
Thrive

Expectations are premeditated disappointments:

Five ways to maintain a flexible mindset in an uncertain world

by STEPHEN KEARNEY

The human mind is unique, and can do things that no other animal can do. It can construct futures and reconstruct the past. This ability to construct expectations of the future, along with the drive to enact them, has been the secret of our success as a species.

It is also the cause of much of our distress. We can react to these imagined futures, or the loss of them, as if they are happening for real right now. This might be a sense of disappointment that a move to Level 3 is unlikely to see me being able to visit family, and grieve for the loss of that future, or fixating on the worst-case scenario for our business.

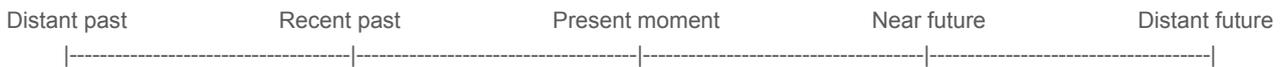
In a world that is increasingly uncertain and volatile, and is driven by factors outside our control, we can find ourselves stuck on a roller coaster of emotions as we react to each of the futures our mind constructs. For some of us, this might begin to lead to a sense of overwhelm, exhaustion, grief and despair. Consequently oftentimes, to paraphrase prominent 20th century psychologist Albert Ellis, our expectations are premeditated disappointments. Our mind can “see” a future disappointment, and pushes us to seek greater control to avert it. This push typically takes the form of anxiety – discomfort associated with anticipating shame, disappointment, loss or other threat. Sometimes our mind is so focused on the future we can become distracted from the present, including the things and people that are important to us right now.

In the face of uncertainty and lack of control, noticing when our expectations are getting in the way can be a helpful skill. Here are some thoughts on how you might do that.

1. Put your thoughts and feelings somewhere you can look at them. For many people, the easiest way to do this is to write them down. However, it can take other forms; drawing a picture, writing a song (if you are so inclined), or any other form of external expression. The act of writing your thoughts down allows your mind to acknowledge the feelings and concerns in those thoughts, and potentially hold them a little lighter. Importantly, by giving your thoughts and feelings a form and some edges, you may find they aren’t as scary as they feel when they are in your head. Be aware that, as you first sit down to do this, there may be an initial spike in anxiety, as your attention settles on your scary expectations. However, this typically passes as you stick to the task. Perhaps set a timer for five minutes and track your discomfort as you write, and see what happens.

2. Notice your time-travelling mind. Your mind’s ability to travel in time is amazing. It is also inevitable. Your mind is essentially a prediction engine. Trying to stop it from projecting into the future is impossible. However, if we buy into those predictions as facts, we can experience a great deal of distress. Noticing where your mind is going, whilst being aware that you aren’t there yet, can mitigate the emotional impact of predictions and expectations.

One way to do this is to draw a line on a piece of paper in front of you, like the one below, with the anchors: Distant past, Recent past, Present moment, Near future, and Distant future.



When you notice your mind time-travelling, put a mark on the timeline reflecting where it went. No need to be too precise, and don't chastise yourself for letting it wander, your mind is built to do that. Then, once you have tagged it, you might bring your awareness back to the present moment. Or, let your mind keep wandering, and track where in the timeline it goes, putting marks on the line as you go. You may find yourself surprised as to how your mind travels. Importantly, the aim of this is not to stop your mind wandering, but to remind yourself that your thoughts are constructions of your mind, rather than reality. You may find that, the more you do this, the better you get at noticing when you are reacting to thoughts like they are reality.

3. Intentionally take varied perspectives. When it generates a scary expectation, your mind will tighten its grip on that expectation and that perspective. The thought will feel sticky and intrusive. This is a survival strategy. Your mind is driving you to act to avoid that future. However, when we are uncertain about our ability to control the future, we can feel stuck and helpless. We can then become preoccupied by worry and futile rumination.

The antidote to this rigidity of perspective is to intentionally take multiple perspectives on the same situation. There are many ways to do this. You might shift yourself in time, "How will I look back on this situation in my retirement?" or alternately, "What would my 5-year-old self have seen as important in this situation?" You might shift along the optimism spectrum from, "What is the worst-case scenario?" through to, "What does the best case look like?" You might look at it through the eyes of those around you—whānau, workmates, other members of your community. The capacity to shift perspective on a stressful situation predicts a number of long-term wellbeing outcomes. The more perspectives you are able to take, the more you realise no single perspective reflects all of the reality, and this reduces your emotional reaction.

4. Establish a "present-moment anchor". Training a verbal or behavioural prompt to bring your awareness back to the present moment can be useful. With practice, you can train your mind to step out of prediction and expectation mode, and bring your awareness to what is in front of you. Lord Rabbi Sacks suggests, when we feel fear or anxiety, we ask ourselves, "What does this moment ask of me?" The US Navy Seals, in moments of high stress, remind themselves to "work the problem". The specific phrase or action is less important than that it makes sense for you. It might be the act of a slow, deep breath out, or counting to five in your head. Either way, have a cue that signals letting go of expectations, good or bad, and coming back to the moment so you can focus on something you can control in the here and now.

5. Label expectations as what they are: hopes and worries. Notice how the thought, "I had expected to be able to hug my friends on Thursday" feels different from "I had hoped to be able to hug my friends on Thursday." One brings frustration and anger, the other brings a tone of self-compassion. Expectations feel rigid and punitive, hopes link to our values and imply uncertainty. Similarly, label your worries. When you notice yourself reacting to a scary future, try adding the phrase, "I notice the worry that..." to the front of your prediction and see how this changes your reaction to it. For example, "I'm going to lose my job" becomes "I notice the worry that I'm going to lose my job". This small act can have a noticeable effect on your emotional response to it.

The human mind is a prediction engine that is predisposed to orient and fixate on scary or negative expectations. In times of volatility and uncertainty, this can lead to a sense of helplessness and overwhelm. Practising the skill of noticing when your mind is doing this, and intentionally responding differently, can enable you to be both happier and more effective in the face of that uncertainty.