

What Do You Expect?: A Key to Personal Happiness

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Brothers and sisters, I am honored to be before you today in this devotional setting. I never imagined, as a BYU student in 1968, that in my future I would ever have something important enough to say that several hundred students would show up to hear me—unless, of course, they were getting course credit and I was taking roll! I appreciate the confidence others have shown in me by asking me to speak to you. Since I always start class with a joke or something humorous, I will do the same today to get you into a better mood and help me relax.

I was recently searching the want ads in the newspaper and found some interesting ones. As an editor, I generally read things carefully. Evidently some people do not edit their ads before publishing them. Here are some I found:

Illiterate? Write today for free help!

Dog for sale: Eats anything and is fond of children.

For sale: Antique desk suitable for lady with thick legs and large drawers.

Free puppies: Half cocker spaniel, half sneaky neighbor's dog.

Nice parachute! Never opened, used once.

Now to more serious matters. When I was a young boy, 13 years old, I was about to enter junior high school in Grand Junction, Colorado. I am the oldest of five boys and thus felt some pressure to accomplish great things and be a good example for my four younger brothers. I expected that junior high would be difficult. I wouldn't know all the kids, since in junior high we came from several different elementary schools. The thought of going from classroom to classroom made me wonder if I would get lost and look like a fool. I wondered: What if some of the teachers are mean? And I was most worried about how skinny I was at the time and about my new crop of pimples. (When you think about it, how does *anyone* survive junior high school?)

Most of all I worried that I would not compete well academically with the other students, as being a scholar was my goal. So I was a bundle of nerves that summer of 1962.

Fortunately I was blessed with a great mom who always seemed to be able to calm me

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down. Let me show you a photo of me making homemade fudge with my mother in 1953. The *Salt Lake Tribune* took the picture and published my mom's great no-cook fudge recipe. This is where I got my sweet tooth! As I was worrying about starting junior high, my mom calmed me down with one of the wisest, most caring, and rational statements a mom could make to her worrywart son.

She said, "Jeff, we don't care what your grades are. All we expect is that you do your best. If you do your best, we will be proud of you regardless of your grades."

With that statement my anxiety was cut in half, and I started looking forward to junior high. After all, I could not control my final GPA, but I could control how hard I tried. I couldn't control my intelligence, which was average—okay, maybe a little above average—how mean the teachers would be, how smart the other students would be, or even my final grade in any particular class. But control my levels of dedication and effort? I could do that!

Mom taught me the value of setting realistic expectations in life that day. She taught me that *process* or *effort* is more important and manageable than the *final outcome*. So for over a half century of living I have used her wise counsel in my life to accomplish much, get over my failures, keep perspective in all I do, and not beat myself up when I don't succeed the first time.

Thus my topic today is "What Do You Expect? A Key to Personal Happiness." My questions for you today are "What do you expect of yourself and of life?" and "How are your expectations influencing how happy you are day to day?"

Expectations are thoughts or beliefs we have about ourselves, our relationships, and what happens to us in life. They are crucial, as they are the standards or yardsticks by which we judge what happens to us and how satisfied or unsatisfied we are with ourselves and with life. I want to focus on two kinds of expecta-

tions today: what we expect of ourselves and what we expect of our relationships. I want to start with two kinds of thoughts or expectations we sometimes have of ourselves and of life that can get us into trouble. They can lead to depression, anxiety, and a sense of failure. Avoiding these expectations or thoughts we carry around in our heads can change our way of looking at the world and, ultimately, how we feel emotionally. They directly affect whether or not we are happy.

The two popular thinking errors we humans seem destined to make and that can cause us much misery in life were first scientifically identified by world-renowned psychologists Aaron Beck and David Burns, both cognitive-behavioral psychotherapists. They discovered 10 thinking errors or cognitive distortions that cause us emotional pain. These distortions are at the root of depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem. I will focus on two especially common ones and on the related problem of perfectionism. They are:

- All-or-nothing thinking
- Overgeneralization

Theory and research over the last 50 years show that emotions or feelings are based not on the event or the world we perceive but rather on *how we interpret* events and the world. This is referred to as the cognitive therapy approach in psychology. Burns' important book is called *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. It is from that source that I will quote.

