

# Healthy expectations

Create a life of ease, balance and purpose by fostering healthy expectations.

Words EMMA NUTTALL

Many of us have expectations around what our life should look like and what we want to achieve. Have you ever stopped to consider where your expectations originate from and whether they are actually serving you? Are they a healthy motivator for achieving your goals or are they causing you endless stress and anxiety?

## Healthy versus unhealthy

Having realistic expectations of yourself contributes to healthy self-esteem. If you are frequently stressed, unfulfilled and highly self-critical, then chances are you are putting too much pressure on yourself.

Expectations are the internal standards you set for yourself. If you are not living up to these standards, you can become frustrated and disappointed. Over time, this can erode your self-confidence.

Unrealistic expectations can also mean your goals and values are out of alignment. It's hard to fulfil your purpose when you are working from unreasonable standards. You may also discover that although your goals are realistic, your timeframes and resources are not. This may result in high stress from working too many hours or taking on an unmanageable financial burden in order to achieve success.

Photography Getty Images



If your expectations are realistic, authentic and aligned to your purpose, you can create meaning and abundance in a more positive and balanced way.

It can be helpful to make the distinction between passion and drive versus pushing yourself to burnout. Hustle culture has infiltrated Western society – not to mention our social media feeds – and it's easy to get caught up in the momentum. By becoming aware of your internal drivers, you can act with intention while still embracing your passion. If your expectations are realistic, authentic and aligned to your purpose, you can create meaning and abundance in a more positive and balanced way.

#### Who do these belong to?

Unrealistic expectations that have been placed on you in childhood or early adulthood may have been instilled into your subconscious. This can result in pushing yourself too hard without being consciously aware of the motivation behind this behaviour.

It can be helpful to stop and reflect on the original drivers for your expectations. Are they internally driven or have they been passed down by a partner, a parent, a childhood teacher or your boss? If they are from an external source, have you taken the time to clarify them? You may find that they are no longer valid or that you are living with unspoken expectations from childhood or a past workplace that no longer apply. Perhaps there is someone you seek admiration from, and this is causing you to push yourself too hard in order to impress them. Or maybe you fear disappointing people.

When it comes to defining success, the only person's opinion that matters is your own. Recognising that you are the only person who needs to be proud of your achievements can be liberating!

#### Letting go of outdated beliefs

When I started a mature-age Bachelor degree, I aimed for high distinctions in all subjects. Trying to juggle studies with work and all my other responsibilities was enough of a challenge, without the added pressure of "needing" to excel in every assessment. I planned on working for myself when I graduated so it was highly likely that no one else would ever see my results, but this knowledge didn't change the expectations I placed on myself. I had something to prove.

It took a fair bit of reflection to uncover that I was trying to prove to a younger version of myself that I was smart enough, so that I would no longer feel inferior to other people. I was working from the psyche of an insecure 19-year-old who had learned that the only way to manage her lack of confidence was to do everything perfectly, so no one could criticise her.

Since the age of 19, I have pushed my comfort zones, achieved a great deal in my personal and professional life and, most importantly, connected within and expanded my sense of self. This belief I had been subconsciously working from was no longer valid and by clarifying and reframing it, I was able to significantly reduce the expectations I had been placing on myself.

When I received a credit in my next subject, I was prouder of myself than for any of the high distinctions I had received because it signified a development in my emotional intelligence as opposed to simply being graded for academic performance.

You too, can push back the curtain behind your expectations to discover whether your daily actions are aligned with your purpose. You may find that you are hurtling towards burnout due to a set of outdated beliefs that are fuelling unrealistic expectations. Or your internal standards may just need a few small adjustments in order to reduce a significant amount of stress.



### Practise self-compassion

Even when we are working with realistic goals, mistakes are inevitable. Do you berate yourself when you make a mistake? Are you ever guilty of exaggerating your failings? We are often harsher towards ourselves than to other people.

Next time you experience a setback, it might be helpful to attempt to soothe your distress by showing yourself kindness and compassion. Research shows that self-compassion reduces feelings of inadequacy.

If you are concerned that self-compassion is indulgent or may result in complacency, you will be pleased to know that the opposite is actually true. A person who allows themselves the freedom to make mistakes and can accept failure without engaging in self-criticism is actually more likely to move forward and try again.

### Redefine failure

It can be helpful to acknowledge that mistakes are how we learn. Successful people generally have a trail of failures

behind them. They just choose to reframe mistakes into learnings that they can apply to their next endeavour.

So when you next make a mistake, reflect on the circumstances, behaviours or emotions that caused it and what you will do differently next time.

It's hard to live a happy and congruent life if you are motivated by outdated beliefs or someone else's version of success. It's hard to move forward when inauthenticity and a lack of direction are holding you back. Take the time to define what success and contentment mean for you at the stage of life you are in right now. By embracing expectations that serve you, you can live with greater purpose and ease. 🍷

*Emma Nuttall is a nutritionist (BHSc) and freelance writer. She combines evidence-based nutritional medicine with mindset strategies to support her clients in achieving their goals. W: healthservedup.com; IG: @healthservedup*

## Reflection exercise

Reflect on the expectations you have for yourself in all areas of your life. You may want to consider areas such as career, education, home life, relationships and even possessions. It can be an interesting exercise to stop and reflect on the role that material possessions have in your life and the perceived happiness they bring.

A good way of completing this exercise is with free journaling (otherwise known as "stream of consciousness journaling"). Do a short meditation, or take 10 long, deep belly breaths. Then put pen to paper and write down whatever comes to mind.

**For each expectation you have identified, consider the following:**

- ~ Is this expectation causing me unnecessary stress?
- ~ Is this truly what I want for myself or does it come from an external source?
- ~ What would my life look like if I let go of this expectation?
- ~ If I can't let it go, how can I make it healthy and realistic?