I want things to go well. And I want things to go well for you in recovery and beyond. Even when an outcome turns out well in the end, there are often difficulties along the way. This lesson will help you navigate the tension between expecting the best and enduring difficulties as they arise. It will help you overlook faults and continue to make progress even when situations and circumstances appear difficult. The way you set your mind, attitude, and disposition will determine your satisfaction along the way. Therefore, you want to set reasonable expectations. Learn to identify unrealistic expectations in treatment and recovery, and replace them with realistic expectations to bring about the recovery and changed life you desire.

This lesson is available at journeytorecovery.com

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SETTING REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS

EXPECTATIONS

I want things to go well. And I want things to go well for you in recovery and beyond. Even when an outcome turns out well in the end, there are often difficulties along the way. This lesson will help you navigate the tension between expecting the best and enduring difficulties as they arise. The way you set your mind, attitude, and disposition will determine your satisfaction along the way. Therefore, you want to set reasonable expectations.

REASONABLE EXPECTATIONS

The following list looks at some common situations and events. They are normal and ordinary facts of life, often difficult or impossible to change and should be accepted and tolerated as such. Practice accepting them with little or no frustration, or concern.

☐ Sometimes traffic moves slowly
☐ Sometimes people don’t understand what I’m trying to say
☐ Sometimes it snows in the winter
☐ Sometimes people are late to important meetings
☐ Sometimes people expect too much of me
☐ Sometimes I burn the pizza
☐ Sometimes I make mistakes
☐ Sometimes treatment is difficult
☐ Sometimes things don’t make sense to me
☐ Sometimes I don’t feel like it
☐ Sometimes I’m happy
☐ Sometimes I’m not happy
☐ Sometimes I feel like being around people
☐ Sometimes I don’t feel like being around people
☐ Sometimes I am sensitive to other people’s pain
☐ Sometimes I’m not sensitive to other people’s pain
☐ Sometimes people forgive me
Sometimes everything in the entire day goes right
Sometimes people are inconsiderate and rude
Sometimes people are slow, stupid, and mean
Sometimes I forget
Sometimes I'm impatient
Sometimes I'm unmotivated
Sometimes I'm tired
Sometimes I don't listen
Sometimes I'm defensive and argumentative
Sometimes I complain
Sometimes I'm selfish
Sometimes I'm wrong
Sometimes I'm gullible

NOTES

LET’S BE REALISTIC

People with co-occurring disorders often have unrealistic goals and high expectations for themselves. They desperately want things to go well, be in good health, realize their dreams, have things go their way, make constant progress, get good grades, be involved with beautiful people, and make a lot of money. And of course, people with high expectations can be extremely disappointed and upset when things do not turn out like they had hoped.

What unrealistic expectations do you hold for yourself? Give specific examples. Include your thoughts, feelings, and overreactions when things do not go your way.

What unrealistic expectations do you hold for others? Give several specific examples. Include your thoughts, feelings, actions, and overreactions when things do not go your way.

How is your mental health and substance abuse disorder affected when things do not go as you had hoped?

LET’S BE REASONABLE

Setting reasonable expectations means grappling with the uncontrollable, the doubtful, and the difficult. Coming to grips with these uncertainties acknowledges that sometimes you cannot control, fix, and bend them to meet your desires. Other times you must face the limitations of your own abilities.
It is wise to set expectations in harmony with good reasoning. It is not that things do not change; they do. If you do not see any evidence of change, it is reasonable to expect things will remain the same. For example, imagine having an uncle who constantly insults you and your family when you visit him at Thanksgiving. He has insulted you, criticized you, and announced your faults on every annual visit for over 20 years. This year, because you have learned several new jokes, you expect him to treat you differently. That would be considered an unrealistic and unreasonable expectation. You have no evidence he would be different, even if you were. It may be better to set your expectations in line with the experiences and actions from the previous 20 years and set your boundaries accordingly.

**OVERLOOKING FAULTS**

Having a good understanding that I make mistakes and other people make mistakes frees me to overlook the slights, inconsistencies, and selfish actions of myself and others. The Bible says “the righteous man falls seven times and rises again.” (Proverbs 24:16). We are to get up after we fall. The mistake is not falling; the biggest mistake you can make is refusing to get up and try again. Work toward getting up, admitting your mistakes, dusting yourself off, and trying again. Give up on being perfect, right, always accurate, and faultless.