Let me refer to a figure in Burns' book that shows the theory in a simplified manner. It shows "the relationship between the world and the way you feel."

First, "world" is labeled as "a series of positive, neutral, and negative events."

Second, the label on "thoughts" says, "You interpret the events with a series of thoughts that continually flow through your mind. This is called your 'internal dialog'" (or self-talk).

The third and last label, found on “mood,” says, “Your feelings are created by your *thoughts* and not the actual *events*. All experiences must be processed through your brain and given a conscious meaning *before* you experience any emotional response.”¹

This model emphasizes that we don’t usually just feel an emotion spontaneously; rather, we create our feelings from our thought processes. Depending on our thoughts, we experience certain feelings. This model has been widely supported by empirical research in the field of psychology, and Burns’ approach is generally recognized as one of the most potent treatments in all of psychotherapy for the treatment of a wide variety of emotional disorders. Lest you think (or, shall we say, *expect*) that problems like depression and anxiety are uncommon, it is predicted that more than one in four of you will have one of these problems sometime during your life. Or you may know someone with these problems and be in a position to help.

Scriptural support for Beck and Burns’ theory can be found in the following:

Proverbs 23:7: “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.”

President Ezra Taft Benson emphasized: “Daily, constantly, we choose by our desires, our thoughts, and our actions whether we want to be blessed or cursed, happy or miserable.”²

Norman Vincent Peale exclaimed: “Change your thoughts and you will change your world.”³

Now let me demonstrate how these cognitive distortions, or unrealistic expectations of ourselves and of life, can harm our mental and relationship health. Let’s first look at the problem of all-or-nothing thinking. This is also called “black-and-white thinking.” When we do this, we think of life’s events and people in extreme categories: black or white,

righteous or unrighteous, good or bad. You may think, “Since I flunked that quiz, that means I’m a failure.” Or, “Since she turned me down for a date, that proves I’m a loser.” (This is also referred to as “catastrophizing.”) These cognitions or thoughts will cause you to be depressed.

What if, instead, you got off the phone after being turned down for a date and said to yourself, “Wow! Too bad for her! She missed a chance to go out with the best-looking guy in Provo. That’s her loss, not mine!” You would then feel less depressed. Of course you may also be exaggerating your own personal qualities!

The fact is, most of what happens to us cannot be thought of in black-and-white or all-or-nothing terms. No one is absolutely brilliant or totally stupid. People are not absolutely righteous or unrighteous. We are all just more or less so! The fact is, much of life is gray, not black or white.

Related to all-or-nothing thinking is the cognitive habit of overgeneralization. This happens when you arbitrarily conclude that something that happened to you once will occur over and over again. It is analogous to dropping a drop of black ink into a container of clear water; soon the whole container turns gray or black. It is exemplified in the earlier example of the young man who after being turned down by a prospective date decided he was the world’s biggest loser.

We use all-or-nothing thinking and overgeneralization in the service of another toxic habit called perfectionism. Perfectionism is defined as the obsessive and rigid desire or expectation that we must do things perfectly or life is not good. Sometimes we apply it to even trivial things like mopping a floor or straightening up our desk. (By the way, a clean desk is the sign of a sick mind!) If something is not done just right, perfectly, we consider ourselves failures. It is directly related to all-or-nothing thinking: Either I am a success or a

failure. Either I'm perfect or imperfect. And I cannot stand not to be perfect! Average is not for me!

Perfectionism, or having unrealistic or irrational expectations about ourselves or about our relationships, is a chief cause of depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorders, as well as relationship problems. Perfectionism leads to procrastination, which leads eventually to paralysis. We call these the three Ps. A college student who was a client of mine several years ago related this story about his perfectionism:

I set such high standards for the projects I did for class that when I thought about even starting a project I would feel anxious and nauseated. That would lead me to procrastinate beginning the project or doing even one section of it. Eventually it led to me feeling paralyzed. I remember staring at the instructions from the professor, getting anxious, then waiting until the last minute to quickly do the project and turn it in the next day. My perfectionism led to me getting less-than-perfect grades on projects.

