Expectations

"I have been bent and broken, but - I hope - into a better shape."

— Charles Dickens, Great Expectations

I was recently asked where the expectations I have of myself come from and, even after a couple weeks of thinking about I'm not sure that I can fully answer that question.

What I do know is that there have been times when expectations have weighed heavily. They impact the choices we make and how we feel about ourselves. This in turn, has the potential to stop us from voicing our thoughts, feelings, opinions and getting our emotional needs met.

I also know that in order to feel fulfilled, satisfied and to maximise our potential we need to understand and value our own expectations. That means:

- working towards the things that are truly important to us rather than the things that are important to others,
- spending less time doing what we think we should be doing and more time doing what we want to be doing.

This doesn't mean shutting everyone else out but rather that we can hear and take on board what they're saying whilst also fully understanding who we are and what we want for ourselves.

Read on to see why looking at where our expectations come from can be helpful in doing just that.

Primary Care Givers

We'll often inherit our beliefs and priorities from the people who are nearest to us and care for us in our younger years. For example, did your family assume you'd be married to a partner of the opposite sex by a certain age or perhaps they expected you to look or act in a certain way to fulfil a gender stereotype? Buying dolls and dressing in pink for girls and cars and blue clothes for boys is a great example of this.

Whilst family influences us to some degree, I don't think this always gives the full picture and I believe that there are also other "wider" influences.

Educational Settings

The school environment can bring a lot of judgement and expectation. I know it acts as encouragement and helps young people to thrive but it can also have a negative impact.

We often see this when younger children go to the same school as their older siblings. Teachers might have expectations of the second/third child based on the achievements and behaviour of the first. So, as the younger child you might find yourself underachieving to fulfil the low expectation

or conversely, feel that you're not good enough because you're not achieving as well as your older sibling. Either way, it's likely that you'll come away from the school gates feeling resentful for not being treated fairly or being seen for the individual that you are.

But it's not just siblings that can bring expectations to the school environment, perhaps it's other background information. I experienced this with racial stereotyping. This created a conflict between my individuality and what I knew to be right for me when it came to subject choices versus what the school felt would be right.

Peer Pressure

I think we've all experienced the pressure of wanting to fit in at some point at the other. Whether it's the "in crowd" at school or the "on trend" social clique at work; whatever the group there's a largely superficial expectation to look or behave a certain way in order to belong.

We all fall prey to these expectations at some time, though its often strongest during our teenage years as we figure out who we are and find our own sense of self in the wider world away from families. These expectations can turn into pressure to conform in order to fit in as we try to find our "own tribe".

Roles and Responsibilities

Adulthood brings lots of changes. We become responsible for our own financial security and social wellbeing and in order to take care of these we take on work, which usually brings a list of expectations e.g. hours, uniform, tasks you're required to complete.

But the expectations aren't always clear and this has certainly been the case during the pandemic. Perhaps the expectations have changed if you're now working from home? Is your workplace low on staff members so you're being expected to do more?

The clarity that expectations bring can be helpful but it may be that the expectations feel hard to fulfil, particularly right now [*read more about this in my next blog*].

Aside from work, we also have roles and responsibilities in our private lives as partners, parents, siblings and children. The expectations that all the different roles bring can become conflicting and require some juggling, for example, trying to care of older parents whilst also looking after your own young children.

The consequence is that once again our own voice and sense of self is either drowned by the need to fulfil the expectations of others or we end up with a sense of conflict within ourselves.

Why This is Important Now

It's March 2021 and we're still in the midst of a global pandemic and associated restrictions in social activity. These have brought us a huge heap of uncertainty and we find ourselves having to be more reliant on our own personal resources and resilience.

Black Lives Matter has also brought us a better understanding of the negative impact of judgements made through systemic racism and everyday micro-aggressions.

All of the above may have left our emotional well being and sense of self feeling a little run down, to say the least, but if we're able to reconnect with our own expectations (rather than feel weighted down by them) and focus on the things that are important to us then we are better placed to manage and if necessary confront the expectations of others and also to face the world, whatever it holds.

This leaves us free to choose to choose our own path and, to quote Dickens, emerge in "better shape".

Expectations and the negative impacts of judgements or stereotyping are all areas that I work with, in my counselling practice, so get in touch if you'd like to talk about any of these issues. It'd be great to hear from you.

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