

KEEPING OUR SANITY BY MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

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We have a unique capacity to envision

an immense variety of possible future states. This allows us have ideals and strive for them, to plan, to learn and grow... and to want things.

This has everything to do with how we spend our money... and the joy or misery we experience from it.

In an essential way this orientation toward the future is what makes us human. We can imagine something we want to achieve, something we want to avoid, something we want to have, and then we can plan and aim ourselves toward achieving, avoiding, or gaining possession of whatever it is.

But there's a downside.

What if I want something that other people have, and I don't?

What if I want something that I had in the past but no longer have?

What if I expect to have something, but don't get it?

What if I want something I can't have?

That gap, between what we have and what we want, can inspire us to strive, to persevere, to lean into our lives more... but it can also make us miserable.

One of the main causes of depression – along with loss, feeling stuck, and certain poor habits – is when we strive for goals that we cannot achieve. I don't mean goals that are difficult but that, with enough work and grit we may very well achieve; I mean goals that are *genuinely beyond* our abilities.

The desire to achieve things, to have things, to make things happen that are beyond our capacity is extremely

common these days – and may be one of the reasons depression has been increasing.

Images and expectations for perfection and unrealistic success have been increasing. Social media shows posts of people enjoying lives of adventure and perfect happiness. It's natural to want to share joyful images and triumphs; but the cumulative effect in this online format is to present a world in which none of us actually lives; where everyone's happy and successful, always. This can lead to a greater focus on image and external displays of success rather than internal satisfaction.

Young people are more likely now than in the past to believe they're going to attend graduate school, or agree with the statement: "I will never be satisfied until I get all that I deserve." And in 2005 a third of American teenagers said that they were going to be famous someday. These are all examples of expectations that, for most people, will never be met.

If we expect to have a certain kind of house, a certain kind of car – or a certain number of houses or cars – but we don't yet have what we expect, we can either work on it from the outside by striving to get those things, or from the inside, by adjusting our expectations.

Striving is wonderful. Earned success is one of the genuine satisfactions of life – as long as what we're striving for is genuinely achievable and reflects our true values.

But to the degree that we tie our well-being to the *outcome* of our striving, we're also focusing on things outside of our control. We may work hard, do everything right, and still not reach the specific outcome we desire.

It can be delightful when an experience *exceeds* our expectations, like when we try out an unknown restaurant that turns out to be wonderful or get exceptional customer service at a store. When I had a root canal a few years ago, because of the skill and spirit of the dentist and his staff I still remember the experience fondly!

On the other hand, if an experience doesn't live up to our expectations, it's likely that we're going to feel bad about it – disappointed, sad, angry...

In addition, one of the most certain paths to feeling miserable is to compare what we have with what other people have. I know a person with a net worth of about 50 million dollars, who feels terribly disappointed in his life because, unlike several of his friends, he's not worth 100 million dollars!

If we have as an expectation that we should have more of something – wealth, airplanes, triumphant pictures to post on social media – than other people, but the reality is that we have less than many, or most, or even just a few that we obsessively focus on, then we're probably going to feel bad.

And in the worst case, we'll feel bad not just about the specific circumstance, but about ourselves.

One way that people deal with this is by spending beyond their means to try and have the lifestyle that they can't afford. Racking up credit card debt can feel painless at first, but this can change, as Hemingway said, slowly at first, then suddenly. Leading to feelings of regret, guilt, and even shame.

The objective difference in quality of life between a net worth of \$50 million and \$100 million is certainly not worth feeling miserable about, and yet if we hold our expectations strongly to an outcome that we're not likely to achieve, miserable is what we'll be.

One key is not to compare what we have with what others have – which is easy to say, harder to do, but well worth the effort to practice.

The most useful approach if we notice ourselves comparing is not to suppress it, indulge it, or push it away, but

to acknowledge it first, and then redirect our attention toward appreciating what we *do* have, and maybe, if we're comparing our circumstances to something that's possible and true to our deepest values, using that desire to fuel a *healthy* striving.

Beyond this, pay attention to the expectations you have of yourself, and what you expect to have and enjoy.

Then decide if your expectations are reasonable or not. If they're not, then do the internal work to adjust your expectations accordingly.

To live well, reality should be our trusted friend. Coming to terms with what's possible is not about giving up on a dream, it's about having our expectations align with reality, and envisioning those dreams we can make happen.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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