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“Great Expectations”

Many of our greatest struggles come unexpectedly--Someone we love dies, we are blindsided by a restructuring at work, our partner does something completely out of character. It's natural to feel in shock and disoriented. But often what is occurring is that we had expectations about what would happen, and the shock is in realizing that these won't come to pass. The technical term for this experience is "violated expectations."

I first came upon that term while conducting research for my doctoral degree. The study focused on couples' relationships as they transitioned to parenthood, and how expectations and reality impacted their well-being. For many of the couples, parenthood impacted their relationships in very unexpected ways, and the ways in which their expectations were violated or unmet had a greater impact on their overall well-being than the reality of the situation itself.

Throughout my practice, I have worked with individuals from many walks of life struggling with the realization that things are not turning out as planned. For many of these individuals, the term "violated" expectations makes a lot of sense to me rather than "inaccurate" expectations or "unrealized" expectations. Our conscious and unconscious mind develops a picture of how things *should* be, and reels when that picture disintegrates or is shattered, leading to the feeling that our hopes have been violated in a very real way.

A preventative step of course is to make sure that our expectations are realistic in the first place. Because expectations are often outside our conscious thought, this may involve some soul-searching to determine "What am I expecting from this relationship?", "What do I want to come out of this endeavor?", etc. Next it may help to take a good hard look at whether your expectations realistically can be met.--This step may involve talking to others who have already been there, or comparing notes with anyone else involved to determine whether your expectations are in synch, or whether some negotiation is going to need to take place before you can move forward.

What if your expectations have already been violated? You're in a place where you may feel shocked, angry, disoriented. Part of why you're experiencing these strong emotions may be that you are going through a grief process--Just as there are different (sometimes contradictory) stages of grief when we lose someone close to us, we experience grief when we begin to realize any other kind of loss, including the loss of dreams or expectations.

Sometimes the situation is completely beyond our control. Give yourself permission to grieve, and have faith in the process, knowing that you will come to a place of acceptance where you will have the strength and knowledge to move forward.

Other times, expectations just need "tweaking," whether this involves giving yourself and others more time and patience, or coming up with a different roadmap to get where you're going.

Sometimes what is needed is a significant re-evaluation and re-working of our expectations. Although violated expectations are often painful, it is possible to re-envision the future in ways that turn out to be equally or even more fulfilling than we originally had planned.

I encourage you to be kind to yourself, and to keep dreaming of great things to come while remaining open to the gifts of the unexpected.

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