



Whether you

acknowledge them or not, it's very likely that you have some (or many!) expectations of how your life will unfold: 'I was an A student at school, so I'll sail through varsity'; 'I treat him well and with respect, so he'll treat me the same way'; 'I got on really well with my colleagues at my first job, so of course they'll love me at my new office'.

But when these expectations – either of yourself or of others – aren't met, disappointment, dissatisfaction, anger and bitterness are triggered, says Rudy Rasmus, author of *Touch* (Thomas Nelson), because 'expectations are premeditated resentments'.

THE GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Sticking to your ideas about how things *should* be sets you up for a cycle of anger and disappointment.

TRAP

The road to disappointment...

...is paved with many expectations, is how the saying could easily have gone. The minute you create an expectation, you've decided that whatever you expect to happen is rightfully yours – which means when it doesn't happen as you had planned you feel robbed, writes Rasmus.

Kim Venter* knows this feeling of being robbed: growing up as one of six children on a Karoo farm, she'd expected to fall pregnant 'the minute my husband glanced in my direction, so to speak'. But after putting children on hold while she and her husband travelled and worked overseas for 10 years, she was told that she had severe

polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) and would most likely not be able to fall pregnant.

The disappointment and anger at not being able to conceive was, she believes, so much greater because she'd never given a second thought to the idea that falling pregnant would require anything less than a few weeks off birth control.

'Because my mom clearly had no problems, I always just expected that I'd inherit that from her and fall pregnant when I wanted to, so I never even considered infertility. It just wasn't possible that I wouldn't be able to have children.

'I think if I'd had fewer expectations, I'd never have left it so late to

start trying to conceive – and when we did start trying, but without any results, I wouldn't have left it so long before consulting a doctor about possible problems or treatments'.

'I still have this overwhelming sense of anger that something that was meant to happen to me, didn't.'

Expectation above effort

Another pitfall of having too many expectations is that you run the risk of putting less of an effort into achieving what you expect will come your way, writes Rasmus. 'After all', people in this position think, 'why work hard to achieve something that's mine in the first place?'

THE GREAT EXPECTATIONS TRAP

Sindi Matthews* knows this feeling well: 'Throughout school and varsity, I never had to struggle: I was always in the top 10 academically, without too much effort or stress; lecturers liked me; I headed up committees, and I generally made a success of things. So when I entered the job market I didn't expect anything less than fantastic offers – it just didn't cross my mind that I'd have to start at the bottom like everyone else.'

But 11 months after graduating, Sindi was still on the job hunt: it wasn't that she hadn't found any available positions, but that she'd passed over applying for the ones she thought were below her ability – and had been passed over for the higher level ones she wanted.

'If I'm completely honest with myself, I'd say that because I expected employers to be desperate to hire me, I probably didn't put as much effort into job applications and interviews as I could have.

'I've also noticed that because I expected to be so much further along in my career than I actually am, I resent my friends who've achieved more than I have, especially the ones who I didn't think would do well or who didn't "deserve" it as much as I did.'

Playing up to the negatives

Various research studies have shown that we conform to other people's expectations of us, even when these expectations are incorrect. In a University of Minnesota study this was shown to be true to the extent that even when people only sensed how others viewed them, they started displaying those expected characteristics.

This may be fine when the expected characteristics are positive – confidence, a sense of humour, intelligence – but when people expect that you won't work as hard as you should, that you'll be late for appointments, that you'll let others down, you're still likely to live up to these (negative) expectations.

In a study published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Christy Buchanan, professor of psychology at Wake University, found that risky behaviour was more prevalent among children and teens of parents who expected their children to be rebellious and badly behaved. 'Negative expectations on the part of both parents and children predict more negative behaviours later on,' wrote Buchanan, who also said that the reverse is true: teenagers of parents who expect positive behaviour often live up to this expectation.

In the study, Buchanan went on to say that while this doesn't mean that people should be naive about, or blinded to, possible failures, they shouldn't let these expectations control their behaviour.

Setting others up for failure

It's not just our expectations of ourselves that can lead to disappointment, but also our expectations of how we believe others should act toward us. In a relationship you might have expectations about how your various needs should be filled, says psychologist

Albert Ellis, but when these needs aren't filled in the way you expect them to, you feel betrayed.

The problem here, he says, is that we're taking our own beliefs about how things should be (thoughtfulness is a bunch of flowers; loyalty is sticking up for me in an argument; a good sex life is x amount of times a week) and transferring them to people who very likely don't have the same ideas as we do about these things.

This doesn't mean giving up on your fundamentals – if you expect monogamy, shared finances, and shared responsibility for childcare, then these aren't expectations that you need to shift or adapt. But if your expectations are about the specifics of

[If you have] too many expectations, you run the risk of putting less of an effort into achieving what you expect will come your way.

resolving an argument, for example, (you like thrashing things out, he likes to move on quickly), or how often you think you should be entertaining, or visiting family, or discussing the budget – all things that your partner could easily have differing expectations of – then refusing to budge from yours is only going to lead to disappointment and

you will end up with the 'premeditated resentments' that Rasmus talks about.

Recognising that something is an expectation rather than a fundamental is key: clinical psychologist and author Michael D. Yapko suggests writing down your expectations of others in one column, what you know about them that makes you think they will or won't be able to meet these expectations in another, and then a revised expectation (based on the outcome of the second column) in a third. The things that you simply can't revise are your fundamentals, while the others are expectations that you can rid yourself of. ♣

* Names have been changed