

Jacklyn Marcus, Ph.D  
2225 Broadway Suite B  
Santa Monica, CA 90404  
310-714-8809



## **Unrealistic and Unspoken Expectations Harm Relationships**

By Jacklyn Marcus, Ph,D Certified Life Skills Coach

We all create expectations for ourselves.

It is a basic human trait to project our desires and thoughts onto those we are closest to. We tend to expect significant people in our lives to behave in a manner envisioned in our mind. Expectations in relationships can be harmful when unspoken ideals are projected onto the other person. Unspoken assumptions and unrealistic expectations commonly sabotage relationships.

How many times have your feelings been hurt because you mistakenly assumed someone else knew what you thought or expected?

Do you ever become annoyed or angry with someone who acted differently than you expected?

Have you found yourself saying:  
“If you really loved me, you would...”  
“Why didn’t you...”  
“You should...”

It doesn’t matter what kind of relationship you are in. Each person’s expectations plays a large part in determining the health of the relationship. Perceptions of a relationship change when there is a contrast between the ideal and the real. The partnership strengthens when one begins to see the relationship for what it really is.

Having unrealistic or unfulfilled expectations is a sure way to ruin a relationship. When an individual has a strong desire that their partner meet their impossible expectations they become blinded to who their partner really is. Even if the partner tries to meet the expectations, it will never be exactly what their partner wants. This is because expectations in relationships are most often unattainable. We all have a preconceived notion of what we want in our ideal mate, and this is how expectations are conceived. When someone harbors unclear or unspoken expectations, then they are likely going to surface at some point.

“Happiness is living without expectations. “ Peter Cajander

## ***Types of Expectations on Relationships***

There are different types of relationships a person experiences in their life: parent/child, friendship, romantic, and business. Situations discussed in this chapter most directly involve persons in a romantic union, yet all these strategies apply to any type of relationship.

Different types of expectations can negatively affect our relationships. Expectations can be unrealistic, unclear, unfulfilled, unspoken, unexpressed, and misguided. These unrealistic expectations can come from:

- Our family values and traditions
- Past relationships
- Past experiences
- Expecting the other person to provide our personal happiness or fulfillment
- Projecting onto someone else how we want them to be.

Most importantly, problems in any relationship come from lack of communication and miscommunication.

## ***How Past Experiences Influence Our Expectations***

Our past experiences shape how we think, feel and act. It is through various influences in life that we form unclear and even unrealistic expectations. Key influences that shape our beliefs include: childhood upbringing, gender, age, cultural differences, traumatic events, and religious and political beliefs. Each person is a compilation and product of their past history. Along the way, we each learn by trial and error how to get our needs met and desires fulfilled.

The quality of interactions with significant others from birth onward have an effect on the way we view the world. Our childhood upbringing influences who we become and plays a role in the formation of personal expectations. We learn through experimentation. We learn whether we can trust ourselves and others. We learn to feel worthy and confident, or ashamed and guilty of who we are. This is imprinted at an early age and is unconsciously set into motion. These lessons form the core of our belief system. This is where misguided relationship expectations begin.

Each person brings into a relationship their own family values. While growing up, you internalize your own family's beliefs. When a person grows up in a family where their parents don't take the time or interest to listen to them, this can lead to the child growing up feeling no one cares what they think. The domino effect of this is that the individual does not verbalize what they need or feel, yet still feel disappointed when their partner does not automatically figure out how they are feeling. For example, if in your upbringing it was emphatic that you never bother your father or mother when they are busy, you learn to push your feelings down and keep them suppressed. As a consequence, entering a romantic relationship makes you feel unworthy of expressing your needs and feelings. Unfortunately, this can lead to resentment and anger because the other person does not automatically know how you are feeling and cannot possibly know how to help you.

