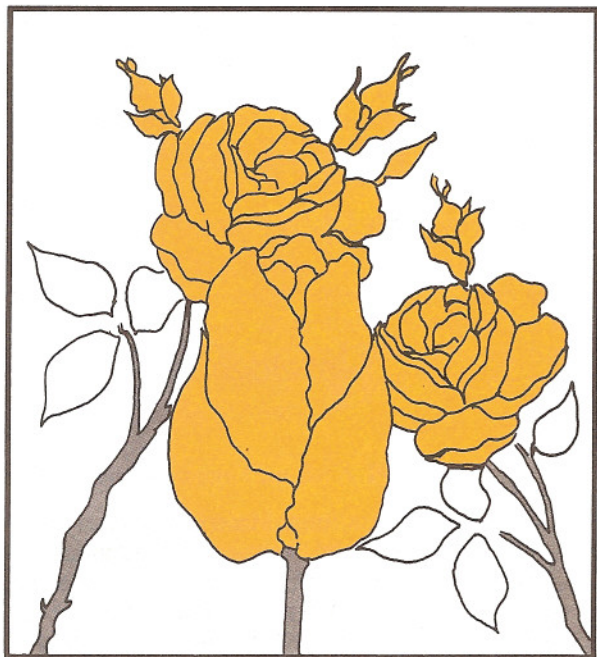


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POCKET POWER

GREAT

# EXPECTATIONS



Hazelden

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**H**azelden

**Editor's Note:**

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## **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

You may remember being on a "pink cloud" shortly after you began your recovery. As the fog caused by your addiction lifted, you began to feel good for the first time in months or even years. You felt so good, in fact, you were sure your problems were over forever. Undoubtedly, your sponsor warned you the euphoria wouldn't last. But if you were like most of us, you secretly expected it would. And sure enough, our sponsors were right.

Eventually, we fall off our cloud and begin to deal with life as it really is, rather than as we wish it to be. Through intensive work on the Steps, we begin to understand our lives on a spiritual plane. We achieve some serenity, the promises begin to come true, and we're on our way to a lasting recovery.

### **Why Expectations Can Be A Problem**

When we've been sober and clean for a few years, we're likely to run into some problems we didn't expect. We've learned, for the most part, the meaning of "one day at a time." We probably aren't going to a meeting every night like we did in the beginning. Our jobs are working

reasonably well; our relationships with others have smoothed out a bit. In short, the program is working both for us and in us. We're beginning to understand serenity and know some real peace of mind. Life is looking pretty good.

Problems begin when we expect the good life will be ours forever, without a hitch. We get into trouble when we count on a particular person, place, or situation to bring us exactly the results we want when we want it, or when we make unreasonable demands on ourselves. Life just doesn't flow smoothly, and if we expect it to, we're setting ourselves up for disappointment or worse.

Not all expectations, of course, lead to difficulties. After all, "to expect" simply means to look forward to something or to anticipate something. It's when our expectations grow out of proportion that problems develop. Our alcoholic personalities seem to make it easy for us to create grandiose visions as we anticipate the results of almost any action. This wouldn't be so bad if we didn't insist our expectations be met. But instead of responding to our unfulfilled expectations reasonably, we tend to react as if the world has ended.

Disappointment, that feeling of being totally let down, gets us into the most trouble. When our expectations are not met, we begin to feel

isolated and alone. We wonder what's wrong with us, with our world, and with God. Carried to the extreme, these feelings can lead to a slip because they create the sense there's no point in going on.

### **Three Kinds of Expectations**

It's possible to classify expectations in three ways: the expectations we place on ourselves, those we place on others, and those we place on things and situations. Any of these can be destructive, and often they work together.

We usually find we are expecting a great deal from ourselves — perhaps more than we would expect from anyone else. And when we fail to live up to these self-imposed expectations, we're harder on ourselves than anyone else would be.

