

Waking Up Again: Renewing Our Commitment to the Life We Say We Want

Living our values is not a one-time decision. It is a repeated awakening.

1. Why we fall asleep to our own values

Most people think behavior change fails because they lack willpower. The science is more forgiving and more practical. Habits form when behaviors are repeated in stable contexts until they become automatic; one widely cited habit-formation study found that a basic habit takes 20 days to initiate but automaticity took about 66 days on average, with wide variation depending on the person and behavior. The key point is that habits are not simply choices; they become cue-driven routines. That means bad habits often return not because we “don’t care,” but because the environment still cues the old pattern.

This helps explain values narcolepsy. We may value health, reflection, kindness, creativity, faith, or service, but if our daily cues reward scrolling, avoidance, resentment, overwork, isolation, or numbing, the nervous system follows the cue rather than the ideal. Values live in the frontal, reflective mind; habits live in the repeated pathways of daily life.

So the first scientific insight is this: **values need to be built into routines, not merely remembered as ideals.**

2. Values work best when they are chosen, not imposed

Self-Determination Theory is one of the most useful research frameworks here. It proposes that human beings are more likely to grow, persist, and flourish when three psychological needs are supported: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In plain language, we stay committed when the behavior feels personally meaningful, when we believe we can do it, and when we feel supported rather than alone.

This matters because many people try to renew their lives through shame: “I should be more disciplined,” “I should exercise more,” “I should write more,” “I should eat better,” “I should be kinder,” “I should stop wasting time.” But “should” often creates controlled motivation. It may work briefly, but it rarely sustains deep personal change.

A values-based renewal begins differently. It asks:

“What kind of person am I trying to become?”

“What matters enough that I want to organize my life around it?”

“What would make this practice feel like an expression of love, purpose, faith, service, or integrity rather than punishment?”

That reframing moves the commitment from pressure to ownership.

3. The ACT model: values are directions, not destinations

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, or ACT, is especially relevant. ACT focuses on psychological flexibility: the ability to stay present, make room for difficult thoughts and feelings, and still take action in the service of chosen values. The ACT model explicitly includes values and committed action as core processes.

This is important because values are not goals in the ordinary sense. A goal can be finished: walk 10,000 steps, call a friend, go to the gym, attend church, finish the project. A value cannot be finished. You never complete compassion, wisdom, health, courage, faith, learning, or love. You practice them.

That means falling asleep is not failure. It is part of the path. You wake up, reorient, and take the next values-consistent action.

A value is not a finish line. It is a compass. When we drift, we do not need to condemn ourselves; we need to look again at the compass.

4. Recommitment requires “if-then” plans

The research on implementation intentions is very practical. Implementation intentions are specific “if-then” plans that connect a situation with a behavior: “If it is 8:00 a.m., then I will write for 15 minutes,” or “If I feel the urge to scroll, then I will stand up, breathe, and drink water first.” They help translate intentions into action by making the response more automatic.

This is the difference between a vague intention and a livable practice.

Vague: “I want to be more centered.”

Actionable: “After I pour my morning coffee, I will sit for three minutes and ask: What matters most today?”

Vague: “I need to get back to my writing.”

Actionable: “After breakfast on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I will open the blog draft before checking email.”

Vague: “I want to live my values.”

Actionable: “When I feel reactive, I will pause and ask: What would love, courage, or wisdom do next?”

Values wake up when they have a time, place, cue, and next step.

5. Bad habits return when old cues remain

Relapse-prevention research, originally developed in addiction and health behavior change, offers a compassionate model for all forms of human backsliding. Relapse is not treated as a moral failure; it is understood as a predictable risk when people encounter high-risk situations, old cues, stress, fatigue, emotional triggers, or inadequate coping resources.

We can normalize the cycle without excusing it.

People do not usually fall back into bad habits randomly. They fall back when they are hungry, angry, lonely, tired, overwhelmed, ashamed, bored, isolated, or unstructured. They fall back when life changes and the old scaffolding disappears. They fall back when a goal was too rigid, too perfectionistic, or too disconnected from joy.

So instead of asking, “What is wrong with me?” the better question is:

“What cue, stressor, need, or unmet condition made the old habit attractive again?”

That question restores agency.

6. Identity matters: we live toward who we believe we are

There is also growing interest in the relationship between habit and identity. Research on habit and identity suggests that habits are connected to what people consider part of their “true self.” When a behavior becomes part of identity, it is easier to maintain because it no longer feels like an external task; it feels like self-expression.

We do not simply need to ask, “What habit do I want?” We need to ask, “Who am I becoming by practicing this?”

“I am trying to write more” is weaker than “I am a person who translates wisdom into usable form.”

“I need to take better care of myself” is weaker than “I am a steward of the life I have been given.”

“I should be kinder” is weaker than “I am someone who chooses dignity, even when I am disappointed.”

“I need to get back to my spiritual life” is weaker than “I am a person who listens for meaning before rushing into motion.”

Identity-based renewal is not pretending to be someone you are not. It is gathering evidence, one small act at a time, that you are becoming more fully yourself.

7. Self-compassion prevents the shame spiral

One of the biggest dangers after drifting from our values is the shame spiral. We notice we have fallen asleep, then we scold ourselves, then the scolding makes us feel worse, and then we numb or avoid again. That is how a lapse becomes a relapse.

