



## **Expectations vs Reality - *Expectations, Reality, and the Role of Acceptance.***

### **Opening Exercise: The Expectations-Reality Game**

Directions: As a group read the following scenarios and then stop after each one and allow group members to share what their expectations would be if they were in that situation. Group members should try to be realistic based on their own personal knowledge and experiences. The scenarios have limited details so people will need to use their imagination to fill in the gaps. Then when the group is done discussing their expectations for the scenario, then flip a coin and read the outcome (reality) corresponding to the heads or tails coin flip. Pause and allow group members to discuss how they would feel about that outcome, especially considering their own expectations. Scenarios below:

1. **Court Date** – You’ve got an upcoming court date for a misdemeanor charge. By the letter of the law, you know you are guilty but there were some extenuating circumstances that could allow the judge to show you leniency if they consider it in court. **Discuss: What are your expectations and why?**
  - a. **Heads** – You go to court and the judge considers your special circumstances and lets you off the hook with no charges.
  - b. **Tails** – You go to court and you, and your lawyer plead your case, but the judge is stern and does not want to hear it. You are guilty as charged. Fortunately, it was a misdemeanor so it’s just a fine, but it is going on record.
2. **Achievement** – Imagine you achieved something you have been working toward like getting a new job, a promotion, passing a test or obtaining some kind of goal. People close to you know this is important to you. **Discuss: What are your expectations from your loved ones?**
  - a. **Heads** – Your close friends/family hear about what you achieved and take active steps to recognize it verbally by showing excitement and encouragement. Some even later give your cards and gifts.
  - b. **Tails** – Friends and family basically just say platitudes like “gee that’s really great” and then they do little else. Your achievement doesn’t seem to resonate with them in the same positive way that you feel about it.
3. **First Day** – Tomorrow is your first day somewhere new. You are starting either a new job, school, or a new treatment program. **Discuss: What are your expectations probably going to be like?**
  - a. **Heads** – The first day goes really well. People there are welcoming and seem like they are going to be fun to be around. You feel like everything is going to be a good fit for you and you will do well.
  - b. **Tails** – First day was worse than expected. People are cold and the environment just doesn’t feel comfortable or optimistic.
4. **Showtime** – Time to go to a place or event like a concert, a ballgame, a party, etc. Think of something that is within the range of things that you like and enjoy. **Discuss: How do you feel beforehand?**
  - a. **Heads** – The vibe at the event was great. People were having fun, and the energy was positive and enthusiastic. You had an exciting time.
  - b. **Tails** – Things were not what you were hoping. The people at the event had a negative vibe and lacked energy and enthusiasm. You found yourself wanting to leave early.
5. **Make up your own? If there is time and a desire to do so, work through some of your own scenarios. Perhaps consider some of your own real life current or recent situations to discuss.**



The gap between expectation and reality can cause a rollercoaster of emotions. When reality falls short of expectations, it can bring disappointment, frustration, or anxiety. But when reality exceeds our expectations, the emotional payoff can be elated and euphoric.

## The Kirby Expectations-Reality Scale

<u>Expectations vs. Reality</u>	<u>Description and Feelings</u>
<p><b>Expectations &gt; Reality</b></p> <p>(Expectations beforehand exceeded what really happened)</p>	<p><b>Disappointment</b></p> <p>Feelings of disappointment, frustration, disillusionment, sadness or even disheartened or discouraged. We have all had this experience of getting our hopes up but reality falls short</p>
<p><b>Expectations = Reality (Neutral or Positive Outcome)</b></p> <p>What you expected pretty much happened or close to and nothing bad occurred. Expectations were realistic, reasonable, and accurate.</p>	<p><b>Satisfaction</b></p> <p>Feeling a sense of satisfaction, contentment, or even relief. This can also lead to feelings of success, confidence, and stability, as beliefs about the outcome are confirmed by real-life events. It feels validating when we know we can predict the outcome with some degree of success.</p>
<p><b>Expectations = Reality (Negative Outcome)</b></p> <p>There are times when we expect something to be difficult beforehand and then in reality it is difficult. We knew it would be bad and it was bad</p>	<p><b>Mixed</b></p> <p>There is always the hope that we are going to be wrong when we expect something to be challenging and then later, we learn we were right, and it was difficult in reality. Still there are mix of feelings that may result.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Resignation</u> – Accepting the difficult reality: sometimes things just don't go our way.</li><li>• <u>Relief</u> – Sometimes even though we expected things to be tough and then they were, there is a sense of relief that we were able to see it coming and get through it.</li><li>• <u>Resolution</u> – The feeling that a task is resolved and now, we can move forward.</li></ul>
<p><b>Reality &gt; Expectations</b></p> <p>Sometimes reality exceeds our expectations and things go better than we had hoped for</p>	<p><b>Elation</b></p> <p>When reality exceeds expectations, it can be a very nice experience. Feelings can range from pleasantly to joyfully surprised. It is important to be grateful when reality exceeds expectations because it is special, should be embraced, and appreciated. (We cannot always expect this!)</p>