What's happening here? Why do we place such demands on ourselves, then beat ourselves up when we think we fail? It's partly because we've enjoyed a little success in recovery, and we want more. We haven't yet learned our limits or how to bring balance to the goals we set for ourselves. It's also partly because we feel we must find a way to make up for the time we lost while we were drinking and using. We think we have to rush madly about to achieve the success that surely would have been ours if we hadn't

been chemically dependent.

Take, for example, the woman who almost came apart because she didn't receive an expected promotion. At a meeting, her story went something like this: "I'm just not good enough. No matter how hard I try I can never measure up. I don't know what's the matter with me."

This is not a balanced response. Obviously, the woman had expectations far beyond the reality of the situation. Chances are she had engaged in fantasies about what it would be like to have the extra money and the additional prestige. It's quite possible, too, that she did nothing but fantasize. We can get so caught up in our expectations that we fail to take necessary actions.

But this person could have avoided the problem in the first place by not getting tangled up in expectations. From the program point of view, the problem here is the emotional upset, not the failure to get the promotion.

We also tend to expect a lot from the people around us. If we're parents, we expect more from our kids. We expect more from our co-workers, spouses, and friends. In fact, it's possible to demand so much from others that we put a heavy strain on our relationships.

A classic example of this happens at least once to all of us when we're doing Twelve Step

work. A newcomer expresses the desire to have what we have, and we immediately lay plans to help them get, and stay, sober. We plan what meetings they should go to and when they should work their Fourth Step. Underlying our intentions is the demand that they get sober our way, and if they don't, we're crushed.

If the woman who didn't get promoted had blamed other people, she might have sounded like this at a meeting: "I don't understand it! I have seniority. The person they promoted doesn't know half as much as I do. It's not fair. I'll show them, I'll quit — better yet, I'll sue." In this instance, she is failing to take any responsibility herself and totally blaming other people. Again, the root cause is expectations.

The third type of expectation we often have to deal with is the expectation we hold for places and things. How many people have you known who have taken a vacation and come home disappointed? Or what about the person who is disappointed with a new car or other purchase? When this happens we are looking outside ourselves for a quick fix. We think the new clothes or new apartment are the keys to happiness. Although there is certainly nothing wrong with material possessions, they will not give us contentment — and to expect them to is a sure way to be disappointed.

How do we let these expectations of ourselves and others sneak up on us? Perhaps it's just another example of the pendulum swinging too far. When we came to the program we were whipped, sure we were condemned to a boring life made up of nothing but meetings and the constant struggle to stay clean and sober. With time, we discovered our lives could be fuller and more productive than we had ever dreamed possible. So we swung to the opposite extreme, expecting serenity, fame, fortune, and love. We placed high demands on ourselves and others.

### Some Solutions

So what are we to do? We've worked the Steps, we've gone to lots of meetings, we've been involved in service, and all of a sudden the bottom drops out of our world. What now?

The first step is to recognize the problem. It's probably safe to say that any time you feel any disappointment at all, it's because you've had expectations that haven't been met. Usually there's some sort of warning. Often it's easy to ignore the first signals. We may find ourselves discounting little disappointments that crop up, only to discover they are happening with greater frequency. If we don't catch the symptoms quickly, we're likely to find ourselves either

worn down by a whole series of little disappointments, or suddenly faced with a truly large one.

The quickest way to deal with any disappointment is to do a spot-check inventory when it happens. This can be simply a matter of asking, "Why am I disappointed? What did I expect to happen in this situation?" When we answer these questions honestly, we're apt to see we were placing unreasonable demands on ourselves, someone else, or the situation. Once we get a handle on the demand we've made, we can let it go immediately.

It's also helpful to ask, "What can I learn from this?" Of course, one thing is not to have our expectations so high. But we can look a bit deeper and see if we wanted a certain outcome simply to enhance our own view of ourselves or for some other entirely selfish reason.

It's generally true that when we want something only for ourselves, without understanding the contribution we can make to others, we end up disappointed. So checking for selfishness and self-centeredness is also helpful.

