



Let Go of Harmful Expectations

Personal dreams and goals create motivation, fulfillment, and happiness.

Whereas "expectations" set us up for disappointment, frustration, and shame. They ultimately *kill* motivation. Overall, they hold us back and keep us less happy.

Especially if they are expectations placed on us by someone else. Fun fact: most expectations we put on ourselves actually came from someone else, originally. You've internalized their expectations.

This exercise will help you identify harmful expectations and transform them into helpful goals. I'll walk you through each step to make it easy.

For best results,

- *Before completing this exercise, identify your personal [values](#) (5 – 10 min.) and [Vision](#) (10 – 20 min.)*
- *Psychological change is an incremental process. So push yourself with the exercise, but not to the point of burnout. If you're really stuck on a step, take a break or move on.*

Step 1:

Write out 1-3 major expectations you have for yourself or expectations that others have for you.

These often sound like "I should _____", "I'm supposed to _____", "I have to _____", "They want me to _____", or "They'll be disappointed if I _____".

Ex: "I must not be late to anything, ever."

Ex: "I should be getting better grades in college."

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Step 2:

For each Expectation, ask yourself: does this actually come from me? Versus from my parents? Or from my culture? Or from something else external?

If you're not sure, it can help to consider it not from the perspective of your usual self, but from your best self. What do you think and want when you're feeling your most secure and confident? Also, consider if the Expectation aligns with your Values and contributes to your Vision for your life. If not, it's probably from an external source.

Hint: most of your expectations for yourself actually come from someone else. External things can feel like a part of you over time. Someone communicated their expectations so powerfully or so often that you started to believe it must be reasonable and started holding yourself to the standards that they forced upon you. Even if other people's expectations were *not* explicitly spoken, you may have felt like you had to act a certain way to earn approval or love. Even if other people had good intentions, the resulting expectations are usually harmful.

Ex: your father told you that, where he was raised, being late is an unacceptable sign of disrespect, so you feel you must never be late.

Ex: teachers told you over and over that you're so smart that you'll surely go to a prestigious college and get excellent grades, so you feel ashamed if you do not.

Now, for each one, if it comes from *any* external source, cross it out, literally! Replace it (below) with something that feels genuine to you. Or simply don't replace it at all. Let it go.

If there are any that you think do *not* come from an external source, copy them below, leaving you with a new list that is 100% you.

For now, it's ok if they still sound like "should" expectations.

Ex: "I don't agree that being late to informal events is a problem. But I shouldn't ever be late to formal events. I'll write that down." OR "This just isn't important to me. I'll drop it."

Ex: "I actually don't think grades matter for my future career. I just need good enough grades that I don't have to retake any classes and prolong my degree, so I'll write that."

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Step 3:

By now, you've let yourself let go of expectations that were not true to you. But even your own expectations are usually unhelpful and even harmful. They bring frustration, disappointment, self-shame, and demotivation.

So, for any that still sound like expectations, turn each one into a goal that fits your own desires and values by making it start with "I will."

Don't worry if they sound like terrible goals – we'll fix them later.

Ex: "I will never be late to formal events."

Ex: "I will get just good enough grades that I don't have to retake any classes and prolong my degree."

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Step 4:

Do any of your goals sound ridiculous or toxic now? **If so, change them (below) to be more realistic and healthy, OR eliminate them altogether if they simply don't align with your personal priorities.**

Do any of them involve not doing something? **Turn those “do not”s into “do”s.** Negative goals tend to bring more shame than fulfillment, and it's very difficult to avoid a behavior if we have nothing better with which to replace it.

Once you're done, all of your limiting expectations will be turned into positive goals.

EXAMPLE OF THE ENTIRE PROCESS:

(Notice how we change it to become more nuanced, realistic, positive, actionable, and ultimately helpful)

External expectation: “I'm not supposed to be late to anything, ever.”

Internal toxic expectation: “I shouldn't be late to any formal event, ever.”

Unrealistic goal: “I will never be late to any formal event.”

More realistic goal (but still negative): “I will not be late to any formal event, except maybe when there are unforeseeable emergencies or other higher priorities.”

Positive, actionable goal: “I will make sure I'm on time to all formal events by leaving ≥10 min. earlier than I need to, except maybe when there are unforeseeable emergencies or other higher priorities.”

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★ **By now, you've turned all of your limiting expectations into helpful goals, or you've let go of them altogether. Congratulations! ★**

But your brain patterns can't change completely overnight, so you'll almost certainly have times when your thoughts or behaviors revert to those original, toxic expectations. That's totally normal!

When that happens, you need to **1)** have the mindfulness to notice it's happening, then **2)** remind yourself what you really want. If needed, mentally or physically take yourself through this exercise again.

With practice, your old patterns of thinking and acting will fade, replaced by the new ones that you just created. You'll replace the junk that you had no control over with valuable habits of your own choosing.

If you want to make this process maximally helpful, complete the last two steps below:

Step 5 (recommended):

Turn your goals into full S.M.A.R.T. goals. (Google this if you're unfamiliar with it.)

Then make specific plans of how you will hit them. These plans generally should result in you actually adding something to your calendar, making reminders, sharing your goals with others, changing your environment, etc.

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Step 6 (recommended):

Share this worksheet with me, if you're comfortable with that.

