

Managing Disappointment
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Disappointment is an ongoing feature of life that seems heightened in today's world of uncertainty, rapid change, and diminished trust. I talk to many people who carry disappointment over a wide range of issues and they end up feeling powerless and sometimes bitterly unhappy. Lost jobs, failed relationships, chronic illness, messed up kids, unmanageable work challenges, financial losses—these and so many other difficulties of life create disappointment. Learning to manage disappointment, then, becomes an essential life skill.

The first step in managing disappointment is understanding it. Think about what disappoints you. Is it people? Events? Circumstances? Timing? Often, it's a combination of these things that creates disappointment. But sometimes people, events, and circumstances converge in ways that you hardly notice, while at other times you feel acutely upset.

Take people, for example. People screw up. They make promises they don't always keep, even if they intended to when they made them. They say one thing and mean something else. They don't do what they said they would do. They change their minds abruptly. They forget to mention things. Sometimes they just don't pay attention.

Our disappointment in people is probably the most difficult to manage. We expect certain behaviors like honesty, integrity, and follow-through and when people don't behave in ways that we expect them to, we get disappointed. Depending on how close we are to the person who has disappointed us, we may also feel things like anger, sadness, confusion, even betrayal. When these feelings arise, chances are that instead of managing disappointment, you will be more interested in showing the person why they are wrong and demanding retribution.

Events can cause disappointment, too. The downturn in the market, new regulations, changes in leadership, wicked weather, secret meetings, unforeseen project impediments. Accidents. Injuries. Acts of nature.

Circumstances may be the slipperiest of disappointment factors. You're in the wrong place at the right time or the right place at the wrong time. You miss an important conversation and the opportunity that was discussed. Your flight—the last one out—departs on time for the first time ever when you're running three minutes late.

All kinds of things happen in the course of daily life that cause disappointment. At the base of disappointment is expectation. That's where you'll find the biggest clue to first understanding your disappointment and then managing it.

Instead of thinking about all the things in your world that create disappointment and enduring the frustration and sadness that go along with it, there are several effective ways to manage your disappointment.

First, be clear about what your expectations are. In every case, what you want sets a basis for measuring what happens. If your expectations are not reasonable—you can determine this based on recent history, the current environment, your own experience, and feedback from others you trust—find a way to bring them more in line with reality. I'm not suggesting that you adopt a position of never expecting anything in order to prevent yourself from ever being disappointed. That would be foolish and unnecessary. I am, however, recommending that you find ways to reality check your expectations.

Second, be aware that what you expect from yourself is not necessarily what you can expect from others. Always be sure to clarify your expectations. If, for example, you expect people to tell you when they are having trouble with their work, regardless of whether that trouble has something to do with you or not, you must outline specifically what you expect. Do you want a phone call, an email message, a white paper? Do you want to hear about family troubles, medical worries, pet anxieties? How much information do you want and how often? This may seem like a silly thing to be advising, but think back to last week and how many times you were disappointed by people who did things you'd never consider.

Third, be aware that what you expect from the environment is sometimes wildly wrong. I am always amused to read headlines, whether electronically on Reuter's news service, in the Wall Street Journal print editions, or in my local newspaper. Today's cataclysm is often tomorrow's shrug. Headlines exist to grab our attention, not necessarily to reflect the real information of a story. If you don't read further than headlines your understanding of the environment will be badly skewed. Setting your expectations based on "expert opinion" is a dangerous, though often unavoidable, practice. Be clear when you do it that that's what you're doing.

Fourth, understand that regardless of what happens, you have a choice of response. This is a critical part of managing disappointment. You don't have to react with surprise or anger. You don't have to find someone to blame. You don't have to do anything until you are ready to understand what happened and what it means to your choices going forward. When you can accept the truth of this, you will be far more capable of dealing with disappointment of every kind. Knowing that you can recover from any disappointment gives you a firmer basis for moving forward effectively.

Recognize that people will always make mistakes. Even when they try with all sincerity to do the right thing, their definition of the right thing and yours will not always match. That's okay. Unless you are dealing with a sick or dangerous individual, most mistakes can be corrected or at least forgotten. Yes, it's a big task sometimes, but it's doable. Any time you are dealing with a disappointment caused by other people, you can choose your own actions in response to it.

Rather than focusing on what was done and how it has hurt you, you can concentrate on being the kind of person you want to be at all times.

When it comes to events that cause disappointment, remember that many, many opportunities will come along in a lifetime. Missing one does not mean the rest will disappear as well. When timing is wrong for something you hoped for to happen, recognize this for what it is. The wrong time, period. That doesn't mean that what you wanted will never happen, just that the timeframe, and your expectations may need to be adjusted. If in fact you missed out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, don't worry. There will be others just as compelling. Maybe better.

Each time you feel the darkness of disappointment, take time to consider it. What is causing it? Can you change anything about the situation to diminish the sting and to prevent it from happening again? Be realistic about this particular assessment, neither overly pessimistic nor naively optimistic. If you need another pair of eyes or a different perspective to help you be clear, seek out a friend or trusted adviser. Check your assumptions. In fact, it helps to write them down. Were they inflated? Misplaced? Completely out of line with reality? Did you hope for the impossible and then somehow convince yourself that it could happen? Being realistic in approaching situations is a key factor in managing disappointment.

It is not unusual to feel and act dramatically when facing disappointment. When you're hurt or scared, emotions tend to run hotter and colder than usual. Be keenly aware of this and manage your reactions with this awareness in mind.

You'll notice that I did not suggest that you could do away with disappointment or that in time disappointment will no longer hurt. That's not true. As long as you are active in a crazy world, all kinds of things are going to disappoint you. *You will sometimes disappoint you!*

Disappointment comes with living an active, hopeful life. Learning to manage it is a great way to appreciate the shadings of life, the times that add depth and character and color. By learning to manage your disappointment, you will also be in a great position to help others manage theirs. People who are clear about their expectations and graceful in dealing with disappointment create the most effective and successful working environments imaginable.