Most of us are not aware of our unspoken rules and expectations, until the other person violates them. When our partner doesn't live up to our unrealistic expectations, we may

become frustrated, disappointed or angry. Often we don't even know why we are upset because we don't know what is wrong. It is helpful to reflect on 'the rules' of one's family so that misguided assumptions and expectations are brought out for examination. Some examples of family-oriented rules are:

- Big boys don't cry
- Girls always look pretty and presentable
- Wait until your father gets home (father is the disciplinarian)
- Don't speak unless you are spoken to.

## ***Ways Expectations Effect Relationships***

The most common cause of relationship conflict comes from unrealistic and unexpressed expectations. Misguided assumptions pose the biggest danger when each person in a relationship brings their own, and sometimes conflicting, expectations to the relationship.

As we project our viewpoint onto others, we are assuming that they think and feel in a similar way that we would in the same situation, and we expect them to behave accordingly. Unrealistic expectations occur when an individual projects onto their partner what they want or need. Your partner cannot read your mind. When someone close to us does something that seems in deep contrast with the standards we have associated with that person, we often feel hurt, betrayed, angry and /or confused.

Our disappointment gets expressed in the kinds of phrases we've heard or spoken:  
"You're the last person I ever expected to do that."

"You really let me down."

"This is not like you at all.'

We cleverly develop a tunnel vision where we only allow through information that supports the view we have of who we want that person to be. The truth is that people show us exactly who they are through their everyday behaviors. When we chose to break the illusion and replace assumptions with a truthful evaluation, freedom from expectation is carried with it. The opportunity to begin a more authentic and honest relationship is born.

Relationships end for a variety of reasons. The most common reason being that people enter relationships with certain expectations which, when unmet or unspoken, start and fuel the domino effect which may eventually leads to the end of the relationship.

How one perceives the state of a relationship is altered by various conditions such as age, past experience, and personal background. Differentiating between what is real and what is imagined in a relationship is tailored by these experiences in life. An example to illustrate this is how many young girls grow up envisioning 'happily ever after' with their 'knight in shining armor'. No one can live up to that fairy tale image. This unrealistic expectation quickly leads to relationship problems.

Both partners must be free to be themselves, to respectfully express their needs and feelings, and to know they are accepted for who they are.

It is important for both parties in a relationship to take responsibility to mutually express their wishes. The couple must learn how to meet each other's desires and needs,

which usually requires compromise on each side. However, individuals may choose to cooperate – or not. If not, the relationship is ultimately doomed. If the partners agree to compromise, the payoff builds cohesiveness and intimacy. This is the glue that holds the relationship together.

The decision to cooperate is a decision of trust. Trust requires regular communication and sincere engagement with your partner. Once trust is developed, an ease in expressing one's needs and desires to one another can occur. Distrust occurs when one person fails to listen, support, and give feedback. When expectations are not met, trust becomes fragile.

Before each partner can begin to have effective communication, boundaries need to be established. Failing to set boundaries is damaging to the relationship. Remember that there are two separate people in the relationship and it's necessary to assess what is bothering each of them on an ongoing basis. It's imperative that each person knows their limits and learns to discover, then change, their unrealistic responses. If a person senses an invasion of their boundary by their partner, this is the critical time to verbalize this to them.

When things happen in life, such as traumatic events, people need to learn to readjust and discover new ways to function as a couple. One event affects all other components of your life. Successful relationships adapt as changes occur throughout life. There's a rhythm in a relationship. When change occurs, the rhythm is disrupted and may even come to a halt. A crisis creates a test of the relationship. How each person in the relationship deals with the crisis determines if their bond will strengthen or collapse. The key is how they acclimate as a couple. Remember, there are two of you in this relationship. The couple must learn how to respond to each other, *not* react. An example that illustrates this situation would be the loss of a child. A possible dissolution of their union may happen if either person begins to resent or blame the other. One may be too emotional to function while the other may stop feeling any emotion at all. If the couple support each other and continue communicating, their bond can be strengthened.