When I asked this young man to make a list of the advantages and disadvantages of his perfectionism, he came up with four advantages (e.g., he thought he did a better job when he was perfectionistic, although his grades did not show it). He then listed 17 disadvantages to perfectionism, some of them just discussed. He then started reconsidering the value of perfectionism in his life!

Even God does not expect us to be perfect in this life. It simply cannot be done. Norma Ashton, speaking to the BYU women, said:

Know that you don't have to be perfect. We aren't even expected to achieve perfection in this life, but rather to make steady progress toward it. We are masochists, sometimes, and I think we allow ourselves to succumb to the failed-diet syndrome—you overeat one time and think, "That's it. I've blown

it. No reason to stay on the diet now." When we fall short of the mark we feel we've blown it, that we'll never be able to measure up to everything we're told to do. So, in effect, we give up. This thought pattern is a very clever and successful tool of the adversary. We must keep trying, but we must be able to forgive ourselves when we can't do it all. We can make do with our present and look forward.⁴

This suggests a more rational and productive way to think about life: Just do your best—like my mom said!

I like these quotes from other wise people:

Happy people do their part, do their best, then let go and let God do the rest. They do what they can within their circle of influence.⁵

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

(This prayer has been successfully used in Alcoholics Anonymous for the past 70 years.)

These ideas suggest that *process* is more important than *outcome*. Burns suggests developing a process orientation to life: "This means you focus on processes rather than outcomes as a basis for evaluating things."⁶ This more rational way of thinking emphasizes:

"The journey is the destination."

"Don't audit life. Show up and make the most of it now."⁷

Let's apply this process idea to a common problem today: looking for a job. When you are applying for work, do not make it your aim to get the perfect job; instead, make it your aim to do your best to develop a great résumé, contact employers, and interview well. Most people who get a decent job do so after first receiving an average of 10 to 15 rejections. This is because the outcome of job hunting depends

on many more factors than just you. The outcome depends on many factors outside your control. For example: How many other applicants are there? What are their qualifications? Who knows the boss' daughter? So, instead, focus on what you can control, and that's your effort. If you make a great effort each day, you should feel proud and satisfied. You will feel less depressed and discouraged than if you expect that landing a great job equals success. And you will eventually land a job. Maybe even a great one!

What should we do when we make mistakes? What should our expectations be then?

Burns quotes a student, Jennifer, as saying: "It's good to make mistakes because then we learn—in fact, we won't learn *unless* we make mistakes. No one can avoid making mistakes—and since it's going to happen in any case, we may as well accept it and learn from it."⁸

Jennifer also said: "*We don't die* if we make mistakes!"⁹

Focus instead on what you can learn from your mistakes. An example of this for me happened when I was in the U.S. Coast Guard being trained as an officer and a gentleman at Officer Candidate School in August 1974. The platoon leaders lined us up each day at 6 a.m. to inspect for dirt on our uniforms, wrinkles in our shirts, unshined shoes, and even lint on our black uniforms (white lint really showed up!). I got "gigged"—or punished—every time they found anything out of order, even something very minor. When you were gigged, you lost points on a chart, and if you lost enough points, they kicked you out of the program. During the first two weeks I lost 20 points and was getting discouraged. Then it occurred to me that instead of beating myself up over my mistakes, I should use them as learning experiences. After that, each time I got gigged, I wrote down a note to myself of what *not* to do the next time. Eventually I was passing inspection every week and not losing any points. Looking back, I know now that the platoon

leaders were purposely finding any little mistake to nail us for just to see how we would react. There was no such thing as a perfect uniform after all. If we catastrophized and got angry or discouraged when we got gigged, their conclusion was that we certainly would not be able to handle stress well enough at sea to be leaders in the U.S. Coast Guard. And they were right.

In reality, the secret to happiness is to set modest, realistic goals and then accomplish them. Climbing mountains is important, but each of us has our own mountain to climb. And *we* decide what a successful climb is!