Relapse-prevention approaches distinguish between a lapse and a full return to the old pattern. A lapse can become useful information if we respond with awareness and recommitment rather than shame.

This is also where spiritual traditions and psychology overlap beautifully. Repentance, confession, renewal, forgiveness, and return are all ancient ways of saying: wake up, tell the truth, receive mercy, and move forward.

Self-compassion is not lowering the standard. It is refusing to let shame become the reason we stop trying.

8. Renewal requires rhythm, not intensity

Many people try to renew their lives through a burst of intensity: a new planner, a dramatic declaration, a 30-day challenge, a spiritual retreat, a major reset. These can help, but science suggests that stable repetition in context is what turns a new practice into a habit.

So the better question is not “How inspired do I feel today?” but “What rhythm will keep me awake when inspiration fades?”

A renewal rhythm might include:

A morning question: “What value needs my attention today?”

A weekly review: “Where did I live from my center of values? Where did I drift?”

A monthly recommitment: “What practice is becoming stale? What needs adjusting?”

A seasonal retreat: “What is this season asking of me?”

A community check-in: “Who helps me remember who I am?”

This is where our homespun wisdom can be useful. Our ancestors built values into repeated rituals: Sabbath, grace before meals, seasonal festivals, family sayings, church bells, table conversations, Sunday dinners, quilting circles, harvest practices, mourning rituals, rites of passage and, yes, even formal

revivals in some communities of worship. These were not just customs. They were memory systems for the soul.

9. Sometimes recommitment means changing the goal

Another useful line of research focuses on goal adjustment. Studies on goal disengagement and reengagement show that well-being is protected when people can let go of unattainable goals and reengage with meaningful alternatives.

This matters because sometimes we think we have “fallen asleep” when actually the old form of the goal no longer fits the season of life. The value may remain, but the expression needs to change.

The value is creativity; the old goal was writing three journal entries a week. The new expression may be one thoughtful journal post per month.

The value is health; the old goal was intense exercise. The new expression may be walking, stretching, strength work, and sleep.

The value is service; the old goal was active leadership. The new expression may be mentoring, writing, teaching, or quiet generosity.

The value is spirituality; the old goal was formal practice. The new expression may be contemplative walking, prayer journaling, sacred reading, or service.

This prevents rigid self-judgment. Values endure; strategies evolve.

A science-based renewal framework: WAKE

To awake to your values and reconfirm your purpose you may consider a simple acronym: **WAKE**.

W — Witness the drift.

Notice where you are going through the motions without condemning yourself. Ask: “Where have I fallen asleep to my own life?”

A — Align with values.

Choose one value that matters now. Not ten. Just One. Ask: “What kind of person do I want to be in this season? Or even this day?”

K — Keep one small promise.

Create a tiny, repeatable, cue-based action. Ask: “What is the smallest visible act that proves this value still matters?”

E — Establish rhythm and support.

Build reminders, routines, and relationships that help you stay awake. Ask: “What structure will help me remember when I forget?”

That gives you a memorable bridge between self-help and science.

10. In Summary

Sometimes we do not abandon our values. We simply fall asleep to them.

We still believe in health, kindness, creativity, faith, service, courage, and growth. We still want a life of meaning. We still know, somewhere inside, what matters. But daily life has a way of making us drowsy.

We get busy. We get tired. We get distracted. We do the next urgent thing, then the next convenient thing, then the next familiar thing. Before long, we are not living against our values exactly. We are just not living from them.

So what exactly is values narcolepsy or spiritual narcolepsy? It is the ordinary human tendency to fall asleep in the very life we are trying to create.

The good news is that science offers a hopeful answer. We do not wake up by shaming ourselves. We wake up by remembering what matters, making one small promise, building cues and rhythms around that promise, and returning again when we drift.

The work of personal growth is not to stay perfectly awake forever. None of us does. The work is to notice sooner, return more gently, and build a life that helps us remember.

Values are not meant to live only in journals, mission statements, sermons, therapy notes, or inspirational quotes. They are meant to become visible in breakfast choices, calendar blocks, apologies, walks, prayers, phone calls, boundaries, generosity, and the small brave acts that say: "This is who I am becoming."

Spiritual wakefulness is not perfection. It is recommitment.

And we can begin again today.

Awakening from Values Narcolepsy - Practical Exercises

The Values Wake-Up Question

Each morning, ask: “What value do I want to embody today?”

Then choose one behavior that would make it visible.

The Drift Inventory

Complete these sentences:

“I say I value...”

“But lately I have been spending my time, attention, or energy on...”

“The cue that pulls me away is...”

“The need underneath the drift might be...”

“One kinder, wiser replacement is...”

The One-Minute Recommitment

Pause. Breathe. Say: “I am awake again.”

Then take one action under two minutes: open the document, drink water, step outside, send the kind text, close the browser, practice a brief meditation or say a prayer, clear the table, make the appointment.

The If-Then Plan

“If I notice myself drifting into _____, then I will _____.”

The Weekly Values Review

Ask:

Where did I live close to my values this week?

Where did I drift?

What helped me stay awake?

What is one small promise for next week?