“Peace begins when expectations end. “ Sri Chinmoy

## ***Resolving Relationship Conflict – Developing Realistic Expectations***

### **1. The first step.**

In order to begin the process of redefining and building a flourishing relationship, each person must:

- Recognize that there is a problem
- Be willing to invest their time and energy into the repair process
- Accept responsibility
- Must admit that each party's actions have consequences
- See the payoff as a worthwhile investment

### **2. Listen and be heard.**

We each bring our own perspective to any situation, colored by our past experiences and learned behavior. In order for the relationship to thrive, each person must learn to really listen - to really *hear* what your partner is saying. It is very easy to get

caught up in our own thoughts of what we are hearing, which may be quite different than what is really being said.

A great exercise to incorporate when there is a conflict or misunderstanding is to practice active listening. This requires you to stop the 'noise' in your head and focus on what your partner is saying. Each person should then reflect back on what they just heard the other person say. As an example, Jill and Joe are having a discussion. Jill says, "I feel you're being inconsiderate when you leave me standing in the market alone while you wander off." Joe answers back, "Oh, you're saying you don't want me to go to the market with you?" Jill responds, "Joe, please look at me and hear what I'm saying. I don't like it when you leave me alone when we're out together." Joe then says, "Oh, when we're out together you don't like it when I wander off." Jill responds, "Yes, that's it. It means a lot that you understand and heard me." Joe then reflects, "I will try hard to always stay with you when we are out. Will you remind me if I forget?"

It is very helpful to take a deep breath when you attempting this new approach of listening. This allows you to break the cycle of listening to your own thoughts and instead focus on what the other person is saying.

### 3. Self image and reflection.

Developing a healthier self-image improves and strengthens all relationships. If you are sabotaging relationships, you need to look within and identify what is provoking your misguided thoughts. Focus on the positive, and work toward improving the rest. Suggestions of avenues to explore in developing a healthier self-image are: open up to a trusted friend, look at websites on self care, consult a life coach, and/or talk to your minister. It is essential to acknowledge that we are all valuable and worthy of being loved. Accept and honor yourself as a unique individual. Taking care of yourself means that your feelings, thoughts, and needs are significant. When you find yourself focusing on the negative, stop and take a breath. Let that breath remind you that you are worthy. With each new inhalation, remind yourself you are taking a new step forward in life. You are restoring yourself.

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### 3. Boundaries.

Establishing boundaries is important for the individual, as well as for each person in a relationship. It is imperative that an individual is clear about defining what they are both comfortable *and* uncomfortable with. A boundary is your ability to take charge in all situations of what is acceptable to you. If you feel someone crosses your boundary then it is necessary to let that person know it is not ok or to walk away. Your boundary protects you. This means not allowing someone to attack you with action or words. Once you create your boundary, you will be able to stop any negative or disruptive actions or words from penetrating your boundary. It's like a gate - you control who you let in or who you leave out. This gate (your boundary) is the protection you set up for yourself.

When you enter a relationship each person keeps intact their own boundaries they bring into the partnership. Then together, they make a new relationship boundary, still retaining their own identity. This is an ongoing process where together you figure out what the relationship boundary will be for you as a couple. Both parties need to agree on rules that establish respect and safety. In a healthy relationship

both parties still retain their own separate identities, while also creating a new joint boundary as a couple. It is *not* merging your distinct boundaries into one. One example of a relationship boundary rule would be that it's not acceptable to yell when you are angry. Instead, in your relationship you establish when one of you is angry, you will say, "I am angry. We need to talk about this."

#### 4. Accentuate the positive - not the negative.

Couples that have a healthy relationship focus on each other's good qualities and on the positive, rather than drawing attention to their partner's negative traits. This reinforces the continuation of each partner concentrating on the positive aspects of the other person. As an example, Susie's husband Ted is always very helpful with their children, yet he leaves his dirty dishes piled in the sink. Susie chooses to focus on how helpful Ted is, so when Susie is washing his dirty dishes she thinks about how wonderful it is he's putting the children to bed.

No matter how much you may love someone, you will not love everything about that person. For a union to be continually successful, it is imperative that each person realistically recognize and then accept the other for who they truly are. This includes your partner's traits that may irritate, frustrate or anger you.

