "Because I stopped going to the cool kid parties." I said, "Why?" She said, "Because I know what happens to sophomore girls who go to parties with senior boys." Basically, Jade found a value that was important to her and tried to live it out in a world where the social government was not about to let her do that without a social price to pay. She was pretty heartbroken about this new label she got.

I have the shoe of Sophia from Montana who showed me her scarred arms, gave me a cloth with a razor blade in it, and asked if I would help her stop cutting herself. I told her that I wasn't a cutter, so I needed to ask her a question. I said, "I don't understand cutting, why does pain take away pain?" The best explanation I have ever received about cutting wasn't from

Google, a book, or a psychologist, it was from her when she said, "It's like taking emotional pain that I have no control over and turning it into physical pain that I can control." That made sense to me.

I have the shoe of a guy named Robert. He was in the last row of the auditorium waiting for me after an assembly. He had his wrestling shoes in his lap. The story he told me blew my mind. He was a three-time state champion wrestler for the state of Oregon. This was his senior year, and he was pretty sure he would get a fourth title. In the summer, he went over to one of his assistant coaches' houses to hang out and talk wrestling with a few other teammates when something crazy happened to him. This coach wasn't the head coach; he was just helping the team, and he wasn't much older than Robert. The coach put something in Robert's drink, and he passed out; that's when he molested Robert. The other guys that were there ended up walking in on it and got a picture on their phone of what was happening. They were concerned, so they told their parents. The parents took the picture to the police, and the guy got arrested. When it came out that this guy did this, other students came forward to report that he had done that to them as well. When the coach got out on bail, he killed himself. I met Robert a month after that had happened. He gave me his shoes and said, "I don't think I want to wrestle anymore."

I have my son Keegan's shoe. (It smells pretty bad.) I don't have his shoe because he is my son, but because of an incident that happened at his school that he had to deal with. We had just moved back from Illinois to Omaha, Nebraska, and my son was in seventh grade. He knew no one at this new school, but he had never had any problems making friends.

We weren't worried about him. He came home one day and was sitting at the kitchen table getting something to eat, and I

noticed he wasn't himself. He was quiet, and he looked depressed. I asked him if he was okay, and he mumbled that he was fine. I knew he wasn't, so I pulled up a chair and asked him again. He burst into tears and told me that a bunch of guys at his new school were calling him gay and spreading rumors about him.

My natural reaction was to get names and take care of it myself, but I knew that he wouldn't want me to do that. I asked him, "Why do you think they are calling you gay?" He said, and I'm not making this up, "Dad, in a way, it is your fault." That's really what he said. I said I didn't understand, and he said, "Do you remember when I was in fifth grade, and you told me not to laugh at dirty jokes?" What he was referring to was a conversation that I had with him, trying to give him a heads-up before he went to middle school. I told him that there were going to be dirty jokes about girls, and he had to remember that he has three sisters, a mom, and two grandmothers. If you laugh at those jokes, you are basically disrespecting the females that are in your life. I was trying to instill a value into my son.

What I didn't realize at the time was the social price he was going to pay if he really lived up to the value.

That's what happened. It was the first week in a new school. He was in the boys' locker room after gym class. Dirty jokes were being told, and he didn't laugh. The other kids noticed he wasn't laughing and decided that if he wasn't laughing, then he must be gay. They ran out of the locker room announcing to everyone in the hallway that the new kid is gay. It really hurt him socially in that school for about six months. He was trying to live out a value that I was teaching him at home, and he paid a huge price socially for that. Let me tell you what I told Keegan that day. I said, "First of all, let me tell you how proud I am of you for taking a hit like that today. Wow! You are my hero. I know it's tough to

stand up for what you believe, and I don't blame you if you feel tempted just to laugh at the jokes. Let me tell you what is going to happen as you get older. The fact that you didn't laugh at the jokes sent those guys a message that you have values.

"That isn't going to mean much to them right now, but I guarantee that as you get older, they will look at you differently. They will notice that you are a strong person, and you will gain influence in their lives. Think about it. The people that they are surrounded with are just like them. They are followers, just copies. Ultimately, we don't respect followers. We respect true leaders, and that is what you are, Keegan, because you were willing to pay a price for your personal values."