Sometimes we need to do a more thorough overhaul of our attitudes. Again, an inventory, this time perhaps a written one, is a good way to start. By writing down several recent disappointments, our response or reaction to them,

and asking the same sorts of questions, we're likely to discover a pattern. We may discover we are simply being selfish, or we are trying to run the show our way, or we've been expecting something for nothing.

It's easy to get confused about the difference between planning and projecting — projecting is just another term for expectations. There is nothing wrong, of course, with making plans. In fact, if we didn't make plans nothing much would get done. The problems arise when we demand our plans turn out the way we expect them to. We must learn not to demand or count on specific results.

### **Life is a Series of Adjustments**

One way of looking at life is to see it as a constant series of adjustments. It's not unlike driving down a road; in order to get to the store, you don't simply point your car in that direction — you follow the road, which is probably not a direct line from your house to the shopping center. And in order to stay on the road, you must make constant adjustments with the steering wheel and the gas pedal.

If you held the wheel in one position, you'd find yourself in the ditch. Expecting a specific result is rather like holding the steering wheel in

one position. It's difficult to be flexible and to respond when we take the bit in our teeth, determined we're going to achieve our outcome no matter what.

When we're driving, we get to our destination not only by having a goal, but by making constant adjustments using feedback. We may notice, for instance, that we're headed a bit too far to the right, so we turn the wheel to the left. Perhaps we then notice we've overcompensated and are moving too close to the center, so we turn the wheel a bit to the right. We do this almost unconsciously, and, after making hundreds of these corrections we find ourselves safely at the store.

The same thing is true of life; if you want to be president of the company, you make plans based on your understanding of what it takes to be president. Perhaps you discover along the way that you need an extra course in business administration, so you make that adjustment. That doesn't mean your plans were wrong, just that you didn't have all the information.

The more flexible our plans are, the more likely we'll get where we want to go. When we're caught up in expectations, we can get locked into a particular course of action that turns out to lead in a different direction. Then we're unhappy because our expectations were not met.

We also may find, along the way, that our plans change. For example, we may need to go to the store after a storm, but we discover the road is closed. We then either decide to go back home and make do with what we have, or head in another direction to another store. The same thing is true about wanting to be president — we may find we are not willing to take another course, so we change our goal. If the goal is a good relationship, it doesn't work to place our hopes and expectations on one person until we're sure they return the feeling. Even then, we must avoid expecting that person to be the key to our happiness.

There's another attitude some of us acquire as we continue on the road to recovery. We feel we've already done so much, and we've been so good that we deserve to have our expectations met just because we're wonderful people. This is a particularly subtle notion, often showing up without our even realizing it.

Sometimes it takes the form of bargaining with God. We may actually be expecting God to provide us with some wonderful result, in spite of the fact we're not putting much effort into it. It's as if we were saying to ourselves, "Look, I've been sober five years now, things really ought to be going better." Well, perhaps they should and perhaps not. What we receive from

life really depends on what we put into it.

We will also discover as we continue in recovery that we tend to become involved in more things. Because we're getting well, we're able to take more risks. The more we do and the more risks we take, the more disappointments we will have if we don't learn how to temper our expectations with reality.

So our solution is to get back into the Steps again. First we need to concentrate on our inventory to discover where we went wrong. Then we need to continue to deepen our conscious contact with the God of our understanding through prayer and meditation. Finally, we need to reach out to others, perhaps in Twelve Step work, practicing the principles as we go along. It's a process of surrender.

### **Acceptance**

Acceptance is the key. We must come to terms with ourselves and discover just what we are capable of doing, not what we wish we could do. We need to learn that, like ourselves, every other person is doing the best he or she can. We must recognize that true happiness and satisfaction come to us through our Higher Power and not by anything we do strictly on our own. We must come to terms with the fact that nothing

happens to us without a purpose. Everything we do is an opportunity for growth, as long as we're willing to look at it that way.

Steps Ten, Eleven, and Twelve, the so-called maintenance Steps, can go a long way toward keeping our expectations at the delightful status of simply looking forward to tomorrow without the demand that it be to our order and on our terms.

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