#### 5. Express your feelings and try to see your partner's viewpoint.

When one is upset or angry lucid communication becomes very difficult. When you are angry the first thing to go is communication. Blaming and criticizing can become an automatic response if you feel verbally threatened. This can spiral out of control where each person reacts by yelling at the other.

A way to change the communication is to share your feelings, instead of attacking your partner. By using "I" statements (such as "I feel...") it allows your partner to *hear* you without putting up a wall of defense. This way, your partner can assimilate what you've said and respond with their feelings, rather than attacking. This is a much more effective way to communicate than using "you" statements (such as "You always do...").

#### 6. Speak your mind as the emotion occurs.

By waiting until a later time to express the problem or issue, the emotion is taken out of context. The difficulty of waiting until later is that the other person is put on the defensive. It may be that your partner doesn't remember the event, and time has distanced the feelings that occurred from that prior incident. It may not always be possible to speak up when the feelings occur, but it is a goal for both parties to strive towards. A married couple, Sandra and Bill, will serve as an example. At the end of the day Sandra does the cooking and dishes while Bill reads the newspaper. Sandra fumes internally about Bill's lack of participation. In Sandra's family home her parents did most of the household chores together. Her expectation of married life was of a partnership where her husband would be cooking alongside her. At a family gathering, where others are pitching in, Bill is planted in front of the television oblivious to all the activity around him. Sandra blows up in front of everyone. Bill glares at her and leaves. They are both angry and blaming each other, without either of them knowing why. Their lack of communication is drifting them apart. A better scenario would be if *at the time* Sandra got upset that Bill was reading the paper while she was cooking, she said, "I'm beginning to become upset that every day you come home and relax and expect me to do all the work. I would enjoy getting to spend time together. How about if sometimes we make dinner together?"

Bill responded, “That never occurred to me since my mother did all the cooking while I was growing up. I would enjoy spending more time with you. How about if I help you cut the vegetables?” They need to learn to talk about their feelings and thoughts at the time, so they have a chance to correct the problem that is deteriorating their communication.

#### 7. Initiate the first move.

Decide what’s really important – to be right or to build a quality relationship. This is an essential place to pause and reassess that this is about you as a couple, *not* just you. This is not the time to gloat or point fingers. The goal is to strengthen your relationship. Nobody wants to initiate the first move, be it pride or stubbornness. That is why it is vital to take the first step. Making the first move shows your desire for a happier and more harmonious union. For example, while at dinner with friends Jim insults Carol, his wife. On the way home they are both silent. Carol is thinking, “When is he going to apologize to me? I wish he would stop saying such hurtful things.” At the same time Jim is thinking, “She seems angry. What did I do now?” Now they are both upset and starting to get angry. This would be the appropriate time for either of them to make the first move. Carol could say, “I felt hurt by what you said to our friends at dinner.” Jim could say, “You seem upset. Is something bothering you?” Either of these simple statements lets the other party know that you want to understand how the other person is feeling. It encourages their partner to also express themselves.

#### 8. Compromise is necessary for successful relationships.

One misunderstanding in an immature relationship is that a person feels they don’t need to compromise. Once you’re in a relationship it’s not just about you anymore. In truth it’s now about the two of you. In order to have a cohesive relationship you have to consider the other person, and their thoughts and feelings. This means verbally discussing the identified issue and then both making an agreed-upon compromise. You need to give at least as much as you want to receive. Change is inevitable if you want your bond to keep growing.

#### 9. Pause and reflect.

Unspoken or unrealistic expectations are harmful to any relationship and can lead to sabotaging the relationship. It is beneficial to pause and reflect for a moment when you are disappointed or frustrated. Ask yourself what you expected and evaluate what actually happened. Examining the difference between realization and expectation reveals the disparity in perception between the two of you. Addressing this discordance, which unconsciously affects your connection, helps in correcting future expectations. Pausing and reflecting allows you an opportunity to refocus on more reasonable expectations.

