

Not-so-great Expectations

A few days ago I was at a stoplight waiting to get on the freeway. I noticed a guy walking over to the freeway onramp to hitchhike. He set his things down and stuck out his thumb. As soon as the first few cars passed him without stopping, he held up his arms dramatically, clearly frustrated that nobody was picking him up. I was surprised (and I'll admit, somewhat amused) by how quickly he got impatient and how righteous he was about it. It seems to me if I was hitchhiking, I might stand there a couple of hours before I got impatient. I'd be patient for a while, then at some point I'd have the idea that I'd waited long enough, and sure enough the impatience would set in. In fact, each person reading this has a certain point at which they'd get agitated, and some might never get agitated. The threshold would be different for each person simply because it would be based on their own ideas, expectations, and what they thought was reasonable.

I was struck by watching this hitchhiker because in a way we're all like that throughout life. We have a code that we think life should adhere to and we get upset when the code is not followed. My husband switched his cellular service from Verizon to Sprint. He is perpetually dissatisfied with Sprint's customer service. He complains that the hold times are too long and their reps are unaccommodating. What I'm suggesting is that he's not actually frustrated because Sprint is bad and wrong (although he would argue otherwise). I'm suggesting that the reason he's frustrated is because he has a set of arbitrary standards, set by his memory of Verizon, and he's comparing Sprint to Verizon. His frustration comes from the expectations within his own mind. Conversely, before the Sprint experience, he used to complain about Verizon's hold times, whereas now he is one of Verizon's biggest fans. If being on hold caused impatience, people would never vary in their tolerance for waiting on hold. Our upset in life does not come from life itself – waiting for a ride or long hold times – although it may appear that way to the person who feels put out. That upset comes from the fact that life is not going according to our plan. *Our plan* is what causes our upset, and our plan is a collection of the thinking we've made up in our own minds. The upset itself is generated from within our own minds, not from life itself. This is a subtle yet critical distinction that has profound implications for our mental health.

There are several ways in which our expectations and ideas about life will play out that are very predictable. I have a friend whose wife left him unexpectedly. On certain days, he sees the divorce as something that was never supposed to

happen. On those days he gets stuck in resentment and defeat. On other days, however, he sees that life takes unexpected turns and he's much more philosophical and humble about it. Our attachment to our codes and expectations change depending upon our mood, or state of mind, at the moment. As people's moods go down and they get more upset or tense. The more upset they are, the more rigid they are about their ideas and take life more personally. As people's moods improve, they get more easygoing and composed. As they get more easygoing, they get less attached to their ideas about life and see themselves as part of a bigger picture. You'll also notice that people become more or less effective in life depending on their mood state and the ideas from which they're operating. On days when my friend felt betrayed by his wife and the divorce, he would get very adversarial during their legal proceedings. As a result, their custody arrangements would become more difficult and complicated. On days when he was more accepting of the divorce, he was more cooperative during their conversations and they could cover a lot of ground. This example demonstrates the power of our thinking to either disrupt and undermine what we're trying to do in life in the moment, or help us and make us more effective.

I am attempting in this article to illustrate the profound effect our thinking has on us as we go through life. Our codes, standards, ideas, and expectations are just a few of the infinite forms our thinking can take, and they either help or hinder us in life. Often we find it hard to see these mechanisms happening in ourselves. However, it's fairly easy to see other people, like the hitchhiker, upset because of his own expectations. Realizing that we all fall into that trap will help us take our codes and standards with a grain of salt. We understand on some level that we're all as righteous as the hitchhiker in our worst moments. We all get unreasonable and take life personally at times. Generally we have no idea it's happening and that we are creating it ourselves. Similarly, have the ability to understand that our attachment to our codes and standards will change as our mood changes. This understanding will give us the confidence that our frustration and upset will improve as our state of mind improves. Although we're all "under the influence" of this system that is invisible to us, we all have the potential to insulate ourselves simply by waking up to the incredible forces of our own minds.

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