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Today's Specials

Sculpture, acrylic on wood, found object sculpture, and copper plate printmaking

Every human being has a close relationship with expectations; they appear left and right in our daily lives. However, this relationship is more often times than not a cycle of high expectations that lead to defeat and disappointment, which leads to higher expectations resulting in detrimental mindsets and habits. This is a personal experience I have encountered countless times in my short eighteen years of life, and as I am growing older, I want to inspect these cycles and tendencies as well as how they affect my life.

When creating *Today's Specials*, I wanted to explore mine as well as the common human experience with expectations and how they control our perception of our experiences and life. I began by creating a tabletop with sides that would serve as a tablecloth. On this tabletop, I painted a checkered tablecloth with two placemats, plates, napkins, spoons, and knives. In the center of the table, I placed a customized Sprite bottle with Chamomile flowers as well as a menu listing different ironic statements related to expectations.

When someone sees a table, expectations immediately pop into mind: is the table set for two friends? Lovers? Or perhaps a child and their parent. This table serves as one big metaphor for how expectations control our perceptions. By simply looking at a table, expectations have surfaced in the viewers' minds. The choice to have spoons instead of forks is because the viewer will expect to see a knife and fork together but not a spoon and knife; this way, the viewers' expectations are immediately revealed. The statements made on the menu serve as a way to show how much expectations infiltrate our lives in an ironic and satirical sense. The Chamomile flowers are included in irony as well because these flowers hold the meaning of achieving one's dreams and goals.

Expectations:
What Power Do They Have Over Our
Perceptions?



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Writer's Note: This paper addresses and explores the different aspects of expectations and their effect on human perceptions. It goes into detail about what expectations are, where they are derived from, if they are inherently bad, and how they potentially control our perceptions. This paper also explores sub-topics such as control, mental health, as well as mindfulness. The topic of expectations and how they control our perceptions is important to me as it is something I am thinking and asking questions about as I am growing older and shaping new mindsets.

What are expectations, and how do they affect our lives every day? How do they influence our lives and control our perceptions? These are questions I have been asking myself as I am growing older. Around every corner, expectations appear and begin to control the trajectory of our perceptions. However, expectations, more often than not, lead to disappointment. As humans, we set high expectations for ourselves, unintentionally pile on immense amounts of pressure, and when we do not meet those expectations, we feel failure and defeat. Once those feelings seep into our minds, constant disappointment begins to control the perceptions of our lives or something we are passionate about. Our own expectations control how we perceive the world around us.

The Oxford dictionary defines expectations as “a strong belief that something will happen or be the case in the future” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Expectations are not inherently negative; however, it is the power that we grant them that can cause them to “become rigid barriers keeping us from taking the right actions or moving past our disappointments” (Oppong). Expectations are first introduced to us when we are young, whether by parents, caregivers, extended family, teachers, or coaches. These are individuals who have a certain amount of authority over us at a young age and expect certain things from us. They expect us to succeed, display good behavior, and put our best selves forward; even the most relaxed parent has certain

expectations of their children. Society also sets expectations for us: it is expected we go to college, get a good stable job, get married before we are 40, settle down in a good neighborhood, and start a family. We are faced with expectations every single day. As we grow older, we begin to set expectations for ourselves. This could range from setting an expectation to complete a, b, and c and having an extremely productive day to set a goal to become a world-renowned freestyle skier. These expectations can begin small but grow higher and higher. Where things get interesting is when we fail to meet those expectations.

In the exploration of what expectations are, two more ideas can be discussed: when reduced, are expectations just pre-judgments or misguided certainty? Our past experiences can greatly affect how we view future events. They can cause us to have unrealistic expectations for ourselves. These can stem from pre-judgments regarding future events; a pre-judgment is “an opinion about a situation or a person that is formed before knowing or considering all of the facts” (the Cambridge English Dictionary). For instance, if someone was not accepted to a job they applied for, they may have certain expectations or *pre-judgments* about the next job they apply for. Expectations can also be misguided certainty, and this also stems from past experiences. For example, a person can have an expectation that because they studied for two hours a day, took mock tests, and showed up early to the test, they will get a good grade. However, any number of unpredictable events can interfere with this *certainty* and cause the person to not meet the expectation they set. Our past events and expectations hold great power over our perceptions.

As previously stated, we learn to set high expectations for ourselves from a young age. What happens when we do not meet these expectations? We immediately feel a level of disappointment, failure, and defeat. Oftentimes it is a strong level of disappointment, and because of this, we set higher expectations to *do better*. When we fail to meet those, we feel even greater

disappointment. And so a detrimental cycle begins of expectations and disappointment. We begin to blame ourselves, feel deep personal failure, fear we are disappointing others, and our self-esteem becomes damaged. We fear we are losing control and feel inferior to others. We become hard on ourselves and begin to fear the future and that we *will not be able to control it*. This is where control comes into play; we were unable to control the past, and so we try to control the future by setting new expectations. However, that is the point, isn't it? – control in our reality.

