

Great Expectations

ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS BRINGING YOU CLOSER TO YOUR SPOUSE OR PUSHING YOU FURTHER APART?



WE'D BEEN MARRIED only two months when Bernie handed me a potato in the grocery store. "Karen, do you know what this is?"

"Of course I do!" I responded. "It's a potato!" *That was a strange question, I thought. Maybe it was some kind of joke.*

"Why don't we eat potatoes?" He looked puzzled.

"Because . . . well . . . because I don't like them. They're icky! I've not eaten potatoes since I left home."

"But I love them! It's not a proper dinner without potatoes!" Bernie has a strong German heritage.

So we bought a sack of potatoes. And I learned how to cook them. But I'll never learn to love them like Bernie does.

When we get married we bring a shedload of expectations into our new relationship, including little details such as how often we'll eat potatoes, dessert, or pizza, as well as bigger details, such as how we'll cope with our conflicts and manage our cash. The challenge is that we're not aware of our expectations . . . until they go unmet.

Most of them seem so obvious to us that we can't even describe what they are. Our expectations have been strengthened by years of watching our

parents and grandparents, reading books, and consuming TV shows. Patterns form in our thoughts, slowly shaping how we expect people to behave, including our spouses.

We rarely discuss our expectations because we just assume that our husband or wife will behave a certain way or do certain jobs around the house because that's what we saw when we grew up. For instance, our garden was almost overrun by weeds because I expected Bernie to do the gardening, and he expected me to do it.

Now we know how difficult it can be to manage our expectations and how complicated it can be to talk about them. It's painful to realize that Bernie may not be living up to my expectations, or that I'm not living up to his (which is why it took us two months to talk about potatoes).

When relationships don't turn out the way we expected, we can feel disappointed, rejected, frustrated, hurt, and sad, without really understanding why. We're just aware that something's missing. At other times we know exactly what our expectations are, and we fully understand what our partner is not doing, or what they're doing differently from what we expected.

It's useful to reflect on our expectations and to ask whether our expectations are bringing us closer together or pushing us further apart. If they're hurting us and our marriage, then maybe we need to let go of our unrealistic expectations and find some different ones.

EXPLORING EXPECTATIONS

Pray that the Holy Spirit will give you useful insights into your relationship and give you the courage to talk lovingly about these expectations.

- What different expectations do you have for husbands and wives?
- What expectations do you have for marriage?

For each expectation, ask yourself:

- Where did this expectation come from (my parents' or grandparents' relationship, books, culture, traditions, fantasies, hopes, etc.)?
- How valid is this expectation for *our* marriage, in *our* life situation, *today*?
- How might this expectation be more challenging to fulfill in a ministry marriage?
- Have I discussed these expectations with my husband or wife, or have I just assumed that they'll "know" what I expect?
- When/why might my husband or wife find it difficult to meet my expectations (due to time, health, different personality, different priorities, different family experiences, etc.)?



- What effect would it have on our relationship if I didn't have these expectations?
- Which of my expectations might I need to modify or release so that I no longer feel disappointed and hurt?
- What effect does it have on my partner and our marriage when I don't fulfill his or her expectations?

We're not aware of our expectations . . . until they go unmet.



- How can I ask my partner for forgiveness for the effect that my unrealistic or unexpressed expectation has had on our relationship?

CONVERSATION STARTERS

Loving, humble, and forgiving conversations can take away our fear of talking about sensitive subjects (see 1 John 4:18).

- “I realize that when we got married, I expected you to _____ because _____. When this unspoken expectation wasn’t met, I felt _____ and showed it by _____. I now see that my expectation wasn’t very considerate because _____ and I may have hurt you by _____. I am very sorry. Please forgive me.”
- “We all bring different expectations into our marriage. That’s normal. Now that I understand more about your expectation and where it comes from, maybe I can learn how to meet it better. Tell me what you would like me to do and why, and I’ll try to be more considerate.”

GREATER EXPECTATIONS?

After a few years Bernie and I started to develop healthier and more realistic expectations for our ministry marriage. Here are some of ours. What would you include on your list of realistic expectations?

- Every marriage, especially a ministry marriage, needs plenty of prayer, love,

patience, understanding, and flexibility. (Rom. 12:9-18; 1 Cor. 13)

- There will be times when life will be amazingly happy. We need to remember these special moments. (Rom. 12:15; Phil. 4:8)
- There will be times when life will be sad and challenging. We need to learn how to comfort each other effectively. (Rom. 12:15)
- There will be times when we will let our partner down. We need to ask for forgiveness and do something special to show them our love. (Eph. 4:32)
- There will be times when we will be let down. We need to be flexible, forgiving, and graceful. (1 Cor. 13:5)
- There will be times when we need to juggle the complex needs of church members with the complex needs of our own family. We need to pray for loving wisdom when we have these dilemmas. (James 1:5)
- We are different people with different personalities, skills, ways of doing things, emotions, and hopes and fears. We will not think, feel, or do the same things. Our differences are just differences. They make life interesting, and they bring different strengths and perspectives to the relationship. (Rom. 15:7)
- We will both change and grow throughout our marriage. So we need to keep listening, talking, and learning together. 7

Karen Holford is a family therapist and family ministries director for the Trans-European Division.