Well What Did You Expect?!

Have you ever heard the phrase, “New year, new me”? Have you ever spent New Year’s Eve setting resolutions for the next year? If you answered “Yes” to either of those questions, you’ve also probably felt disappointment to varying degrees. As January morphs into February, many people start to lose momentum on the goals and intentions they set for themselves leading to a variety of negative feelings. This may be toward themselves, but also toward others. This month we will be talking about setting healthy expectations and how to keep moving forward when we get disappointed.

Expectations are meant to be Broken

Dr. John A. Johnson talks about “moral psychology” in his article for *Psychology Today*. He discusses that when we have expectations in relationships such as friendships or romantic partnerships, they are based on personal morals. These are often unspoken expectations and without verbalizing our expectations, it is hard for someone to live up to them. Another basis for expectations is authority. This usually happens between adults and someone younger such as their kids or a student. Having expectations for younger kids and teens is not a bad thing, and is a healthy way to help them learn and grow. However, what isn’t healthy is when we don’t make these expectations simple and clear or when we expect they will be followed 100% of the time. Dr. Johnson questions the reader, “Did you follow all the rules when you were young?”

How do you Expect Me to Feel?

When we set expectations, we set them based on our own best interests and agendas. Therefore, we can “expect” that others will be acting with their own agendas and best interests. When these don’t align with each other, we tend to feel anger and resentment. This is especially important to think about when dealing with our own children or students. When our expectation of those we are teaching/guiding/protecting are not met, we feel resentment and anger. This often leads to yelling and punishments. For example, if we give a child a task such as doing the dishes before you get home from work, and you come home and they are not done, what is the first thing you think of to do? Call them down and point out what they did wrong? Yell and scream because you didn’t get what you wanted? Maybe you start taking away privileges. These methods rarely work to solve the problem long term, and at the end of the day, you are still left with uncomfortable feelings. If you encounter unfulfilled expectations on a daily basis, often people start to experience what Dr. Meg Carbonatto calls the four D’s: Doubt, Despondency, Despair, and Depression.
I Expect there is a Solution to This Problem

So now I am unhappy, resentful, I have no friends and my family hates me, my life is over! Not so fast, there is good news! There are clear and healthy steps you can take to manage your expectations and the resulting feelings.

• **Acknowledge your feelings and communicate openly:**
  - When it is others who haven’t met our expectation, we often have feelings of anger right away, but there tend to be other emotions underlying the initial anger. It is important to identify what these primary emotions are. Then identify the parts of your expectation that may have been unrealistic or assumed. When you’ve gotten all of the facts, communicate them to the other person you are interacting with.

• **Let go of expectation and find something to be grateful for in the experience.**
  - What you expected didn’t happen, is there anything you got out of that experience? See the art activity below to help you get started.

• **Be flexible with the expectations you do have**
  - Know that you are operating under the filter of your perspective and tools you currently have at your disposal. Make room for others’ perspectives and ideas. Acknowledge from the outset that expectations can go unfulfilled.

• **Shift your expectations to reasonable goals that you have the tools to meet**
  - Be willing to examine whether or not your goals are realistic or not. Magic thinking is not helpful.

• **Acknowledge and shift your “should” statements**
  - “Should statements” are limiting and can set us up for failure from the get go. Turn the “should” into “need” or “want” to better succeed with your goals. This [article](#) by Alyssa Miranz, LMHC, DBTC gives great examples of how to stop should-ing all over yourself!

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**CREATIVE OUTLET:**
**Celebrate your Wins!**

*The Gratitude Jar is an opportunity to celebrate all victories from your year, no matter how big or small. This is a chance to focus on gains of your year rather than losses.*

**Materials:**
- A vessel or jar of your choosing; a transparent jar is recommended
- Craft supplies (paint, googly eyes, yarn, felt, etc.) to decorate
- Paper and a writing utensil

**How To:** Decorate your jar as much as desired. Use small scraps of paper to write down accomplishments, special moments that occurred, small victories from a hard day, LOL moments, or give yourself a compliment! Add a date on the bottom to preserve the memories in more detail.