Before exploring how control relates to expectations, an exploration of the scale of control and mental health is important. Control exists on a scale or spectrum, just as most things do. There is a level of control that creates a healthy structure in our lives that can minimize stress and anxiety; “A persistent lack of control in a person’s life often leads to depression and anxiety” (Croston). For example, someone who struggles with stress or anxiety that leads to procrastination could benefit from healthy structure and control of surroundings and environment. This could be in the form of limiting social media use, setting reminders, alarms, and timers, consistently using planners, and asking for help from others to hold you accountable. However, just like anything, there is a certain amount of control that can become detrimental to one’s mental health. For example, if someone experiences an unstable childhood with the absence of ample parental care, this can cause someone to live in a constant state of anxiety; “Anything that makes us feel helpless, lacking fundamental control over our surroundings, can have a lasting impact, particularly if this happens when we are young” (Croston). This can lead to someone feeling a constant desire for control and always grappling to control everything and everyone around them. However, constantly grappling for control in an unpredictable reality can become detrimental to one’s mental health.

We live in an unpredictable reality. Every day, things happen that are out of our control. We cannot predict what will happen. We do not know if we will spill a cup of coffee on our shirt, making us late for school, and because of this, we miss a test and get a bad grade, and so on. If we set an expectation that day to ace that test, it does not matter how much studying or work we put into preparing for that test; an unpredictable factor could interfere with our plan: our expectation. However, we do not see this factor as a valuable reason and instead blame ourselves, “Many people can’t get over their disappointments because they are hung up over what reality should be— a single perception or lens with which they see the world” (Oppong). The truth is we live in an unpredictable reality, and there are only a handful of things we can rely on; with the passage of time, the sun will rise and set. So why do we as humans continue to grapple for control in our reality? The truth is we do not like unpredictability; we like to know when things are going to happen and to be able to have control over our lives. We are creatures of habit, and we like routine. We become frustrated when things interrupt these routines. We have a hard time allowing room for flexibility, patience, and adaptability. This is because it interferes with our expectations for our lives.

The story of Sarah Höfflin’s skiing career exemplifies this detrimental cycle and grappling for control. When Höfflin was young, she believed she was going to be a chicken catcher; however, as she grew, she decided she wanted to be a doctor. When she applied to universities in the UK, she ended up being denied from each. Finally, she was accepted to one, and here she found a passion for freestyle skiing. This soon became her life, and she wanted to become a world-renowned freestyle skier. Höfflin worked and trained hard, and she was eventually recruited for an Olympic team. However, when she was competing in the Olympic tryouts, she messed up on an extremely easy and simple trick. The result was a torn ACL; Höfflin was, in a single instant,

thrown backwards to square one. She was bedridden for extended periods of time and had to learn to walk again. She was unable to ski or compete anymore. However, Höfflin worked her way up again, but this time, she lowered her expectations. She set little achievable goals, and slowly, she was back to where she was and competing in the Olympics. When she's about to compete now, she still gets nervous, but her boyfriend says to her, "It's just skiing" ("Why Lowering Expectations Can Be A Road To Success (WLECBARTS)," 00:15:11-00:18:58). Höfflin has expressed how much pressure this relieves and when she stands at the top of the hill about to start her competition, she says to herself, "Alright, let's have some fun!" ("WLECBARTS," 00:16:08-00:18:58). This has allowed her to fully enjoy her passion; it is not about winning or losing anymore; rather, it is about doing the thing Höfflin loves most, skiing. It has become just skiing ("WLECBARTS," 00:00:00-00:18:58).

As displayed in Höfflin's story, setting high expectations for yourself can begin to control your perceptions of your life or something you are passionate about. When someone is constantly setting high expectations, they are consistently disappointed and living in a state of defeat. This begins to alter one's perception of life. For Höfflin, skiing began to be seen as a burden and something she could not fail, or else her life would have no meaning. Instead of having fun when she was skiing, she was thinking about her future and how she completed a trick would determine her future. She was no longer having fun doing the thing she loved. Her perception was controlled by her expectations. However, as she lowered her expectations, skiing became just that, skiing, and she could have fun again with her passion. Breaking her ACL was part of that unpredictable reality—she had no control over that happening, but it altered her entire career and life. Now Höfflin comes to skiing with a new mindset—to ski and have fun. It is no longer about winning or losing, just simply skiing.