A good example of using this principle in my own life occurred in September 2008. My oldest son, Geoffrey; his wife, Kerstin; and their son, Cameron, invited me to hike to the top of Mount Timpanogos. Since coming to BYU 22 years ago, I have always wanted to do that—every time I looked up at that most beautiful mountain north of our campus. I agreed to go, but then discovered the hike was almost 12 miles round trip. And of course the first six miles were all uphill! And this was in the heat of the summer.

I was close to 60 years old at the time and not in very good physical shape. But I figured if I took it easy and drank a lot of water, I could make it. And Geoff and Kerstin were experienced backpackers, so I felt safe with them. Plus my other son Dillon agreed to take my 40-pound backpack most of the way up the trail for me.

We hiked for a whole day, and by the time we arrived about one mile from the summit and pitched camp, I found myself exhausted. I had been stopping for a breath about every 75 yards for the last hour. I saw the top of that beautiful mountain and thanked God that I was there! But I also realized that I did not have the physical stamina to go to the very top the next day, plus hike down six miles with a full backpack, most likely in the middle of a rainstorm that was forecast for the next day.

At that moment I changed my expectations! I wisely decided, “I have climbed my mountain! I have seen the top! I have survived a hike I was not sure I would survive!” I was joyous, but I had to fight off the normal protests from my son that I was only one mile from the summit and I might someday regret not going to the very top. I told him, “That’s okay. You guys summit tomorrow. I have climbed my mountain!”

Now some of you may be thinking that I wimped out by changing my expectations in the middle of the hike. That’s understandable. However, had I gone on, I might not have been here today making this speech. Little did I know at that time that the breathing problem I was suffering was due to two clogged arteries in my heart that were 95 percent closed—a problem that was not diagnosed and treated until just two months ago. Had I continued to the top of Timp that day, I might still be there—buried with a great view!

A funny thing happened later: my cardiologist, who did not know this story, told me after surgery in May: “You can pretty much exercise the way you were before, but don’t go climbing Timp this weekend!”

But how does God feel about our lack of perfection? I like this quote: “God loves you because of who God *is*, not because of anything you did or didn’t do.”¹⁰

What about the times when our expectations (even realistic ones) are not met? How do we best respond? My mom, the fountain of all knowledge, would say, “Count your blessings, it could be worse!” Perhaps she got this counsel from one of my favorite hymns. Let’s look at the first verse:

“When upon life’s billows you are tempest-tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost.” All is lost? That is overgeneralization combined with catastrophizing! Help! All is lost! “Count your many blessings; name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord has done.”¹¹ This is the strategy I try to

use when trouble or discouragement shows up in my life. The message here is to take perspective with all your problems. If we compare our blessings to our misfortunes, my guess is most of us would have many of the former and fewer of the latter.

It has been said, “Happy people count their blessings, while the miserable complain about theirs.”¹² That’s like complaining that you missed a call on your miniature computer attached to your ear, which is connected to a multimillion-dollar satellite circling the earth hundreds of miles away, thanks to the work of many talented scientists. This device is also referred to as your cell phone. It will even take pictures you can send instantly to your mom! What would the pioneers say if they heard this? By the way, how many of you are texting right now?

As President Monson said, “Everyone can be discontented if he ignores his blessings and looks only at his burdens.”¹³

What about unrealistic expectations about relationships? Here are a few that will get you into trouble. They are from my book for singles called *Should We Stay Together?* For those looking to get married here are a few:

“There is one and only one right person in the world for you to marry.”¹⁴ This is, of course, an example of all-or-nothing thinking. Fortunately for most of us there are several people in the world we could be happy with. Otherwise, why would people remarry after the death of a beloved spouse and be just as happy with the second spouse?

Another irrational belief or expectation is “Choosing someone to marry is a ‘decision of the heart.’”¹⁵ The fact is, if more people used their heads in the mate-selection process, the divorce rate might not be nearly so high.

Next, how about this myth: “Preparing for marriage ‘just comes naturally.’”¹⁶ This is called “the myth of naturalism”¹⁷—that it’s just *natural* to know what it takes to be happily married. You don’t need to take a class! Why

spend your tuition money on that? Everyone knows how to be happily married! We simply learn it naturally from our parents and TV! This is scary when you consider half of the parents in the United States and most on TV are divorced!

