

1 YOU **Might** THINK

Dealing with Unrealistic Expectations in the Reality of Marriage

I'm crazy, but all I want is you.

THE CARS, HEARTBEAT CITY, 1984, ELEKTRA RECORDS

Before we got married, John and I spent hours and hours talking. We discussed our growing-up years, our hopes and dreams, our likes and dislikes. We literally spent every free moment together. I thought I knew him pretty well. After four months of dating we were engaged, and we married five months later.

Id found the man for me. For life.

Even though I didn't realize it at the time, I had expectations of what life would be like after we were married. Very unrealistic expectations, I soon discovered. For example, Id visited John's apartment on many occasions, and I could tell he was a neat freak. His bed was always made. The dishes were washed and put away. He did his own laundry and ironed his own clothes. What a guy!

I was just the opposite. In fact, one thing my mother repeatedly told me when I

was growing up was, "I'd hate to see what *your* house will be like when I'm not around to pick up after you."

Cool, I thought. *John will do all the housecleaning...this will work out perfectly.*

Okay, let's stop right here. I'll wait while you finish laughing.

You see, John had his own expectations.

Great, John thought. *Once we get married Trish will be around, so I won't have to do all the housecleaning.*

As you can imagine, we both had unrealistic expectations. And we were both hugely disappointed!

Now, if those had been the only expectations we had for each other, then married life would have been fairly manageable. But they weren't. In fact, our expectations were just one drop in the tidal wave. Our differing thoughts on issues like money, child-rearing, sex, and our extended families soon created waves, as deep-seated emotions, past experiences, and firm opinions stirred the sandy beaches of our honeymoon paradise.

Ohmigosh! Who is this person I married? I wondered, my chin set and my arms firmly crossed over my chest. *When did he get so opinionated and stubborn?*



Crazy for You

It's all brand-new.

MADONNA, THE IMMACULATE COLLECTION, 1990, SIRE RECORDS

Growing up, all of us develop expectations of what marriage is like. And when we finally meet that special someone, our expectations reach an all-time high. *This is going to be GREAT!* we think as we confess our love to each other. *This is the person I've looked for all my life!*

And in the beginning, things *are* great. Discussions focus on happy topics like lifelong dreams and values and our future children. It never crosses our mind to talk about real-life stuff. In fact, I like to compare the dating relationship to M&M's candies. We're so excited about the shiny, varied colors of our attraction and the sweet

chocolate of romance that we don't pay much attention to the other person's nutty opinions, habits, and real-ness...until we bite in.

I didn't realize until after saying "I do" that marriage isn't about *the future*. It's about the present. It's not about future careers or imaginary children. It's about everyday stuff, like toothpaste tubes and laundry piles, or *Monday Night Football* and karate films versus chick flicks.

As women, we picture our future spouse as the man who will continue to listen and care, continue to flatter us and attend to our whims. And the man in our lives really *does* think we'll continue to shoot hoops together in the driveway...or sit next to him and hand over tools as he works on his car. After all, this is what life was like with each other before the wedding. Why would we expect any different?

Willard F. Harley Jr., author of *His Needs, Her Needs*, writes:



It is not uncommon for women, when they are single, to join men in pursuing their interests. They find themselves hunting, fishing, playing football, and watching movies they would never have chosen on their own. After marriage wives often try to interest their husbands in activities more to their own liking. If their attempts fail, they may encourage their husbands to continue their recreational activities without them.¹

The biggest unrealistic expectation is the notion that things will "continue like they did when we dated" (with the bonus of living together and the added fun of sex, of course!).

What newlyweds often forget is that dating is more about impressing the other person than revealing our true selves. Sure, I hiked with my beau...because I wanted to *spend time with him*. I also made sure I looked my best. I sacrificed time and money for "just perfect" hair and stylish clothes. I exercised and sacrificed ice cream *and* cookies to stay in shape and look like the type of person John would be proud to have on his arm.

And yes, John tromped through the mall with me for hours at a time and wore



the new clothes I picked out for him. After all, he was just like one of those birds that display its brightly colored feathers, strutting its stuff, as part of its mating ritual. John was on his best behavior.

