

# Understanding the Power of Relationship Expectations

By Richard Nicastro, Ph.D.

Expectations play an important part in our lives (you expect your car to start in the morning; your boss expects you to show up for work; you expect the school bus to drop your children off at the same place it picked them up). Similarly, expectations are psychologically important when you enter a marriage or committed relationship (you expect to spend certain times of the day with your spouse/partner; if you're living together, you expect that s/he will contribute to the running of the household; s/he expects that you will be supportive during stressful times).

*It's impossible to enter a relationship without expectations.*

While expectations can do us a world of good, there are times when they can actually block healthy growth in your relationship (and almost any expectation can ultimately be problematic if you're relying on it too heavily, relying on it while excluding new incoming information to the contrary).

## How expectations can lead to relationship problems

Your relationship is more likely to proceed smoothly when your expectations are in sync with your partner's—for instance, you both expect to have children and you agree on parenting issues (discipline, schooling, friends). When you and your partner hold conflicting expectations (you've always expected to live close to your family but your partner is adamant about moving across the country), marriage problems—such as a breakdown in communication, increased conflict, hurt feelings and a loss of intimacy—can arise.

Relationship trouble is also likely when one or both of you hold unrealistic expectations. Here you place demands on your partner (and the relationship) that are unreasonable and unlikely to come to fruition. An example would be expecting that the marriage will *always* make you happy or that you and your partner will *always* see eye-to-eye and agree with each other.

But holding differing expectations in certain relationship areas is a reality for many couples—after all, you and your partner each have unique needs and personality styles, despite the similarities that may exist between you. The goal isn't to find someone who holds the exact same expectations as you do or to convince your partner that s/he must abandon his/her long-held beliefs and see the world exactly as you do. Instead, the goal is to increase awareness of each other's expectations and to find and work toward common ground when possible and learn to accept the inherent differences that may always exist.

Preparing for a marriage or committed relationship is an excellent idea. Part of your relationship preparation should involve increased awareness of one another's expectations. This information will allow for better communication, mutual understanding and compromise, and it will help prevent you from feeling blindsided down the road by any significant differences that may arise between you.

## A Few Marital/Relationship Categories to Consider

Listed below are five different areas of your relationship. For each of the listed relationship categories, you and your spouse/partner hold certain beliefs and expectations (though you may not be fully aware of them).

For instance, you may expect that you will both work and have a shared bank account; your partner may expect to have limited contact with extended family (seeing family mainly during the

holidays); you might expect to have a certain number of children and raise them with specific religious beliefs; and so on.

Can you see why it is important to open up the channels of communication around each other's expectations?

For each area of your relationship listed below, reflect on the following question and write your responses:

*What's important to me in this area is*\_\_\_\_\_.

When answering this question, be as specific as possible. The more detail, the better.

1. **Communication and compromise** (do you both value mutual sharing and working out issues with respect and equanimity?). *What's important to me in this area is*\_\_\_\_\_.

2. **Commitment** (how you expect to demonstrate your commitment throughout the life of the relationship). *What's important to me in this area is* \_\_\_\_\_.

3. **Childcare** (issues related to having and raising children). *What's important to me in this area is* \_\_\_\_\_.

4. **Money-management** (all the ways in which money will be handled and spent). *What's important to me in this area is* \_\_\_\_\_.

5. **Household maintenance tasks** (who does what around the house). *What's important to me in this area is*\_\_\_\_\_.

As you write and reflect on your responses, you will slowly gain greater clarity about your expectations for that area of your relationship. Be mindful of the expectations you hold that feel extremely important to you (i.e., you'd be unwilling to compromise regarding this issue if your partner holds a conflicting expectation).

Also note the expectations you hold that you'd be willing to compromise on if needed.

Ideally, you could have a discussion with your partner about each of these important relationship categories. This will help you become more attuned to your own needs and your partner's needs. Understanding your own and your partner's marital/relationship expectations will help you create a mindful and fully conscious union, a union where knowledge and mutual understanding are the norm.

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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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