

MANAGING THE EXPECTATION GRADIENT, PART 1:

ARRANGEMENTS WE MAKE WITH OURSELVES

By Frank Young Ph.D.¹[1]

EXPECTATIONS define the frame that makes living worthwhile. Managing expectations is the balancing skill that guides effective and enjoyable living.

Managing the expectation gradient is important in maintaining a spirit of enthusiasm, passion, and purpose in every project we undertake. From what we know from research about enjoyment and happiness, several crucial factors about expectations are:

1. Come from a position of perceived abundance.

The first point is difficult to maintain in trying times, but in most of the projects or experiences we take on in life, **the perception of abundance is vital for morale and a key ingredient of enjoyment.** For example, a pessimist doesn't know what he wants out of life, but he knows he'll never get it. His perception of scarce resources definitely limits his enjoyment of living, and casts a self-fulfilling prophecy of negative outcomes. So one of the questions we might ask ourselves before beginning any project or making a commitment to help others is: Can I likely maintain this spirit of abundant energy and resources throughout 90% of the project? If not, can I scale down the scope of my commitment to make it manageable? If not, perhaps I might reconsider before proceeding. The principle of abundance also encourages you to love what you already have, rather than craving for what you do not yet have in your life. Living in the eternal Now also keeps us in a spirit of abundance

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2. Measure and monitor your progress in development, celebrating achievements.

I used to think that happiness was a self-evident state beyond the need for external validation or measurement. What I underestimated was the research finding that measurement itself was an essential part of the process of Flow, and therefore, enjoyment. That is, people experience enhanced enjoyment when they realize that they are improving or expanding their skill or scope of development relative to a standard that they set. This enjoyment can also prevail when a person has declining skills, but has adjusted expectations to accommodate a skill loss appropriate to age level, or closeness to personal best, the masters' standard of competition. When we look beyond competition and into the spirituality of sport and life, we continue to monitor mastery, but shift the expectations to conformance with form and graceful elegance. Again, expectation is a crucial part of the equation of excellence.

3. Set and adjust levels of expectation that keep your reach largely within your grasp.

The third point calls us to quality by avoiding the error of overextension with **the discernment and maintenance of balance**. Perhaps it is no coincidence that a lot of core conditioning in physical fitness calls upon our skills of balance, and corresponding firmness and flexibility in dealing with a range of challenges in a dynamic rather than static way. We are often encouraged to challenge ourselves beyond our wildest expectations to reach goals that would otherwise be unachievable. True, these strivings often bring out the best in us. On the other hand, frequently going for goals that stretch way beyond our usual limits is an inspiration for the few times that it works, but can be a prescription for unhappiness in chronic over-strivers and over-extenders.

Happiness often results when we set a level of expectation that is only slightly higher than our current functioning, and our goal attainment level is around **50% when we are learning a skill, and perhaps 80% when we are refining it**. Whenever we are learning a skill, we have the freedom from harsh judgment because, after all, we are merely novices. We deliberately set the bar low. Thankfully, so do our instructors and fellow students. Thus we attain new skills rapidly and motivation is easy.

Perhaps the next level, refining acquired skills, is a major point of discouragement for many, because we raise expectations too high that we will refine these skills to full usage almost immediately. If our perceived success or goal-attainment ratio now drops below 40%, we often become quite discouraged, perhaps even abandoning the project altogether. At this point, we need to reset the bar lower to the level that we are again hitting the target at the 75% level or better in practice situations. Such goal resetting does require humility, but the ultimate improvement is worth the temporary but vital adjustment.

Repeatedly in the kinesiology research literature, it is important to allow a skill sufficient practice and mastery before moving on to the next skill of focus. In other words, our reach should not exceed our grasp, at least not frequently or for long. Stay with a focus skill until it is fully integrated before moving on; otherwise performance and skill decay will result, with resultant discouragement and motivational depression. Incidentally, this guideline also applies in rehabilitation from injury as well as skill acquisition.

4. With applying new skills in a competitive environment, set the expectation of success below 20%.

This point acknowledges that, to stimulate you to reach beyond your usual abilities, you may occasionally try to apply a recently-learned but not integrated skill in competition or “the real world.” At that point it is important to **set the level of expected success at less than 20%**, so that you can be genuinely thrilled the occasional time that it works, encouraging you to refine the skill in practice and try it again sometime soon in play.

5. Restrain excitement when experiencing a sudden string of “good luck.”

The last point is designed to avoid what one of my golfer clients calls “**the trap of ratcheting expectations.**” When we experience several elements of unusual success in a winning streak, we often start to set this new level of inspired play as our floor of expectations for further excellence in play. The result is that we try too hard to maintain that level rather than merely “relax with it” so that the inevitable reverting to the mean occurs without a big collapse. The streak will end; it must. However, if we can relax with it without resetting our expectations, we will likely prolong it, and enjoy it more thoroughly to inspire us to more consistent practice to reinforce the depth of those skills for next time.

While most of the examples I have used are derived from sport, this model can be applied to coaching life experiences in general. Managing the expectation gradient can be crucial in restraining life from running away from you, and in ensuring that you maintain optimal motivation for enjoyable and sustainable living.