As Madonna sang, "It's all brand-new... I'm crazy for you." But oftentimes we discover that the things that make us crazy-in-love are the very things that drive us insane during marriage. Can anyone give me an amen?



MY TAKE ON IT

I didn't have a clue what it would be like. I was eighteen, a sophomore in college, working two jobs. We were planning to wait until after college to get married, but our plans were moved up three years when my wife-to-be got pregnant. For me, it was the time to step up and take responsibility. Expectations were simply that we would survive and I would finish my degree. I thank God both goals were accomplished, due in no small part to my wife's support and equal dedication to our family.

—Chris, born in 1974

Florida, married thirteen years

I must have had some big expectations, because the very next morning my husband and I got in our first fight ever, and I was like, "Huh? What happened here? What have I done? Oh, noooooo!" I had no clue what I was getting into. I was just pregnant and didn't want my baby to be illegitimate, and I was getting pressure. Oh sure, I had planned my wedding and wanted a white dress and all that fun stuff, but I never really gave marriage any consideration. Sorta like how I wanted a baby but I never considered parenting... Clueless.

—Katie, born in 1972

Montana, married seven years

How Soon Is Now?

How can you say, I go about things the wrong way...

THE SMITHS, HATEFUL OF HOLLOW, 1984, ROUGH TRADE



The problem, of course, isn't only that marriage is vastly different from what we imagined. The problem also arises from our efforts to transform our expectations into reality.

Im sure all of us can think of things we wanted to change about our new husband or wife when we first got married. *Maybe there are things you're still working on!*

But the truth is that changing the other person doesn't work, mainly because it's not our job. This quote says it well: "Part of being a good spouse is to help keep your home in order, putting everything in its place. However, it is not your duty to put your spouse in his or her place."² *Ouch.*

I can feel my cheeks reddening with this one, because boy did I try! And that went about as far as my minivan on *E. nowhere*. The reason, I discovered, is that when we try to force our spouses to live up to our expectations, one thing is missing: honor.

Honor for our spouse.

Honor for God the Creator.

Now, *honor* isn't a word we think about much this day and age, but when I looked it up, the definition was simple:

- a. to hold in respect; esteem.
- b. to show respect for.

When we have expectations of our spouse and secretly wish for him or her to change, discontentment slides in, booting out respect. The thumbs-up we offered during the dating years turns into a thumbs-down.

But since we don't want to out-and-out complain, we show our disapproval in subtle ways—by making little comments, sending disapproving glances, or posting sticky notes inscribed with Scripture verses to the remote control: "I will set before

my eyes *no vile thing*," (Psalm 101:3, emphasis mine). As if the other person isn't smart enough to know what we're doing!

Our actions are justified, or so we think. After all, we have a lot riding on this other person.

"Marriage is to human relations what monotheism is to theology. It is a decision to put all the eggs in one basket, to go for broke, to bet all of the marbles," writes Mike Mason in *The Mystery of Marriage*.

Is there any abandonment more pure, more supreme, more radically self-abnegating than that of putting one's entire faith in just one God, the Lord of all, in such a way as to allow that faith to have a searching impact on every corner of one's entire life? On the level of human relations, there is only one act of trust which can begin to approach this one, and that is the decision to believe in one other person, and to believe so robustly as to be ready to squander one's whole life on that one.³

Yet to truly believe in one other person... we need to *believe in Him*. To trust that God knows his or her strengths and weaknesses even better than we do. God also knows our expectations (no matter how unrealistic they are).

The truth is, these are things God uses as the months and years progress. Issues, conflicts, and struggles can draw us closer to Him if we remember to bring our expectations to God in prayer. They are also the things that will show us what loving imperfect people is all about.

"Yes," you say, "but I still have to live with her! Should I just throw my hands up and stuff my expectations like cheeks full of sugary marshmallows, pretending these things don't matter?"

No, but here's what you can do:

1. Understand that expectations can hurt your relationship.

"'And they lived happily ever after' is one of the most tragic sentences in literature," author Joshua Lievman once wrote. "It's tragic because it's a falsehood. It is a myth that has led generations to expect something from marriage that is not possible."



(Sure, Cinderella got Prince Charming, but we didn't get to see the rest of the story. Just how did she handle it when he continued to forget to put down the toilet seat?)

