

Great Expectations

It's fine to have them—as long as they are grounded in reality

by Tim Gardner

I never expected this. Mark just isn't the man I married." "Joan" sat expressionless as she stoically described her relationship.

"While we were dating, he was everything I wanted. He was fun, caring. We could talk for hours. Now he works late every day and gets home just in time to play with our daughter a few minutes before her bedtime. Then he watches TV. He never takes me out, never helps around the house, and only touches me when he wants sex (which we haven't had for six months). I don't love him anymore. I want out."

It's an unhappy story, but a familiar one. Couples who once stood before God promising "Till death do us part" now sit in a counselor's office, complaining that their mate "isn't doing their part." The passions once fueled by visions of "happily ever after" are gradually extinguished with each failed expectation. Eventually, one of them decides, "Since my spouse can't, or won't, meet my needs, I'll just move on to someone who will."

Call it what you want—disappointment, disillusionment or despair—failed expectations can bring partners to the point of wanting to chuck it all. And it raises a serious question: Why *doesn't* marriage fulfill all our dreams?

Dream a Littler Dream?

Like many unhappy spouses, Joan had legitimate concerns—she should be getting more attention from her husband. But her greater problem was that her expectations of marriage were unrealistic. Ironically, the overwhelming popularity of marriage may in some ways explain the high level of marital breakdown.

"The higher the expectations of marriage ... the greater the number of divorces," writes Margaret Talbot in *The New Republic*. It is this "quest for an ideal marriage" that has, in her opinion, made divorce more acceptable. In other words, if your marriage isn't everything you expected, you should get a divorce and try, try again.

But what about those of us who reject divorce as a viable solution to a dissatisfying marriage? Should we simply lower our standards and resign ourselves to live in an unhappy marriage? No, we shouldn't. It's nonsense to say that God's gift of marriage is great, but, "Hey, don't expect too much." As followers of Christ, we shouldn't settle for bad or even mediocre marriages. We need exceedingly high aspirations.

So what are we missing? The article in *The New Republic* talked about the problem of unfulfilled expectations as if all expectations have equal merit. That's a fallacy. There are certain expectations that marriage and a spouse can never fulfill. Those are the dangerous ones.

"The belief in a happily-ever-after marriage is one of the most widely held, destructive marriage myths. But it's only the tip of the marital-myth iceberg," say Les and Leslie Parrott, directors of the Center for Relationship Development at Seattle Pacific

University. "Every difficult marriage is plagued by misconceptions about what marriage should be."

In Joan's case, the misconceptions were her belief that she and Mark would always feel they were in love, that romance would never die, that sex would always set off fireworks, and that everything would just get better. Her dreams were so lofty they guaranteed failure.

At nearly every wedding, a man marries the woman he believes will be the ideal wife, and a woman marries what she thinks is an ideal husband. Then, as the pages of the calendar turn, each mate senses the other is changing. Soon they realize their spouse is no longer the person they thought they married—and they feel cheated. What actually happened, though, is that they discovered the real person they married—the one who always lived behind the fantasy. And that unsettling discovery can actually be good for a marriage.

How Passion Plays Out

When Amy and I married, I expected we'd end each busy day by falling asleep in each other's arms. But Amy is more comfortable falling asleep while I keep my arms to myself. I also assumed I could meet all of my wife's friendship needs once we'd moved away from her hometown friends and family. I was surprised, and somewhat hurt, to find she still had such a strong need for those other people. But these reality checks gave me a clearer focus on who Amy really is, and it pushed us to greater intimacy.

So the bad news of failed expectations is really good news. By moving from unrealistic ideals to attainable ones, you're set free from trying to achieve the fantasy of marital bliss. You can replace the fairy tale with something better: a real marriage that cherishes two real people.

When couples say "we're just not in love anymore," what they're really saying is they don't *feel* in love. They mistakenly limit love to its emotional aspects. The truth is much more freeing. Even when feelings come and go, a couple can still be "in love." In the words of the late C.S. Lewis: "Being in love is something you *do*."

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One of my premarital expectations has definitely been fulfilled: I expected Amy and I to have some mammoth fights. More than once my lovely wife has looked at me and said in a voice I don't remember from our dating days, "I love you, but I really don't like you right now." I've expressed the same feeling now and then. We may fight, but always within our promise to each other—a promise that "No matter how I feel, I am committed to love you for the rest of my life, and, by God's grace, I will."

