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Health

Life Lines

Improving your quality of life, one step at a time



Letting Go of Expectations

We all carry expectations whether they're about ourselves, others, and how life should unfold. Expectations are the ideas we form in our minds about what we think should happen. For example, expecting a friend to reply to a message right away or believing that we should always succeed without mistakes. These thoughts often guide our actions, shape our emotions, and affect how we interact with others.

The holiday season is often a time when expectations feel especially heavy. Whether it's hoping for perfect family moments, feeling pressure to meet social or financial demands, or reflecting on a year that didn't go as planned, many people find themselves caught between what they imagined and what actually unfolded. It's a time when we often expect too much of ourselves and others which can lead to stress, disappointment, or relationship strain.

In this article we'll examine how expectations can impact mental health, how expectations can be identified, and learn how to let go of expectations.

Realistic vs Unrealistic Expectations

Some expectations can be helpful. They motivate us to reach goals, set boundaries, or strive to be better. For instance, expecting respect in a relationship is healthy. But not all expectations are useful.

Sometimes, we expect too much from ourselves or others. When that happens, we can feel let down, angry, or frustrated.

Unrealistic expectations create a gap between what we imagine and what actually happens. When the two don't match, we often feel disappointed, even if things really aren't truly going badly. The problem isn't just what happened, but how much we expected things to go a certain way.

The Impact of Expectations on Mental Health

Expectations—especially when they're rigid or too high—can have a big impact on our mental well-being. Here's how they often show up:

Stress and pressure. When we expect ourselves to be perfect, we feel constantly tense. We push ourselves harder than necessary, and that stress builds up over time.

Anxiety and fear. If we expect certain outcomes, such as needing someone's approval or fearing failure, we can start to worry about all the ways things could go wrong.

Disappointment and frustration. When things don't go the way we hoped, it feels like something's broken. Even small setbacks can feel overwhelming if we expected everything to go smoothly.

Low self-esteem. If we don't meet our own expectations, we may feel like we're not good enough. We might blame ourselves, even when something was out of our control.

Strained relationships. When we expect too much from other people, whether it's attention, agreement, or emotional support we may end up disappointed or resentful. This can damage trust and communication.

Expectations can sneak into every area of life, including work, school, friendships, romantic relationships, parenting, and even how we think our lives should look by a certain age. The more we cling to them, the more we risk feeling like we're falling behind or missing out.

Identifying Personal Expectations

The first step to letting go is noticing what expectations you're holding: about yourself, other people, and life in general.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I believe I should be doing?
- What do I assume other people should do?
- Where did these expectations come from? Me? My family? Society?

It can help to write these thoughts down.

Look at each one and ask:

- Is this helping me grow?
- Is it realistic, or is it too much?
- Does this match my values, or am I just trying to please others?

Many of us hold onto silent "rules" we've never questioned. Some of the rules include needing to be strong all the time, getting everything right the first time, thinking that others can't make mistakes, or believing others should always agree with us. Recognizing these silent rules is key. Once you see them, you can decide if they're fair, or if they're holding you back.

The Power of Acceptance

Letting go of expectations doesn't mean giving up. It means learning to accept things as they are, instead of constantly fighting with reality. Acceptance is the ability to say, "This is what's happening right now," without immediately judging it as good or bad. It allows you to stop struggling with how things should be and start focusing on what you can do.

Acceptance is especially powerful when life takes unexpected turns, like when a job doesn't work out, someone hurts you, or your plans don't work out. Instead of getting stuck in frustration, you give yourself permission to feel, breathe, and respond with clarity. This shift opens the door to peace and calm.

Accepting people as they are, without trying to change or control them, also creates healthier relationships. It reduces resentment and helps you focus on your own choices instead of waiting for others to meet your expectations.

Strategies for Letting Go

Letting go is a process. Here are some strategies to help:

Practice Mindfulness. Mindfulness means paying attention to the present moment without judgment. When you catch yourself thinking, "They should have done this," or "I shouldn't have made this mistake," pause. Notice the thought, then gently bring your focus back to what's happening now. Mindfulness helps create space between you and your expectations so you're less likely to get caught up in them.

Challenge Your Thinking. This approach comes from cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). When you feel upset or frustrated, ask:

- What am I expecting right now?
- Is that expectation realistic or helpful?
- What's another way to see this?

By shifting your thinking, you loosen the grip of fixed expectations and allow more flexible, balanced thoughts to take their place.

Focus on Gratitude. Gratitude doesn't mean pretending everything is perfect. It means noticing what is going well, even when life doesn't meet your expectations. Gratitude helps shift your focus away from what's missing and toward what's present. Over time, it helps reduce feelings of frustration and increases satisfaction with life as it is.

Set Realistic, Flexible Goals. Instead of demanding perfection or exact outcomes, try setting goals that allow for change. For example, instead of saying, "I must be the best," or "I expect my son to do his best all the time," try, "I'll do my best and learn from the experience" or "My son will do his best and he is learning." Allow room for mistakes, setbacks, and change. Flexibility helps you adapt without giving up.

Respect Your Boundaries—and Others'. If people expect too much from you, it's okay to say no or ask for space. Setting boundaries protects your energy and helps you focus on what matters most. On the flip side, be aware of the pressure you may be placing on others. Accepting their limits builds mutual respect.

Let Go of People-Pleasing. Sometimes, our expectations come from trying to please others or meet society's standards. But constantly living for approval drains your energy and makes it harder to connect with your true values. Ask yourself: "What do I want?" Learning to trust your own voice can be freeing.

Embracing Change and Uncertainty

Life is full of twists and turns. Plans shift. People change. Surprises happen. The more we try to control every detail, the more frustrated we become. Letting go of control doesn't mean being careless. It means learning to respond rather than react. It means staying open to new outcomes, even when they're not what you originally planned.

When we accept change and uncertainty as a normal part of life, we feel less fear and more freedom. Instead of clinging to fixed ideas, we start to trust that we can handle whatever comes, even when it looks different from what we imagined.

Building Resilience and Self-Compassion

Letting go takes courage and it doesn't happen overnight. You may slip back into old habits, especially during stressful times. That's why resilience and self-compassion are so important.

Resilience is your ability to bounce back when things don't go your way. It's built through practice, reflection, and being willing to try again. Each time you face a challenge and keep going, your resilience grows.

Self-compassion means treating yourself with kindness, especially when things are hard. It's about replacing harsh self-talk with gentler,

more supportive words. For example, instead of saying, "I failed," you might say, "I'm learning, and that's okay."

The more compassion you show yourself and others, the easier it becomes to let go of impossible expectations and to accept yourself and important people in your life.

Support is Available

Letting go of expectations is a lifelong skill. It doesn't mean you stop caring or give up on your goals. It means learning to meet life with more curiosity, flexibility, and self-trust. With time and practice, you can start to understand where your expectations come from, accept what's out of your control, and find more peace in the present moment. Life doesn't have to follow a perfect plan to be meaningful or fulfilling.

But it's important to know that you don't have to figure it all out on your own. Letting go can be hard, especially when old habits and pressures run deep. If you're struggling or feeling stuck, reaching out for help is a strong and healthy step.

Homewood Health offers free, confidential counselling through your Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). A mental health professional can support you in working through expectations, managing stress, and finding new ways to move forward.



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