#### 10. Exercises and useful tools.

These exercises promote opportunities to discuss your expectations and the desires you have regarding your relationship. Following are exercises that help couples identify problems and ways to work toward positive alternatives:

- Developing a ‘code word’ is useful for the health of ongoing relationships. Slip up will happen. When either person makes a mistake, such as overreacting to the other, instituting the use of their code word will immediately alert both parties they need to stop and reassess. The code word needs to be decided together. A few examples of code words you could use are: ‘purple’, ‘circus’, ‘red light’, or any word or phrase that alerts

each of you in a non-threatening way. Another example is creating a body gesture, as making the letter “T” with your hands to indicate we need a time out.

- Questions to explore that specify each person’s needs:
  - a) List both similar and different values you bring into the relationship - family values and traditions, cultural background, past relationship problems, painful life experiences, political and religious views, and any triggers that set you off.
  - b) What hopes or expectations do you have of your mate? Finish the following sentence, “I expect my partner to...” This will help illuminate both realistic and unrealistic expectations. Once identified, it is much easier to address and resolve.
  - c) Finish this sentence, “I do not agree with your expectations because...”. Then discuss ways to reach a compromise.
  - d) Answer, then discuss: “How do you want your needs to be met?”
- Plan a daily time to check in with each other. This creates an opportunity for discussion of any unfinished business or any misunderstandings you need to clear up together. This daily conversation works to strengthen your bond. It is an excellent tool to work on building more effective communication. A good time to check in could be after dinner or before bedtime. This insures neither of you go to sleep angry or upset.

#### 11. Seek outside assistance.

Personal relationship life coaching provides individuals the tools and skills to become confident to proactively confront and resolve each situation as it occurs. Relationship life coaching offers tools to identify limiting beliefs that sabotage relationships. Life coaching helps individuals identify strengths and weaknesses and provides strategies for personal growth. It focuses on replacing negative beliefs with realistic ones, and addresses specific actions that reinforce positive interaction with your partner. Life coaches help clients tap into the power of their own resources. Each person already possesses the knowledge and resources within themselves. The relationship coach assists the client in bringing this out.

Continual communication is a process. It is ongoing. All these tools aid in strengthening and nourishing the relationship, and are best if addressed on a regular basis.

### ***Summation of Key Points on Expectations***

One thing that is predictable about a healthy relationship is that it is constantly evolving.

If you find yourself increasingly nagging, criticizing or withdrawing you need to shift gears. Take a moment to reflect on the consequences of your reactions. These reactions are counter-productive. Strive to communicate effectively and praise more often by using the techniques in the ‘Resolving Relationship Conflict - Developing Realistic Expectations’ section. Relationships are like exercise, you don’t get any lasting benefit without ongoing practice and commitment.

Take care of yourself. Look within yourself. Accept and honor yourself as an individual.

Lack of communication and miscommunication are the key factors in relationship problems. Keep the channels of communication open and be willing to adjust your thoughts and expectations.

Change is inevitable throughout life. Couples need to learn to adapt and discover new ways to function. The key is that the couple adapt together. Remember, there are two of you in this relationship.

Partners cannot read minds. Discuss innermost feelings. Be honest. Be clear about what you expect, otherwise you will both have difficulty working as a team. You need to share your viewpoints with each other.

Our expectations have little, or nothing, to do with the other person.

Having realistic expectations for others involves realizing that all of us are less than perfect. Instead of looking to others to meet our needs, we must take responsibility for our own life.

A fulfilling relationship requires developing realistic and agreed-upon expectations as a couple, where each partner is willing to give what they want to get. This takes maturity and courage. Accepting and tolerating your partner's needs and limitations requires the same.

When we demonstrate the insight and fortitude to embrace the truth, along with finally putting an end to the pain of constantly being disappointed by unrealistic and unspoken expectations of one another, our relationships have the opportunity to become rich in authenticity, trust, and deep emotional bonding.

Continual communication is a process. Focus on the positive, and work on improving the rest. All of the tools and strategies discussed in this chapter reinforce the goal of strengthening and nourishing the relationship. This process is most successful if addressed on an ongoing basis.

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