

Preparation for Expectations

Expectations matter. They profoundly shape our lives. They impact how we perceive our world, how we interpret events, how we feel, and how we behave.

Our expectations arise in many ways. They may come from our personality, our family of origin, our experience, and our culture. They are the result of our own unique story.

Expectations can be high or low. High expectations are crucial for achievement and improvement. Interestingly, numerous studies indicate that the secret to happiness is low expectations. According to author and neuroscientist Robb Rutledge, “Happiness depends not on how well things are going, but whether things are going better or worse than expected.”

Expectations can be realistic—or not. We judge what is realistic based on past experiences and the information at hand. That does not necessarily guarantee, however, that our expectations are consistent with reality. In some instances, we persist in maintaining our expectations even after we have clear evidence that they are unfounded. And yet, Chris Berdik, the author of *Mind Over Mind*, suggests that our expectations “can, in some sense, bend reality.” What is expected shapes what happens. Consider the placebo effect. For example, it has been shown that highly trained weight lifters, when they believe they have taken a performance-enhancing drug, can set personal records. Brain scans have revealed that a critic’s review of a wine can influence our expectations about its quality by actually changing the activity in the brain’s reward centers. Any chance you’ll think twice the next time you buy a recommended bottle of wine?

Expectations can be spoken or unspoken. A clearly communicated expectation helps to ensure that everyone is on the same page. Problems arise, however, when expectations are left unspoken and people are held to them as if somehow they should know what was expected.

Often expectations are unrecognized. Phillip Moffitt, the founder of the Life Balance Institute and author of *Emotional Chaos to Clarity*, suggests that we suffer from the “tyranny of expectations.” Unbeknownst to us, “they plague our daily lives, leaving us irritable, disappointed, and disillusioned.”

Expectations can be met or unmet. Fascinating research is being done to characterize the link between dopamine and the brain’s reward circuitry in relation to expectation. Professor Wolfram Schultz at Cambridge University found that dopamine levels rise when expectations are met, especially unexpectedly, and fall steeply when they are not. Given this relationship, he suggests that consciously altering your expectations in order for them to be more consistently met should improve your well-being.

Clearly, understanding our expectations and where they come from can help us to deal with them in a healthy manner. Understanding our expectations enables us to make better choices in how we view and interact with our world.

Expectation is the root of all heartache. *Author Unknown*

Always hope but never expect. *Author Unknown*

Act without expectation. *Lao Tzu*

Trade your expectations for appreciation and your whole world changes in an instant.
Tony Robbins

When you stop expecting people to be perfect, you can like them for who they are.
Donald Miller

Nobody succeeds beyond his or her wildest expectations unless he or she begins with some wild expectations. *Ralph Charell*

I have no idea what's going to happen. And I love it. *Author Unknown*

Questions to Ponder

1. Consider a few expectations that are or have been important in your life. At the meeting, round 1 will ask you to share one of these expectations.
2. How have you, your family, friends, community, culture, society, etc. shaped these expectations? How have your expectations changed over time?
3. Do you find that you feel disappointed or angry, and you are not sure why? Conversely, are you generally happy and lighthearted? How might your expectations be contributing to these feelings?
4. What strategies do you use to manage your expectations, whether they have been met or are unfulfilled?
5. Think about a recent conflict that came from an unspoken expectation. What insight did you gain from this reflection?
6. On one end of the spectrum, we are taught to have high expectations. On the other end, we're encouraged to have none as a means of avoiding disappointment. Where do you find yourself on this continuum and why? What value might there be in shifting your position?