For the marrieds in the audience, here are a couple of marriage myths for you to consider from my second book, *The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book*:

“If my spouse loves me, he [or she] should *instinctively* know what I want and need to be happy.”¹⁸ This is the ESP, or extra-sensory perception, myth—expecting our partner to be able to read our mind.

Another myth is “Marriage can fulfill all of my needs.”¹⁹ No, you still need a close relationship with God, good friends, family members, hobbies, and a golf or tennis game to be happy, even if you are married!

I hope you don’t believe the myth that “couples should keep their problems to themselves and solve them alone.”²⁰ Too many couples keep their problems to themselves until it is too late and the relationship is so dysfunctional that it is nearly impossible to repair, even in therapy. Most couples who divorce say they never went to marriage counseling or they waited too long to go. If they could speak to us now, their message to us would be “Reach out for help before it is too late!”

In conclusion, today I have made a case for carefully considering your expectations and thoughts about life in order to be happier. I want to end my talk with two quotes related to expectations about life from two of my favorite people: President Gordon B. Hinckley and his wife, Sister Marjorie Pay Hinckley.

President Hinckley once quoted Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who said:

Anyone who imagines that bliss is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he has been robbed.

Most putts don’t drop. Most beef is tough. . . . Life is like an old-time rail journey—delays, side-tracks, smoke, dust, cinder and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed.

*The trick is to thank the Lord for letting you have the ride.*²¹

My mom not only made great fudge, she also had a great sense of humor. Sister Hinckley, like my mom, also had a sense of humor. She said this: “The only way to get through life is to laugh your way through it. You either have to laugh or cry. I prefer to laugh. Crying gives me a headache.”²²

It is my prayer that this message has not given you a headache but rather some ideas to consider in improving your own personal happiness. By being more aware and then more realistic in our expectations and thoughts about life and other people, we can become happier than we would otherwise by expecting life or others to change for us. I testify that my mom was right and that these principles are true, as I have tried to live them all my life. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. David D. Burns, *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, preface by Aaron T. Beck (New York: Avon, 1999), 30.
2. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Great Commandment—Love the Lord,” *Ensign*, May 1988, 6.
3. Norman Vincent Peale, *A Guide to Confident Living* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948), 233.
4. Norma B. Ashton, “A Unique Melody,” *Ensign*, September 1989, 24; emphasis added.
5. John Bytheway, *How to Be Totally Miserable: A Self-Hinder Book* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2007), 11.
6. *Feeling Good*, 366.
7. Regina Brett, “Regina Brett’s 45 Life Lessons and 5 to Grow On,” *The Plain Dealer*,

Cleveland, 28 May 2006, number 41; http://www.cleveland.com/brett/blog/index.ssf/2006/05/regina_bretts_45_life_lessons.html.

8. *Feeling Good*, 370.
9. *Feeling Good*, 371; emphasis added.
10. Brett, "Life Lessons," number 34.
11. "Count Your Blessings," *Hymns*, 1985, no. 241.
12. Bytheway, "Totally Miserable," 13.
13. *Favorite Quotations from the Collection of Thomas S. Monson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 142.
14. Jeffrey H. Larson, *Should We Stay Together?* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 2, 3.
15. *Should We Stay Together?* 2, 8.
16. *Should We Stay Together?* 2, 10.

17. See chapter 10 in Clark E. Vincent, *Sexual and Marital Health: The Physician as a Consultant* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973).

18. Jeffrey H. Larson, *The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 9; emphasis in original.
19. *Marriage Tune-Up*, 13.
20. *Marriage Tune-Up*, 13.
21. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, "Big Rock Candy Mountains," *Deseret News*, 12 June 1973, A4; quoted in Gordon B. Hinckley, "God Shall Give unto You Knowledge by His Holy Spirit," BYU devotional, 25 December 1973.
22. Marjorie Pay Hinckley, *Glimpses into the Life and Heart of Marjorie Pay Hinckley*, ed. Virginia H. Pearce (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1999), 107.