

Reining in Expectations
By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

“I’m worried. This isn’t the way I thought this would go. Did I do something wrong? Have I messed it up? What should I do?”

Those worried words came from my wife, Ann, who recently had surgery on her ankle. As is her style, she had followed the surgeon’s advice exactly—six weeks non-weight-bearing, 4 weeks in a boot with light to full weight bearing, and at week 10, the beginning of normal walking without a crutch or a boot. That first six weeks had been a challenge for Ann. Lying on the couch watching reruns of *Fixer Upper* had grown old quickly. Crawling up and down stairs was less than ideal. Recovery hadn’t been easy or painless, but she persevered without much complaint, anticipating the joyous day when she could shed her boot and walk without pain. But we were past week 11 and things weren’t going well. The ankle was swelling and becoming more painful. She worried whether she had inadvertently hurt it, causing permanent damage. Her expectations just weren’t panning out.

Expectations are inevitable and provide us the confidence we need to move forward. We wouldn’t get out of bed if we didn’t think the floor was going to hold us. We wouldn’t get into bed if we didn’t think our home was relatively secure. We wouldn’t go to work if we didn’t believe a paycheck would result. But our expectations can also cause us grief.

A young woman I counseled with was struggling. She was bright, educated, pretty, talented, humorous, athletic, spiritual, and outgoing. She wasn’t flaunting any of that, but she wasn’t hiding it either. She was quite comfortable with who she was, with one exception. She was 27 and seemed unable to get dates. To an outside observer, she had it all. Yet she couldn’t manage to find compatible men who would take her out. Internet dating had been an exercise in frustration. As she unfolded her dating history to me, I was flummoxed. Nothing made sense. Clearly, any guy with eyes and a brain should have been pounding down this girl’s door. Understandably, she felt sad and disappointed regarding her dating record and was worried what her future would hold. Reasonable initial expectations had ultimately led to frustration and discouragement.

What could she do? She couldn’t force men to date her. What could Ann do? She had followed the doctor’s recipe exactly. Both circumstances took unexpected, unwelcome turns. We all want the best outcomes. We tend to think that progress should be straightforward. We don’t want to imagine our dating life, our recovery, or other aspirations collapsing around us. But it happens. And when it does, what do we do?

First, we can avoid panicking. Very few people have dating histories or recoveries from surgery, or other life experiences that didn’t have a few twists and turns. Advancement seldom involves straight trajectories. We can avoid telling ourselves scary stories about what a twist or turn means for our future. A setback does not portend ruination.

Secondly, we can grieve. All of us have been and will be faced with situations we can’t control. Therefore, we sometimes have to relinquish cherished hopes and dreams. The pain of doing so

can be piercing. Yet, allowing ourselves our tears and heartache, as we work through our losses, actually helps us recover and helps us prepare for and accept new and different realities.

Finally, we can talk to ourselves about our expectations. When unexpected injury or illness, job loss, basement flooding, breakup with a girlfriend, engine demise, or unwarranted mistreatment occur, we can examine our assumptions regarding how our lives are supposed to roll out. How much sunshine should there actually be? Considering how many ways lives can take a hit, is it reasonable to expect that we should always be able to dodge the bullet? What percentage of just and kindly treatment should we expect? Have we left room for human weakness, happenstance, even disaster? If we know of others who have experienced similar misfortunes, have we insisted that such a thing couldn't, or shouldn't, happen to us?

Years ago I heard about the 10% rule. The idea was that it's probably reasonable to expect that, at least 10% of the time, aspirations won't work out as we'd like. As Pastor Jenkin Lloyd Jones put it, *"The fact is that most putts don't drop, most beef is tough, most children grow up to be just like people, most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration, and most jobs are more often dull than otherwise."* Anticipating the negative only makes us into sourpusses, but making sufficient room for negative outcomes makes us more resilient.

A couple of years ago I wasn't paying attention, was driving too fast down a hill, and was ticketed. I began blaming the officer, mentally, for setting up a speed trap on a hill. But my conscience indicted me. I knew I had, on other occasions, without a hill, allowed myself to push the speed limit. I recognized that this citation was probably overdue. That realization left me feeling less victimized and more benevolent toward the policeman.

Expectations can't be avoided, but they can be managed to our advantage. When our wishes aren't realized we can examine our assumptions. When our dreams shatter or our hopes die, we can let ourselves grieve our losses and then examine whether we somehow expected that we should be shielded from such events. Perhaps instead of asking, "Why me?" we should be asking, "Why not me?" We can remind ourselves that we should presuppose a little rain in our lives—maybe even an occasional cloud burst. Maybe it was overdue. If so, perhaps that means we've also enjoyed some sunshine. And that's worth celebrating.