I recently spoke at one of the high schools that Keegan's middle school feeds into, and I talked about his story. I got this email not too long after that.

Dear Mr. Donahue,

You came and spoke at my school the other day. I realized who you were after you started talking, and I know your son. I am really sorry that I was trying so hard to fit in that I had to join in on picking on the "new kid." I'm just saying this to get it off my chest. It has really impacted me for the last several years.

Wow! "It has impacted me for the last several years." My son went to a different high school than this kid, but it still bothered him. I'm not sure if he was one of the boys in the locker room that day, but I would be willing to bet that the spectators who watched what happened and who probably joined in on the abuse secretly had more respect for Keegan than the kid who started the verbal assault to begin with.

I have Brittany's shoe from Vermont. She sent me an email that I want you to read.

Dear Mike,

You talked in my school today. I want to share my story with you because some of the things you said really related to me. It seems like everyone talks about courage in these huge dramatic ways, like in movies when someone stands up for what they believe in or accomplishes that impossible task despite some kind of crazy set back. Don't get me wrong, I'm a sucker for movies like that, but I'm always dissatisfied after I watch them. I wonder if I could be that courageous? Could I stand up in the face of some crazy tragedy? Then, I get knocked down to reality because that's not my world. I don't live a life where I'm going to be put in situations like that. I'm an average teenager from Vermont. I have a normal home. My parents love me. I have a brother and two sisters. We are all pretty good students. People wouldn't look at me and say that I need courage, but why do I like movies like that? Why do I always wish I were the person in the movies that conquered their fears? I think it's because deep down in my world that nobody knows about, I want that kind of courage. When you spoke at my school today, you said,

"For a teenager, walking into their school every day is like walking on to their own personal stage. You have to perform every single day. You can never screw up socially or you will feel pressure."

I don't think I listened to anything you had to say after that. All I could think about was my personal stage. If I don't put on a show for my friends and all the people in my school every day, I'm going to get a bunch of sh## for it. Wow! Later on when I was walking down the hall, I just kept staring at all the kids that I go to school with. Most of them I have known since kindergarten. How many of

these kids really dare to be themselves? How many of them are just following social scripts? What you said today was so true. I find myself sometimes saying all the right things to all the right people, not really knowing what I believe. It does take courage to stand up for who you are and what you truly believe in. Thanks for talking to us today. I hope they have you back. Brittany H.

I could go on and on because over the last thirty years I have heard and been a part of hundreds of stories that have greatly impacted my life. Some have ended tragically, and some of the stories have blown my mind on how strong and resilient young people really are. I don't know how long I can keep doing this. I live on airplanes and in hotel rooms. Traveling gets hard, and sometimes I get tempted to get a normal job where I'm working nine to five and staying home with my family. Maybe I will do that someday, but I already know what I'll miss. I'll miss the fifteen-year-old coming up to me and saying what I just said changed his life. I'm not a hero. Students are heroes to me because someone turned a light on, and they walked in the room. Who's the real hero, the one who turns the light on, or the one who has the guts to go into a room they have never been in before?

If I could pick my own superpower, I have no doubt what it would be. I would have the ability to take the shoes of these amazing people and put them on the feet of the people that find it easier to judge them rather than know them. My superpower would give me the ability to let them experience their worst day for thirty minutes. They wouldn't read a book about them or watch some video. They would BE them, and if they got to feel what they felt and experience what they experienced, there is no way they would be able to slap labels on those people.

I've been to award ceremonies at the end of the school year and watched young people receive trophies and prizes for things

they have accomplished and thought to myself, we need to give trophies for the right things. For the most part, the pain and struggle that most teenagers deal with have nothing to do with them. They are products of other people's dysfunction. What I have witnessed over the last thirty years is nothing short of amazing. I have so much respect for the resilience and integrity of the American teenager. If I was the one handing out our trophies, there would be some people that society has overlooked who would have some of the biggest trophies I could find.

I'm going to end this chapter by telling you one more shoe story. His name is Dave.

