

# Expectations from Self and Others

## Section 5



Parents and caregivers experiencing compassion fatigue are often competent people with high expectations for themselves, who may feel overworked and underappreciated. We give the very best of who we are every day, yet all too often struggle to feel like anything we do is good enough. We carry with us beliefs about how a parent or caregiver “should” look, think, feel, act, and be viewed by others. We often expect more from ourselves than we can reasonably give. As caregiving demands add up, our self-image, self-esteem, and sense of worthiness may erode, thus changing our perceptions of ourselves and our children. Our compassion resilience may decline. Understanding, and at times challenging, our own expectations and perception of others’ expectations is key to learning to identify, transform and overcome unrealistic beliefs that may limit our ability to approach others and ourselves with compassion.



We all carry a load of expectations with us. Our expectations paint a picture in our head of how things “should” be, look, and feel and of how the people around us “should” act and feel. Our “shoulds” reflect expectations, responsibilities, or duties that we feel we are not meeting. If our internal dialogue says “*I should spend more time playing with my child,*” the unspoken end to that sentence is “... *but, I am not.*” This can result in guilt, frustration, or anxiety.

Well meaning, but unchecked, expectations can be at the core of compassion fatigue. Expectations may operate in the short-term: “*If I get this dinner just right, the family will love it.*” In this example, we create expectations for ourselves (“*If I get this dinner just right...*”), as well as for others (“*the family will love it*”). Such thinking can invite shame if we don’t live up to our self-expectation, as well as resentment if others do not live up to our expectations of them. Expectations also operate in the long-term and may be evident in the goals we set for ourselves or our children: “*I will be a great parent if my child conquers their anxiety about going to parties.*” This example shows our own expectations may be influenced by expectations others have for us – “That parent should know how to help their child get over social anxiety.”

Expectations can evolve into shame or resentment when they go unnoticed. It is only when we become conscious of our expectations that we can examine how realistic they are. We can increase our compassion resilience by making an effort to notice the “shoulds” in our life and the effect that such expectations may have on us. We must first *notice and name* our

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expectations if we are going to align them with reality. Let’s take a moment to think about some expectations we carry as parents and caregivers. Try to think of a few expectations in each category.

	Expectations of self	Expectations of child	Expectations of partners or extended family members	Expectations of people in helping professions
<b>Example</b>	<i>I should always stay calm when my child is upset.</i>	<i>My child should appreciate how hard I try to be a good parent.</i>	<i>My partner/family member should have the same priorities as me.</i>	<i>The people I go to for help should be able to give me accurate answers.</i>
<b>My Examples</b>				

Let’s look at a few examples of how unchecked expectations may lessen our compassion resilience. For each case, we will consider strategies that may be helpful in building our compassion resilience.

**Case 1:** Lisa is parent of a four-year-old child named Jax. She has loved parenting, and, although there have been challenging times, she has felt like a “successful” parent. She expects she should feel the same as Jax ages. However, she’s noticed that some of her strategies are not working as well as they used to and that Jax is pushing against the limits she sets more and more lately. The pre-school teacher has made several comments about Jax “misbehaving” at school. Lisa recently miscarried a baby at 6 months and is experiencing stress in her relationship with her boss at work. Lisa is struggling to deal with her feelings surrounding the loss of her child, but also believes that her problems should not interfere with her ability to provide the best support for Jax. She is concerned that his challenges are her fault.



**Reflection 1a:** Lisa is experiencing multiple sources of stress and compassion fatigue, which are then affecting the likelihood she can parent Jax in the way that she expects of herself. Her compassion resilience may suffer if she does not adjust her expectations to these new circumstances. **In the table above, what drivers of fatigue make it difficult to achieve the expectations you listed?**