**MAKING PROGRESS**

*I am doing a few simple things that help a little bit, in some areas, over time.* This becomes a reasonable expectation. Let me explain: *I am doing*. I am not going to start doing something soon, but am already engaged in a process that will bring progress. *I am doing a few simple things*. I am not doing one million things and I am not doing one or two. And the things I am doing are simple, not complicated or complex. The simple things I am doing help. These things I am doing do not fix, control, or provide miraculous resolution. Instead, *the things I am doing help a little bit*. These things do not even help a lot. And *the things I am doing help a little bit in some areas*. These things I am doing do not help in every area, only in some. And these things I am doing help a little bit in some areas but not right away. *They help a little bit over time*.

This simple statement helps reduce perfectionist thinking and instead changes the goal to development, progress, and improvement.

“I am doing... a few simple things... that help a little bit... in some areas... over time.”

-Dr. Hal Baumchen
We often judge people on their actions, but judge ourselves on our intentions. As you extend mercy and compassion to others, refrain from making judgments. Consider their intentions, not just their performance and behavior. Expect people to have an imperfect attitude about your recovery.

The truth is, we all make mistakes. People have made and will make mistakes in their judgments of you as well. Oftentimes we want others to perfectly handle all of our mistakes. This unrealistic attitude leads to disappointment and resentment.

**CHANGING VERSUS JUSTIFYING**

Many people say they are trying to change, but in reality they end up justifying their actions and past mistakes and may not make actual changes. The more they are confronted, the more rigidly entrenched they become in their old ways. The more they are pushed, the more they resist. Although they may say they are trying to change, they seem to be spending a lot of energy to remain the same.

**UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS IN TREATMENT AND RECOVERY**

Some of your expectations may be unrealistic, no matter how hard you work and recognizing them may help you understand why you are frustrated. What unrealistic expectations have you had in your treatment and recovery?

- □ Expecting treatment to be easy
- □ Expecting people to always understand me
- □ Expecting everyone to be like me
- □ Expecting special attention
- □ Expecting things to always go my way
- □ Expecting a pain-free recovery
- □ Expecting constant progress
- □ Expecting to never be hungry, lonely, or tired
- □ Expecting the counselors and the staff to be perfect
- □ Expecting instant progress
- □ ____________________________
- □ ____________________________
- □ ____________________________
- □ ____________________________
Unrealistic expectations are rarely created suddenly. They do not emerge hastily through one simple decision or interaction, but instead develop slowly over time. Unrealistic expectations are developed through several key influences including:

1. Demanding parents, teachers, siblings
2. Being criticized
3. Being judged on performance, appearance
4. Linking value and worth with performance

DEVELOPING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Setting realistic expectations means you are willing to accept responsibility for your own character, disposition, and actions, and are willing to be accountable to others. As you move forward, you are willing to work toward a desirable recovery and a better life. Consider the items below and how they might affect your recovery:

1. Take a fierce moral inventory and make a rock-solid commitment to truth.
2. Spot your own ultra-high expectations, perfectionistic demands, and critical judgments of yourself.
3. Admit your faults and shortcomings.
4. Watch your sense of superiority (seeing others as inferior and substandard).
5. Target improvements to your character, attitude, and disposition, not just your performance level.
   Aim for progress, not perfection.
6. Examine how much you compare yourself unfavorably to others and to whom you compare yourself.
7. Do not disrespect, belittle, or find fault with others in order to level the playing field.
   Your worth does not go up by devaluing others. You are valuable and worthwhile, regardless of their standing.
8. Set expectations in the middle.
   Do not become apathetic, lazy, or irresponsible, and do not swing to the other side by having unrealistically high expectations for yourself and others.
9. Be gracious and forgiving.
10. Recovery is a journey. Enjoy the ride!
KEEP MAKING PROGRESS

Recovery is advanced when you admit your faults and shortcomings. As you lead a life of sobriety and recovery, you guard against slips and failings by working to prevent them from happening. And you have a way to move forward with renewed strength if they do occur.