Changing Expectations

at the holidays

Taking a closer look at the expectations you hold can be useful in navigating the holidays.

Consider the iconic Christmas movie National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. In the film, there is this bit of dialogue with Clark Griswold and his long-suffering wife, Ellen:

Ellen: You set standards that no family activity can live up to.
Clark: When have I ever done that?
Ellen: Birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, funerals, holidays, vacations, graduations…

The Griswold's are not alone. Family life is built on expectations for one another's behaviors. At its best, this shared understanding of how we expect our children or relatives to act keeps family life running smoothly.

Our family values are our judgments about what is important in family life. Family values are expressed in phrases like, "Children should always respect their parents" and "Don't take things without asking first."

"Expectations are resentments waiting to happen." The author Brene Brown states the idea even more clearly: "Disappointment is unmet expectations, and the more significant the expectation, the more significant the disappointment." That becomes our description of our child or relative and what they *should* have done or *should not* have done.

Three things You Can Do

1. **Change your expectations**

Accept that your child or relative is not going to change to meet your expectations; it's your expectations that need to change." Giving up on absolute family values and unattainable expectations may be difficult, but for many people it can be liberating. By letting go of expectations for behavior, we can end a cycle of anticipation and disappointment.

2. **See how your child or relative has changed**

If you have felt "done forever" with a child or relative, holding onto this view will interfere with being open to how they have changed over time. Similarly, you too may have changed over time. Perhaps you could take a risk to test the relationship to determine if the circumstances that led to your expectations being violated have change. Maybe your expectations have changed over time too.

3. Determine the LEAST you can accept

Decide what is the *least* you can accept in a restored relationship with your child or relative. In other words, if you cannot get everything you want in a challenging relationship, what can you live with? Can you find something redeemable from the relationship and focus on *that* to create the best connection possible?

Becoming aware of the power of expectations and exploring which ones you are willing to change can help you see a path to reconciliation. Although we cannot change our child or relative, we can change what we expect and demand of them, making room for new possibilities for our relationship with them.

Adapted from Karl Pillemer, PhD, *Fault Lines, Fractured Families and How to Mend Them* (New York. Random House, 2020) pp. 187-209.