Couples who see their expectations come true are the ones who understand that love, far more than being what you feel, is what you do. That means being committed to serve

when you don't feel like serving, to listen when you don't feel like listening, and to love when you don't feel very loving.

God cares about passionate feelings, but those feelings won't last uninterrupted, and they can't form a basis for marriage. In some ways I'm glad the feelings of heart-pounding, palm-sweating love haven't gone on nonstop. I remember fidgeting in my office shortly after our honeymoon, getting nothing done because I just wanted to go home to Amy. The days of fidgeting are gone, but I'm thankful those early passionate feelings have returned—over and over, in both new and familiar ways. I'm much more in love with Amy now, but it's a love resulting from our commitment.

Higher Hopes

God didn't design your spouse to be the one person who perfectly completes you and fulfills your every desire. He provided a lifelong companion to meet your needs for intimacy and sexual expression in an undemanding, mutually enjoyable atmosphere. Like a stamp and an envelope, or a violin and a bow, you are individuals—but together you become more. You become one. That's an achievable expectation.

In ten years of marriage, Amy and I have sorted out most of our early expectations, seeing which ones we still need to pursue, which need to be tossed out, and which have already become reality. Though we may not fall asleep in each other's arms, our physical intimacy has surpassed anything we ever planned. And now I'm thankful that Amy has cultivated so many outside friendships; these people enrich our lives.

Along the way, we've been able to identify healthy expectations that are worth pursuing. You can expect marriage to be fun. You can expect yourself to be faithful, and your spouse to be faithful to you. You can expect to be loved without conditions. You can expect your spouse to be someone you grow with as you fulfill the tasks God gives. You can expect—often through plenty of hard work—to resolve conflict, to accept and enjoy personality differences, and to maintain an active sex life. You can expect to work together to develop a strong sense of shared beliefs, values and priorities on parenting, money, in-laws and roles. Finally, you can expect your marriage to honor God.

These are the great expectations of marriage. Studies show that couples with the most vital marriages have very high, yet very realistic, expectations. Research also shows that the ideals aren't nearly as important as the sincere commitment to fulfill them.

Marriage can be "till death do us part," but "happily-ever-after" only happens to couples who are willing to do what it takes to turn their ideals into reality. It's not enough to make the commitment on the day when you stand before friends, family and God and marry. It's getting up every morning for the rest of your lives determined to make your best expectations come true.

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Do You Expect Too Much?

RESPONSE SCALE

0 = Don't know 1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Agree 4 = Strongly agree

- _____ 1. My partner can and will meet all of my needs.
- _____ 2. Our current problems can all be resolved by spending more time together.
- _____ 3. If we commit to it, I believe my mate and I can overcome any problem or struggle.
- _____ 4. My partner and I want exactly the same things from our marriage.
- _____ 5. With mutual willingness to teach and learn, our sex life will get better with each passing year.
- _____ 6. I believe I will always feel in love with my mate.
- _____ 7. My partner and I fully understand each other.
- _____ 8. My mate can and should be my best friend.
- _____ 9. I expect romantic feelings in our marriage to come and go, largely controlled by our own actions.
- _____ 10. My partner is everything I've ever dreamed a spouse should be.
- _____ 11. I don't believe there will ever be any serious problems in our relationship.
- _____ 12. My partner and I have resolved all the issues from our pasts that could affect our relationship.
- _____ 13. I believe marriage is a gift from God and that overall it will be a very enjoyable experience.
- _____ 14. I believe our sexual relationship will always be wonderful and free from conflict.
- _____ 15. Being involved in a church will keep us from having serious marital struggles.

Total Score _____

WHAT YOUR SCORE MEANS

0-30 You're wearing dark glasses. Either your view of marriage is somewhat negative, or you are uncertain on a number of marital issues. Seek counsel from a pastor or a wise, older friend who has a healthy, fun marriage.

31-40 Your glasses are clear. You have a fairly realistic expectation of marriage. But seek outside input regarding any areas in which you answered "don't know."

41-50 Your glasses have a rose tint to them. You are very optimistic about marriage, but tend to minimize problems and differences. Find a mentor who will bring realism yet not destroy your excitement.

51-60 Your glasses are completely rose colored. You are heading toward a major relationship crisis due to failed expectations. Please seek help from an experienced pastor or Christian counselor. T.G.

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