

## 5 Suggestions for Setting Realistic Expectations for Yourself

Everyone has expectations for themselves. We often assume these expectations are reasonable. Yet many of them are anything but!

We expect ourselves to work without any breaks.

We expect to be able to give our career everything we've got, our families everything we've got, our extracurricular and/or volunteer services everything we've got, and then be able to keep ourselves healthy, happy, and well-balanced... do you really have anything left for yourself?

We expect ourselves to have the same level of—high—energy every day.

We expect ourselves to experience non polar emotions—calm and content.

We expect ourselves to be fearless.

We expect that we'll handle difficult times like a to-do list, said Elizabeth Gillette, LCSW, an attachment-focused therapist in Asheville, N.C., who specializes in working with individuals and couples as their families grow.

We'll be quick and efficient with our sadness—like we'd be with replying to email or cleaning the kitchen.

Or we become parents and still cling to the same expectations around work and productivity except, as Gillette said, now we “are sleep deprived and in survival mode. Even for people without children, there can be an expectation of doing everything well, 100% of the time.” Or we set expectations based on the lives of others. We compare ourselves not only to other people, but to *many* other people. Life

transition and recovery therapist Jenn Fieldman, LPCS, worked with a client who hyper-focused on all the incredible things people were posting on Facebook. They were getting more work done. They were having amazing dinners with their spouse. They were working out every morning. They seemed like the “perfect” parents. But Fieldman’s client wasn’t comparing herself to one person—she was comparing herself to the illuminated and chosen facets in at least *five* people’s lives.

We set super high expectations because “we idealize the ‘perfect’ outcome,” Gillette said. We assume that in order to feel successful, we need a specific result, she said.

We need to get the promotion, or we’ve failed.

We need to get an A+ on the paper, or we’re failures.

We need to measure up to the social media norms that have been created by everyone posting how perfect their lives are when many times, these are the people with the most unhappiness in their REAL lives seeking validation through social media.

This is a hard way to live. It’s a lot of needless pressure. Even if we do reach the carrot, there’s always another bigger carrot around the corner. It never stops. We never stop. And it’s utterly exhausting.

Here are some tips that may help:

### **1-Get clear on your values.**

For instance, Gillette asks parents the following questions to help them identify their values (which you can adapt to your situation and life):

“What do you want to show your child?

What memories do you want to pass on to them?

What are all the ways we can make that happen, without having to be perfect?”

Such questions help parents clarify where they want to place their intention and focus “to create an outcome that feels acceptable, even if it’s not the most ideal.”

## **2- Evaluate your expectations. Ask the following questions:**

What has the past proven about this expectation...”has it ever worked out?” “has it changed over the years?”

What is behind this expectation: Fear of not being enough, fear of rejection, fear of being stuck in a viscous cycle of self-loathing?

If I wasn’t concerned about what other people thought, would I still have this expectation of myself?

Is this expectation specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely? Is it possible with the other obligations I have in my everyday life?

## **3- Quiet your fear.**

Often unrealistic expectations are created from fear. There are a few strategies to use to quiet your fear. These strategies force us to clear our minds of the clutter in order to think more clearly and understand what lies behind our expectations

- a- Meditation- meditation isn’t for everyone but a majority of those who take the time to incorporate it report an improvement in their mood, stress levels, energy, and ability to focus.
- b- You cannot always stop what you are doing and meditate so take this tip from someone who has suffered with anxiety for most of her life. Simply doing the 3 count breathing technique can work wonders. Breathe in for 3 counts, hold the breath for 3 counts and exhale for 3 counts with your eyes closed. Repeat this 5-10 breaths and say the words, “I’m breathing in, I’m breathing out.” As you relax your body. Pay attention to where

you are holding tension in your body. If other thoughts creep in, just return to your breath. This trains the body to accept openness and calm rather than making decisions and expectations from a fearful place.

#### **4- Explore your not-enough story.**

Unrealistic expectations stem from the core belief that we are not enough as we are. “When we live in this place, we are never truly living in the moments of our lives; we’re living in sadness from what we are not and fear of what we may never be.”

This belief comes from a variety of different life experiences from childhood into adulthood but we can begin to change the way we respond to stimulus that may have previously made us feel like we weren’t enough.

Examples:

a bully in middle school

parents comments to us growing up, someone who told us we would never do “this” or “that”

a cheating significant other

a friend ending a valuable friendship over something insignificant

your teenage child saying that they hate you.

All of these things can make us feel that we are not enough unless we are able to change our thinking about the actions of others or the words that others say to us or behind our backs. The real story is that you ARE enough! You have the ability to be your best self but you can only do that through self-acceptance.

#### **5-Identify the most realistic takeaway.**

Gillette encourages clients to consider the question: “If this could go well (with several things not working the way I want it to), how would that feel for me?”

She shared this example: Lots of parents put pressure on themselves for their child's birthday parties or first day of school. In reality, these are imperfect, often messy moments: Your child's best friend can't make it to the party. The bounce house you ordered is suddenly not available. The first day of school is filled with mixed emotions, and various challenges.

So instead of focusing on perfect (i.e., unrealistic expectations), according to Gillette, you reflect on: "What do I want my child to take from this? How can I create an experience that allows for all of these factors to be present, and still consider it a worthwhile experience? Does the fact that it's not perfect bring value to my life and to my child's life?"

Sometimes, we worry that if we don't set high expectations for ourselves, we're somehow letting ourselves off the hook. We're being lazy or unambitious. We're skating through life. We're not living life fully, but that's not true.

Setting realistic expectations actually helps us grow and become more flexible. It helps us savor life and embrace the messy moments, which often hold more meaning anyway. And if you've got kids, it saves them from suffering needlessly. Because sky-high expectations are the antithesis of self-compassion.

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