The way to release the control expectations have over perceptions is to lower expectations. To clarify, this does not mean to expect disappointment—it means to release *any* expectations. For example, Höfflin does not expect to win, and she does not expect to *lose*. When taking a test, do not expect to ace it, and do not expect to fail it. When letting go of expectations, we are also letting go of the pressure we put on ourselves. This allows us to *breathe*, and we can focus on doing our best, having fun, and enjoying our passion and life. We are thinking about the future or the past; we are just focusing on what is right in front of us. When pressure, worrying, and overthinking are eliminated, we are allowing ourselves the joy of the present moment, and our perception of things begins to be much brighter and more positive. When problems arise, we can meet them with a clearer mind and a more adaptable attitude. Flexibility and patience are more accessible, and we are able to enjoy the things we are passionate about and our lives.

An important question to explore in the discussion of expectations is: will the removal of expectations ultimately lead to apathy? This is a crucial point, as apathy is the “lack of interest, enthusiasm, or concern” (New Oxford American Dictionary) and is something that is also counterproductive in life. When I, and others, are discussing the benefits of lowering expectations, the message is not to stop caring but rather to release control over certain factors we have no dictation over. For example, I am currently applying to college, and this is an area where expectations are bound to surface. There are things I have and do not have control over: I do have control over putting in hard work, gathering all the forms, transcripts, and recommendations I need, and submitting my applications on time. However, I do not have control over whether or not I will be accepted to the schools I applied to. It is natural for expectations to arise, but the way I can prevent them from controlling my perceptions is to focus on the work that I put in and know I put my best self forward in the application process. The key is looking for a balance because it is

unrealistic to try to eliminate all expectations. A balance could look like setting small achievable goals, such as learning and practicing a freestyle skiing trick, but not setting the expectation to win the next competition. The goal that could be set before the next competition could be to have fun and show the audience the wonders of freestyle skiing. Striking a balance is key since we live in a world full of expectations. As previously mentioned, expectations are not inherently negative, but it is when they seize too much control is when they become detrimental to our perceptions and lives.

These ideas could raise some questions relating to mental health: is anxiety related to the future, while depression is related to the past? Mental health is an extremely complex topic, and every day, new things are being discovered about this field of study. Due to this, there is rarely a single answer to questions related to mental health. However, there are some answers I can present in response to the posed questions: anxiety can surface from any number of sources, but anticipatory anxiety is a specific disorder related to future events. Now, everyone has a certain amount of anxiety relating to the future; however, when this anxiety becomes persistent, and a person can only focus on the negative outcomes, is when the anxiety has grown out of control and becomes excessive as well as detrimental. Expectations play a role in this because the person is expecting negative results in the future, and this takes control of their perceptions of the future. Although the exact causes of persistent depressive disorder are still unknown, Mayo Clinic presents the past as one potential cause, “As with major depression, traumatic events such as the loss of a loved one, financial problems or a high level of stress can trigger persistent depressive disorder in some people” (Mayo Clinic Staff). This presents evidence that depression stems from past traumatic events, which can affect our expectations about the future, ultimately shifting our perceptions accordingly.

So lowering expectations sounds great, but how can that be achieved when it is something so embedded into our everyday lives? The simple but somewhat challenging answer is remaining in the present moment—mindfulness. As defined in the Oxford dictionary, mindfulness is “a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment” (New Oxford American Dictionary). We hear a lot about this today, and it may seem like a big thing to tackle. However, remaining in the present moment (or mindfulness) does not need to become another overwhelming task or *expectation*. Studies show the numerous benefits, and it can be a simple personal task that lasts just five minutes out of your day. For example, sitting listening to music (without scrolling through your phone), taking a walk in silence, or reading a chapter of a book. Each of these things can center you, quiet the constant chatter of the mind, and bring you back to the present. It can grow into a longer practice; for example, I strive each day to sit outdoors for 30 minutes to read a book, listen to calming music, and journal for one page. It’s a simple practice, but I have chosen three things that center me, and through the rest of the day, I am more flexible, and I am able to remain in the present. The practice can also be shorter: when the mind begins to become loud, three deep breaths can be a simple way to bring your mind back to the present. It is not about meditating for an hour each day; it is about finding the small thing that brings you back to the present. When you are in the present, you are no longer regretting the past or worrying about the future.

Expectations can be easily eliminated with the practice of mindfulness, and their control over your perceptions is released. Expectations lead to disappointment; disappointment leads to control of perceptions, and this traps an individual in a detrimental cycle. However, by remaining in the present moment, the cycle is broken, and one can fully enjoy their passions and life.

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