I grew up with him because he is my brother. Most of the time when we were growing up, we didn't get along. As I have described in the previous chapters, our family was broken and dysfunctional, so we were not loyal to each other. I never really walked in his shoes when we were young, because we were in competition for our mom's affection. I put him down every chance I got. I was athletic and into sports where he struggled with that, so I could be superior to him in that world. He is incredibly smart and witty, so he had some advantages there.

One day the lenses through which I saw him completely changed. It was my junior year, and I was on the bus going to school. He was three years younger than me, but he had already quit school. Our bus had stopped at a light, and Dave was walking up the street on Route 18, just south of Boston, where we lived. His hair was uncombed, he had ripped jeans, he had a raggedy old coat on, and his shoelaces were untied. Some kids in front of me started to talk about him. They were putting him down and laughing at him. I remember the knot I had in my stomach that morning watching my brother David struggle through his life. One of the kids on the bus said, "What a loser."

If you were just taking a snapshot of his life at that point, I guess those kids would be right. But I knew the real story. I lived there, and I knew his pain, because some of it was coming from me.

Those kids had no idea what he had been through. They just saw what they saw and made their judgment. I dedicated this book to him in part because I have watched him over the years take some ingredients that were not the best and turn them into an amazing life. He put himself through college and has done very well for himself. He has a great heart, and everyone who meets him is glad that they did. I love you, David, and I'm proud to call you, my brother!

My challenge for you is to pick out three people who get judged and labeled harshly in your school. I know you know who they are. We always know who they are. They are the ones that make an easy target. Maybe they get in trouble a lot. Maybe it's the new girl who's living with her grandmother because of family issues. Whoever it is, write their names in this book. You can give them another name if you are afraid they might see it. Write down the label they may have from other students. I want you to imagine what their life may be like. I don't want you to feel sorry for them, because, in a way, that is a form of judgment as well. Empathy is different. It's not pity; it's understanding. It is simply taking the time to understand that you can't just reduce someone down to a sentence. They have a story, and that story matters. If you really do this, I think it will change you more than you know. I know it changed me. Good luck.

Name

Label

Shoes/Story

Name

Label

Shoes/Story

Name

Label

Shoes/Story

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter11>

Notes

Chapter Twelve

The Value Up

Twenty-One-Day Challenge

*“Watch your thoughts; they become your words.
Watch your words; they become your actions.
Watch your actions; they become your habits.
Watch your habits; they become your character.
Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.”*

-Frank Outlaw

One of the biggest truths in life is that you can't add or subtract value to your life. You are already valuable because your value is intrinsic. If you have a negative view of yourself, it is a perception problem, not a value problem. As you go through your day, you are either revealing your true value with your actions and thoughts or you are covering your true value with your actions and thoughts.

It is the same thing with your relationships with others. You cannot add to or subtract from anyone's value. When you are interacting with others, you are either revealing their true value or covering it by the way you treat them. Like the quote above says, destinies start with thoughts, which eventually lead to actions. Psychologists say that it takes twenty-one consecutive, deliberate actions to form a habit. For the next 21 days, I am challenging you to do one thing a day that reveals your intrinsic value and one action a day that reveals someone else's value. That is the Value Up challenge.

I'm going to list several things that you can do for yourself and a separate list of things that you can do to help you to treat others with

respect. I want you to commit for the next twenty-one days to do at least one of the things on the list for you and one of the things on the list for others. I really believe you will begin to raise the perceived value of your life and the perceived value of others.

You don't have to follow everything on this list, and you can repeat these as many times as you need. As you are doing this, you will probably come up with your own things you can do as well. Write what you do down and write how you felt as you were doing them. The point is to take this time and challenge yourself to Value Up. Value yourself and value others.

Value Me List

1. Take yourself shopping and buy something you don't need but you just want. It can be something small or big, depending on your budget.
2. Clean your room or your car. You will be amazed how much you will feel better when things are uncluttered in your life.
3. Sleep in until noon on Saturday. Teenagers need lots of sleep.
4. Do all your homework this week. You will feel great about yourself when you accomplish this.
5. Practice your faith. Our organization doesn't endorse any one religion, but I personally am a Christian. I know when I press in a bit and get more involved than just sitting in pew, I feel better. My connection to God seems stronger.
6. Ask your best friend to tell you something positive they see about you. This may seem strange to ask them to do that, but you will be surprised what others see that your strengths are. You will be encouraged.

