



Expectations in Marriage

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When people enter into the marriage relationship, they bring with them a large, multi-faceted assortment of hopes and dreams that come from multiple life experiences. These hopes and dreams are what we commonly call expectations—a set of beliefs about the way things will be or should be in life. Expectations include such things as roles, life and death issues, relationship models, human behavior, romance, right-and-wrong, smart vs. stupid, responsibility, consequences for conduct, etc.

The Bible speaks to the bottom-line issues associated with unmet expectations in Proverbs 13:12:

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life.”

One of the keys to a healthy marriage is the development of a strategy (custom-made for every couple) for understanding, communicating, and analyzing the assortment of expectations that each person brings into the relationship. For example, as a couple prepares for marriage, they need to examine the simple question of “What does the husband do when he is not at work?” (and vice-versa for the wife). My wife grew up in a home where Mom stayed at home, and Dad worked 8 to 5 for the federal government. For most of his career, her Dad was home on Saturday mornings working in the yard, doing fix-up, paint-up projects, grooming and training the dog, cleaning out the garage, and washing the family car. When we got married, my wife was probably surprised that I did not do the same things on Saturday mornings. We had an opportunity to discuss “expectations”

It is critically important to a marriage to deal directly with expectations. If ignored or left unattended, unmet expectations inevitably lead to deep feelings of sadness, disappointment, hurt, hopelessness, frustration, and anger (a “sick heart” in the Scripture quoted above). In general, people feel either contented or disappointed with life in direct proportion to how well their perception of life matches what they had expected.

So, what exactly are we talking about in marriage? Here are some common expectations that people bring into marriage:

- We will always feel in love
- We will keep the same level of commitment we had at the beginning
- We will basically make each other happy
- Our romance and sex life will remain fresh and exciting
- We will share the same goals and interests
- We will be in agreement on issues of morality, honesty, justice, etc.
- We won't have any serious fights or conflicts without resolution
- We will share a set of common friends
- We will be supportive of each other's interests, careers, and other demands outside the home

Where do these expectations come from?

- Parents and family
- Television and music
- Past relationships
- Friends
- Religious traditions and beliefs
- Cultural background
- Personality differences

What are some of the relational traps associated with expectations? The authors of “Fighting for Your Marriage,” an excellent book on many marital topics by Dr. Scott Stanley and others, report these common hang-ups associated with expectations:

- We are often somewhat unaware of our own expectations....they may be present, but only subconsciously
- They may be unreasonable
- They may have never been voiced (spoken)
- Our partner may be unwilling to work toward meeting our expectations, even those that are reasonable.

Sometimes expectations are packaged in “I want you to change” messages designed to transform you into the person your partner expected you to be. Over a 45-year marriage (so far), Carol and I have been confronted with God’s Word on this subject many times. First, God tells us that it is He who wants to map out plans for us: **“I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”** And he then speaks to our man-made plans (including the ones we have for our mate) with these words:

Ps. 146:9: “The Lord... frustrates the plans of the wicked.”

Prov. 16:9: “We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.

Prov. 21:30: “Human plans, no matter how wise or well advised, cannot stand against the Lord.”

The bottom line seems to be this:

- Expectations are worth working through with your mate because “a longing fulfilled is a tree of life” (Prov. 13:12); and
- We should make sure any plans that we have for our mate are the same as those planned by God. Otherwise, we are on the losing side of the equation.

May the Lord give you grace and wisdom as you discover and strategize with your partner about your respective expectations.