"The enemy is an expert archer with lots of practice aiming fiery darts," adds Beth Moore. "When women are the targets, often the bull's-eye is childhood dreams or expectations. We grew up believing in Cinderella, yet some of us feel as if our palace turned out to be a duplex, our prince turned out to be a frog, and the wicked stepmother turned out to be our mother-in-law. Our fairy godmother apparently lost our addresses."⁴

2. Look in the mirror first.

"Success in marriage is more than finding the right person; it is being the right person," wrote the poet Robert Browning. To me, being the right person is looking at myself through my spouse's eyes. It's seeing the things I do that irritate him and working to fix those things that have merit (such as forgetting to do the errands he's repeatedly asked me to do). It's asking God to reveal areas of much-needed transformation in our own hearts.

"Managing self" means to do what I can do with *me* when I can't do anything about the circumstances surrounding me," writes Cindi Wood, author of *The Frazzled Female*.⁵

A lot can happen in my marriage, and my spouse can come up short on many counts, but I can work on myself. I can bring my heart, motives, and actions before God and ask Him to change *me*.

3. Love your spouse... anyway.

According to the *Life Application Bible Commentary* on John 15:17:

"Our world wants love to be spontaneous and driven by feeling. But Jesus knows our deeper need. We know we ought to love even when we don't feel like it because we want others to love us when we are unlovable. In Jesus we find both the supreme model for loving and the supreme resource. He commands us to love, and he helps us accomplish his command.

"Jesus knew that if we would practice love, then the feelings of love would follow naturally. If we waited to be motivated by affection for others, we would

never love others. Treating others with honor and respect (even when we don't feel they deserve it) may generate good will and affection. If we understand how deeply we are loved by God in spite of our sin, we will be pushed in the direction of loving others ourselves. Those who do not realize God's love for them find it difficult to love others."⁶

An old Greek proverb says, "The heart that loves is always young." No matter how many years you've been married, that impressionable guy you dated is still somewhere in there, wanting to be loved, appreciated, and admired. Remember the things that drew you to him? Yes, well, *love* him for those things. Love with words and actions. Focus on the good.

4. Expect a blessing.

Matthew 5:9 says, "God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God" (NLT). Ephesians 6:7-8 says: "Work with enthusiasm, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people. Remember that the Lord will reward each one of us for the good we do, whether we are slaves or free" (NLT).

I can't tell you the number of times I looked at John and saw something in his life that didn't meet my expectations. Yet when I gave my expectations to God, worked on myself, and loved John just as he was, a wonderful thing happened. God worked on *John's* heart in ways I'd never dreamed. And amazingly, God found a way to do it without my nagging and prodding!

"How soon is now?" sang the Smiths. Start today.



MY TAKE ON IT

I think unrealistic expectations are the key to so much unhappiness in marriage—placing expectations on our spouse to fill needs that only God can and *should* fill. If we ask our spouses to take that place, then we make them idols and they will fail. As I look back on the early years of our marriage, many of my disappointments came from expecting my husband to do all the changing while I stubbornly insisted that he knew what he was getting when he married me. Even now, I have to be careful that I'm meeting his needs without burdening him with my unrealistic expectations. I wish I had this down pat. I just pray that God will continue to open my eyes and my heart to be the supportive spouse he needs without the strings of expectations that set him up to fail.

—Cara, born in 1974

Indiana, married ten years



AND ONE MORE THING...

"Everywhere else, throughout society, there are fences, walls, burglar alarms, unlisted numbers, the most elaborate precautions for keeping people at a safe distance. But in marriage all of that is reversed. In marriage the walls are down, and not only do the man and woman live under the same roof, but they sleep under the same covers. Their lives are wide open, and as each studies the life of the other and attempts to make some response to it, there are no set procedures to follow, no formalities to stand on. A man and a woman face each other across the breakfast table, and somehow through a haze of crumbs and curlers and mortgage payments they must encounter one another. That is the whole purpose and mandate of marriage. All sorts of other purposes have been dreamed up and millions of excuses invented for avoiding this central and indispensable task. But the fact is that marriage is grounded in nothing else but the pure, wild grappling of soul with soul, no holds barred. There is no rule book for this, no law to invoke except the law of love."⁷

