



## How Expectations Can Lead to Disappointment *And what to do about it*

by Elizabeth J. Agnew

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Why do we have expectations? Wouldn't our lives be easier without them? We always get hurt because we expect something and it doesn't happen. What can we do about this?

All disappointment stems from reality not matching our expectations - it's that simple. The bus is late, your friend didn't call, your boss didn't like your work. The logical response would then be to quit having expectations, right? Then we could never be let down. Impossible. What is possible, though, is to realize that our feelings of disappointment come from our own expectations. This means that we have the power to protect against disappointment. I am not saying we should avoid disappointment by never setting high expectations. I am saying: disappointment stems from the fact that what actually happened wasn't what you thought would happen.

Expectations are necessary because they provide us with the ability to perform better in the future than we did in the past. Having expectations gives us resilience and a library of life experience to grow with – they are a by-product of learning. We use expectations as a tool in striving to be our best by setting our bar high enough to create challenge. Having expectations that are too stringent or out of alignment with reality, however, is like living in a straight-jacket or dooming yourself for perpetual disappointment. (This is true especially when you expect things from other people.) The goal is to keep them in check, use them for what they're worth, and don't let them bring you down.

You probably get it now, but might still be wondering: how do I steer around disappointment in the future? Here are three tips to get you on the right track.

1. **Don't expect specifics.** Or if you do, remember that the specifics may change. When you're planning that weekend away with your significant other and the week before you're imagining that he'll tell you how much he loves you as you're sitting on the white sandy beach with a wicker picnic basket filled with red wine and brie. Whoa! Back up – you don't even own a picnic basket! Even though having this picture in your head is fun, it probably isn't going to happen like that.

*Imagining* specifics will help you mentally prepare for something by making it feel more real, but *expecting* the specific details to play out will usually leave you hanging.

2. **Get your head right.** Ever wonder how on the normal days at work, you get a hard task thrown your way and you say "I'll wait until tomorrow to tackle that" because you couldn't even imagine doing it today? You need the time between now and then to "get your head right". Even though it's not a conscious process, by the next day you're more mentally prepared. Or remember when you were in college and there was that 16-hour day and you say: "Oh, I could never do that again, how did I even make it through!" My answer is: yeah you could, and you made it through because you had "your head right" at the time. You could do it again if you had to.

This is how we make what sounds like a bad day not so bad. In a sense, when we're mentally preparing, what we're really doing is lowering the bar. And when that tough day or tough moment finally comes, it's never as bad as we thought it would be because we've "reframed" the experience.

- 3. Don't attach to the outcome.** What this means is, stay involved in the process, but don't let the energy you're putting into the process be conditional on the outcome. When you do that, it's apparent and it ruins the process (therefore ruining the chance of getting the outcome you're attached to – how ironic). For example, say you're meeting a friend for dinner and you really want him to sign up for your volunteering project. If you view the dinner as a chance to convince him, and throughout the dinner you're fixated on getting him to say yes, you're attaching to the outcome. This motive will probably show through. What if you decided to enjoy the dinner whether he signs up or not, that those two hours were to be enjoyed with a good friend, regardless of any future projects? Chances are better that you would have a good time *and* he'd sign up.

This idea may sound like a paradox, but it's really not. You can expect something without being attached to whether or not it ends up happening. You may expect your friend to do well in an interview or an exam, but if you're attached to that outcome, you take on their challenge, which makes it harder for you to be a support structure (and when you probably already have enough stress of your own). Detachment is freeing, and it's what will alleviate you from disappointment. It's "getting your head right" for the fact that the outcome may not be as you expect it, *and that this is okay.*

Having high expectations will drive excellent results. Set high expectations for yourself, and lower the bar only when necessary as a survival instinct. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to get going with this concept.

- How can I modify my future expectations to prevent disappointment, without lowering the bar for myself? (hint: keep the bar high, just don't attach to the outcome)
- How do my expectations of others affect my close relationships? (hint: be careful when you expect things from others that they don't want or expect for themselves)
- How will I know when I have my expectations in check so that I'm free of disappointment in the outcome? (hint: you will feel more relaxed and free when you think about the event)

The best tip I can give you is simply to understand the connection between expectations and disappointment. That way, next time you're disappointed, you can remind yourself that you're only upset because reality didn't turn out as you thought it might. Then you can say "So what?" and get over it. Stay flexible, stay open.



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