

Relationship Expectations: How Differences Between You and Your Partner Can Lead to Relationship Trouble

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

A real-life example:

Jasmine came from a close-knit family where her parents spent almost all of their free time together. Her most cherished memories were of her parents sharing stories about their respective work days. On the weekends her parents ran household errands together and her mother spent several hours in her garden. Her parents' strong sense of togetherness made Jasmine feel secure and loved.

From these early family experiences, Jasmine formed the expectation that she would spend most of her free time with her husband. She was surprised and upset when Orlando signed up for a three-month woodworking class with one of his friends from work--especially because the class was six hours each Saturday.

In her own words, she felt "betrayed" by her husband. Orlando was surprised by Jasmine's response and felt that she was being unreasonable. He argued that he is committed to his wife and loves to spend time with her, but felt it would be fun to take this class with his friend. He planned to make gifts for Jasmine from the skills he learned as a woodworker.

Unexamined Expectations

The above example shows the power of unspoken expectations. Orlando believed that it was important to spend time with his wife. He also felt that it was reasonable to spend time with his friends and didn't think that this detracted from his marriage. Jasmine's expectations were clearly different from Orlando's and these differences caused significant conflict in their marriage.

You and your partner will have expectations that are in sync. This will be evident when your relationship runs smoothly--you'll feel like kindred spirits and the time spent together will feel like a well-harmonized dance.

Of course there will be differences between you and your partner. This is normal and to be expected (since each of you is an individual, after all), and not all of your out-of-sync expectations will cause relationship difficulties. For instance, if you expected your partner to be neat around the house, and you discover s/he can be sloppy at times, you might feel nothing more than passing annoyance. Getting back to Jasmine, however, she equated her husband choosing to spend time with her as evidence that he loved her and was loyal to her. So when those expectations fell out of sync, the relationship suffered a big blow.

When your expectations are value-laden and are out of sync with your partner's, you're more likely to experience conflict.

Communicating your unspoken expectations

Have discussions with your partner about what is important to each of you, and you'll discover that you both hold different, important expectations. Trial and error will also bring those differences to light, since it is impossible to try and decipher each and every expectation that you both hold, no matter how much you discuss and try to anticipate them.

Below is a list of areas that might be relevant to your relationship. Talk to your partner about the expectations you both hold (and don't hold) in these different categories. Ignore categories that you both agree don't apply to you, and add any of your own:

Honesty and sharing of personal information
Communication
The meaning of commitment
Sex
Money and finances
Household responsibilities
The role of extended family in your lives
Individual and mutual friends
Having, raising and disciplining children
Religion and spiritual life

If you're having trouble deciding how to go about asking questions relating to these categories, here's an example: Let's use the category of "the meaning of commitment" above. Ask yourself and your partner what commitment specifically means to each of you. How do you plan on demonstrating your commitment to your partner? Is your idea of commitment based on what you observed in your family growing up or did you learn about commitment somewhere else?

Take your time with this important discussion. It should feel like a mutual exploration and discovery, not an interrogation of each other.

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Author Bio

Over the past fifteen years Richard Nicastro, Ph.D. has helped couples build stronger, more fulfilling marriages and relationships. Dr. Nicastro has lectured at several universities and now conducts workshops for couples on a wide range of issues. His relationship advice has appeared on television, radio and in national magazines. A member of the International Coach Federation, Dr. Nicastro is passionate about coaching and believes that healthy relationships can add meaning and fulfillment to our lives. His goal is to guide individuals and couples as they implement the skills that will allow their relationships to flourish.

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