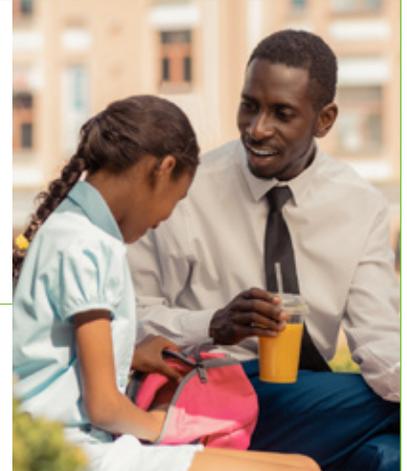
**Reflection 1b:** Self-compassion supports our compassion resilience, while unrealistic expectations can undermine it. Lisa’s perceived inadequacy could lessen her compassion resilience even further. With self-compassion, Lisa is better equipped to recognize her own needs to maintain her physical, emotional, and mental well-being so that she may again show up compassionately for Jax.

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**Case 2:** Todd is undergoing his first teacher-parent conference in quite a while. He cares for his 13-year-old niece and hasn't gone to her conferences in recent years. He is excited to communicate with his niece's homeroom teacher because he has noticed his niece seems down a lot lately. He's discouraged to find that the teacher does not appear to really know his niece and doesn't seem to take the conversation as seriously as he had hoped. After this meeting, he starts to blame the teacher for his niece's moods and feels angry that she is not getting the support she needs at school.

**Reflection:** Our expectations are often internal and undiscussed. Todd may have found it useful to discuss his expectations regarding the conference with the teacher to see if they are aligned with the reality of middle school conferences. Making his expectations known might create space for him and the teacher to figure out another time for them to have a deeper conversation about his niece. That would also invite the teacher to step up to Todd's expectations that she knows his niece and participate in a helpful way with Todd to address his concern about her moods. **How might you test the expectations you listed above by talking with others?**



So far, we have discussed the expectations we have for ourselves and the expectations we have for others. While it pays to keep an eye on our own expectations and assumptions, we also have a laundry list of expectations that are heaped upon us. Many of us struggle mightily as we try to fulfill the expectations of others. Expectations placed upon us are often left unstated or are not clearly defined, leaving us to make inferences or guesses about the expectations people have for us. When unreasonable expectations are placed upon us, it may be a quick path to feeling burnt-out. Giving too much of ourselves as we strive to meet or exceed expectations, without taking time to care for ourselves, leads to burn-out. And then people may presume that we will continue to go above and beyond at each and every opportunity. When we no longer can go the extra mile, or no longer wish to, then everyone may be disappointed. It is not difficult to see how expectations can be a root cause of damaged relationships.

We have the opportunity to build more satisfying relationships with others when we talk to people to clarify their and our expectations. With open lines of communication, we can be clear about what the expectations are and whether we can reasonably meet them.

Building positive family, friend and work relationships rests on the following:

- acknowledging we all have expectations;
- striving to be aware of our expectations and clearly communicate them to others;
- seeking to understand others' expectation of us;
- and being open to altering our expectations to make them realistic and aligned with our values.

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SELF-CARE



STRATEGIES

## MIND: Developing positive affirmations

This exercise is designed to help identify unrealistic self-expectations and transform them into positive affirmations.

**Step 1:** List some of your unrealistic self-expectations related to caregiving. These often contain words such as always, never, must, should, no one.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

**Step 2:** Take each unrealistic self-expectation and change it into an alternative belief that feels right to you. These affirmations should be positive, short yet specific, stated as if it already exists, and be only about you. See the table for examples.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

 Step 1: Examples of Unrealistic Hurtful Self-expectations	Step 2: Examples of Positive Self-affirmations 
No matter how well I parent, it will never be good enough for my child.	I am good enough today as the person I am. While I will strive to do better in my parenting, I accept who I am today.
I can't feel good about myself unless I am successful in alleviating my child's challenges.	I will be there with my children as they face complex challenges. Together, we will learn what works and how to deal with what we cannot change.

**Step 3.** Choose one affirmation from above that especially appeals to you. Say it to yourself with increasing focus and intention repeating and accepting the affirmation. At some point, notice the affirmation repeating itself even when you do not consciously try to repeat it. Feel a growing sense of calm, clarity and peacefulness as it begins to take root.

\* Adapted from the [Traumatology Insitute](#).



WHAT'S NEXT

## Compassionate boundary setting