

Changing Unmet Expectations in Therapy

by **John Banmen**

Without expectations, life might be boring. We all seem to have them and use them to make our lives more meaningful. When expectations are unmet, people often react negatively. Many clients seem to hold on to their unmet expectations and the reactions that follow. From the Satir Model's perspective, we talk about three forms of expectations:

1. expectations we have of ourselves;
2. expectations we have of others; and
3. expectations others have of us.

From early childhood we have daily expectations to handle. In an ordinary life cycle most expectations are dealt with in a healthy, satisfactory way. Unmet expectations often manifest themselves as disappointments, sadness, anger, hurt, even helplessness and low self-esteem. When these unmet expectations trigger people's reactive feelings such as hurt, anger and fear, clients bring these feelings into their therapy sessions. Unfortunately, some therapy models and numerous therapists spend session after session exploring and reliving these feelings without transforming them, only reducing, at best, the intensity of the feelings.

The Satir Model uses a direct experiential approach of surfacing and facing the unmet expectations and resolving them in a way that provides greater harmony internally and externally between people.

Instead of ignoring one's unmet expectations, or reacting with feelings like anger, or blaming others for not living up to one's expectations, we have some positive choices available for our clients.

Here I am proposing five ways of helping your clients with their unmet expectations.

1. "Let go of your unmet expectations."

Letting go of what the client wanted often triggers some sense of loss. By accepting oneself and accepting the situation without necessarily liking it, one can also deal with the loss, and appreciate what one has and is. This process works well if done in a experiential way.

2. "Find alternatives to meet your unmet expectations."

For example, if the client wants something and it is not available either from the past or in the present, the client is encouraged to explore alternatives to satisfy one's unmet expectations. Finding and implementing alternatives to unmet expectations can become a healthy way of dealing with one's daily life.

3. "Decide to hold on to your unmet expectations."

If clients are not willing to let go or find alternatives to their unmet expectations, it is important to explore the costs to the client and possible "payoffs". You help the client explore and accept the cost to themselves and possibly to others without forcing them to change. Don't push them, don't criticize them, honour their choice even if you do not agree with their decision. I have found that many clients who explore the cost of holding on to their unmet expectations are, at a later session, very open to letting go and deal with their disappointment, hurt and anger, and then find healthy ways to meet their needs.

4. "Go to your yearnings."

Expectations are usually person and situation specific. By helping clients experience their deepest longings, such as the universal yearnings for love, acceptance, belonging, security or freedom, you can help the clients to find a way to fulfil their yearnings in a realistic and healthy way. They then might be able to let go of the specific unmet expectation which has been causing their reactions. For example, "I want and expect some approval and acceptance from Peter." By going deeper and realizing that the client wants approval and acceptance, but that he can get it from people other than Peter and from himself would illustrate the concept of meeting yearnings.

5. "Work on meeting your expectations."

Often clients need some help in believing in themselves or possibly help in resolving an old belief, i.e., "I'm too old to go back to school to fulfill an expectation." Therapists can be very helpful in helping clients meet their realistic expectations.

We have found that working with unmet expectations experientially gets us quick results and helps the clients take greater responsibility for their life.