**"Expect the best, prepare for the worst, and be grateful for whatever comes."**



## Expectations vs. Reality: Coping and Thriving

Our happiness can be closely linked to our ability to learn to **manage expectations and reality**. Using the Kirby scale on the previous page, consider the following:

- **Expectations that exceed Reality = Disappointment** – If we find ourselves frequently feeling disappointed or discouraged because our expectations routinely end up exceeding reality then what needs to be done? (**Discuss**)
- **Answer: Learn to adjust and lower expectations.** Developing and maintaining reasonable expectations is a crucial aspect of managing mental health effectively. It involves cultivating a balanced and realistic outlook on life, which can contribute to a more positive and resilient mindset. Here are some questions for mindful self-reflection. Discuss these as a group allowing group members to answer as appropriate:
  - **Do I sometimes find myself having unrealistic expectations? – If so in what kinds of situations does this tend to happen?**
  - **Am I prone to perfectionism?**
  - **Do I sometimes expect too much from myself?**
  - **Do I sometime expect too much from other people?**
  - **Do I sometimes put unnecessary pressure on myself?**
  - **Do I sometimes set unreasonable, unrealistic, or unattainable goals?**
- **YES answers to any of these may indicate a need to learn to appropriately adjust expectations of self, others, or both.**

### Coping with Unrealistic Expectations

1. **Practice being reasonable** – Ask yourself: Am I being fair, sensible, and rational? Am I setting expectations based on logic and sound judgment? It is great to be hopeful and optimistic, but we also need to be reasonable with our expectations of ourselves and others. Some examples of unreasonable expectations:
  - A parent expects their child to behave all of the time and never act out or make childish mistakes.
  - A person expects their relationship partner to always be sensitive and thoughtful all the time.
  - A student must get an A on every test and every class or otherwise they feel like a failure.
  - **DISCUSS - Can you think of more examples of people being unreasonable in their expectations of self or others (perhaps based on your own experiences)?**



- 2. Practice being realistic** – Are you using your own past experiences including lessons you have learned in life already to guide your current expectations? Are you trying to stay within reality or letting fantasy guide your thinking and goals? Some examples of unrealistic expectations:
- “I know for sure I will strike it rich one day if I keep on buying all of these scratch off lottery tickets” – There is a difference between hoping for this outcome and expecting it.
  - “If I keep dating, I will meet Mr./Mrs. “Right” (aka the perfect partner) – Reality is that you may meet someone you will love who is highly compatible, but everyone has hang ups and there are no perfect partners just people we love in spite of their flaws and shortcomings.
  - **DISCUSS - Can anyone think of other examples of unrealistic expectations?**
  - **DISCUSS – Why is it important to be hopeful and positive yet still set realistic, attainable goals for ourselves?**
- 3. Avoid Comparison** – Comparing ourselves with others can be toxic. It is better to compete against yourself and try to grow in comparison to ourselves and get better and better that way rather than looking at others as a gauge of our progress.
- **Example** - A person watches TV or sees people on the internet or social media displaying what seems like “ideal” lives and asking self: Why can’t my life be like that?
- 4. Acceptance** involves acknowledging and embracing difficult realities and feelings rather than trying to deny or ignore them. Embrace situations and circumstances as they are rather than trying to control them or deny their existence. This takes practice and can be challenging but it is essential for progress and growth. Studies show acceptance leads to inner peace and resilience. Some questions:
- **Am I able to discern the difference between what I have control over and what I do not have control over?**
  - **When I realize there are things in life that I cannot control, am I able to give up trying to control those things? Can I eventually let go when I need to?**
  - **Can I look at a difficult or even unfair life circumstance and eventually adapt my life to this new reality? Examples:**
    - i. A person finds out that they have a chronic illness or disability and instead of living life constantly wishing it would magically go away, adapting life to the new circumstances.
    - ii. A cherished relationship ends unexpectedly. Eventually accepting it is over and moving forward rather than living life hoping one day the person is going to come back.
    - iii. **DISCUSS - Can the group come up with other examples of situations where acceptance may be needed? There are MANY!**

**Closing discussion: What stood out to you on this important topic and what specifically can you try to work on going forward?**