7. Do your nails if you are girl. Change your hairstyle.
8. Dress up one day for school. Not like a tux or a dress, but just up your wardrobe a bit and see how others treat you and how it makes you feel.
9. Read something that you don't have to read for school.
10. Work out. Some of you like working out, but some of you may not. Don't put a lot of pressure on yourself with this. Do a little something that will make your heart pump hard for thirty minutes. Working out is not about how you look; it's about how you feel.
11. Spend some time with your best friend. Don't talk about your girlfriend or boyfriend. Don't gossip. Try and do more listening than talking.
12. If you have a pet, go hang out with them for a while. It sounds weird, but animals can be therapeutic. I have a therapy turtle.
13. Write out your story. Don't just make it about the hurtful things. Include tragedies and triumphs. Include your dreams as well.
14. If you have nieces, nephews, or a little brother or sister, take some time to hang out with them. There is nothing like being with a child that puts things into perspective sometimes. Buy them ice cream; you will be their hero forever.
15. Write down how you want to be remembered by your classmates. What characteristics would you want your classmates to remember about you 10 years from now?
16. Set 10 life goals.

17. Make a Proud-of-Me list. On a piece of paper, list as many things that make you feel good about who you are and proud of yourself. Keep this list handy and refer back to it as often as you need to.
18. Make a Passion Plan. Pick one of your passions. Decide what you'd like to do with it someday. How will you go for it? What's a good first step to take?
19. Research a career that interests you. Write down the amount of education needed for that job. What is the starting salary? Would you have to move? What are the pros and cons of that career?
20. Write down a role model in your life. List the qualities that you respect in this person. Do you have similar qualities? What can you do to develop the same qualities?
21. Do something positive today that you have wanted to do, but never dared. Leave your comfort zone and go for it. Ask someone out on a date, join a club or a team, or raise your hand in class.

Value Others List

1. Sit by kids at lunch that you have never sat with. Talk with them and get to know them.
2. Say "Hi" to 7 kids that you never talk to this week. Look them in the eyes, and smile when you do.
3. Count how many negative comments you hear said to other students in one day. Each time you hear one, you have to say a positive comment to someone.

4. Compliment 3 kids that you rarely talk to. Try not to make simple surface compliments like “nice shoes,” or “I like your shirt.” Make deeper statements that they won’t forget, like, “I notice you always do your homework, and I am impressed with how hard you work.”
5. Complement each one of your teachers. You may not like all your teachers, but chances are, they do something that you like/appreciate. Find it and let them know. It will do wonders for your relationship.
6. Set 5 goals of how you can positively impact your school. What can you do to own the culture of your school?
7. Set 5 goals of what you want to accomplish before you graduate.
8. Do a random act of kindness for a fellow student that you are not good friends with. Whether it’s helping someone that you see struggling with schoolwork or taking care of someone’s lunch tray, go out of your way to do something for someone else.
9. Look around your community and find something you can do to make a difference, like cleaning up a park in your neighborhood, volunteering in a senior citizens’ center, or reading to someone who can’t.
10. Try to go the entire day saying only positive things about others.
11. Don’t talk so much today. Spend the day listening.
12. Do something nice for your parents this week for no reason. Ask your mom how her job is going or bring home a coffee for your dad.

13. Sit down and write a thank you note to a former teacher or coach that you had. Tell them how much their investment changed your life.
14. Sit down with an elderly person at a nursing home and ask them questions about life. Tell them you are doing a paper or something. You will be amazed at how much wisdom you can pick up from people that have lived life for a while.
15. See if you can spend some time with the special education students in your school. Most schools have it set up so you can volunteer during study hall or something like that. I actually did that in high school, and it changed my life.

I hope this book has been an encouragement to you. In the next few months, value-up.org/student will have more suggestions and encouragement for you to make a difference in your school.

Chapter Video

<https://value-up.org/valueup-chapter12>

