

Letting Go of Unrealistic Expectations - 'It would be good'

'It would be good' are four simple words. Yet they have the power to set us free. If only we choose to shift from holding on rigidly to our 'unrealistic expectations' to letting go, it would truly be good.

Take a look at *Mr Tan's case. At age 53, Mr Tan was retrenched by the only company he had worked for. For over thirty years, Mr Tan gave his heart and sweat to his employer. In retrospect, he felt he had even neglected the well-being of his children due to frequently returning home late from overtime work.

Mr Tan was a valued employee until his immediate boss retired and a new supervisor took over. The new boss brought along new workers from his previous workplace. Mr Tan found himself 'disadvantaged' and was later retrenched.

A year after his retrenchment, Mr Tan suffered from a severe stroke and became bed-ridden. Two years on, Mr Tan continued to recount his story from his bed, with as much anger, anguish and frustration as he must have felt when the retrenchment first happened.

Mr Tan is typical of many of us. He struggles with the issue of



expectations. Mr Tan had expected his company and his immediate boss to be fair to him. 'I have been loyal to my company. I have always given them my best,' was his constant refrain. Although he did not utter 'They must therefore be fair to me and spare me from retrenchment', whoever hears his story will know that this is his unspoken belief. It is unspoken, yet it drove his decisions and behaviour. It triggered negative emotions that caused him ill-health.

'It is fair for Mr Tan to expect that of his employer after what he has given. What is wrong with that expectation?' you may wonder. Logically speaking, Mr Tan's expectation of his employers is reasonable. The problem is, it is reasonable but not a realistic one.

Like many of us, Mr Tan, had used his own standard of judgement to form expectations of others. Mr

Tan would have been fair to his employee if he were the employer (or he may not if he *really* becomes one). In reality, he is not them and they are not him. He fails to recognise that he has no control over the outcome. It involves others. He has absolutely no control over how they choose to behave. Is there any wonder that his expectation of them is unmet? In holding on tightly to his unrealistic expectation, Mr Tan unknowingly set himself up for distress. He can continue to rigidly insist on what he deems is fair or unfair but it does not change a thing. At the end of the day, his employer and his previous boss have moved on. He, however, suffers the consequences of not letting go of his unrealistic expectations.

The origin of Mr Tan harbouring unrealistic expectations is his inability to perceive the truths about human nature and relationships. As a child, he was limited in his capacity to understand. He was naturally self-centred. The source of his thought pattern was unreliable and inaccurate. The accompanying beliefs formed from this thought habit are unhelpful and need undoing.

Connect-Point

It was normal of us as children with limited capacity, to not understand or grasp fully the reality in which we operated in. So we harboured beliefs such as 'I am a nice and harmless person, people *ought to* be kind to me.' That seems to be a reasonable expectation but because it is unrealistic, not taking into account the limitations of others and our inability to have control over how they behave towards us, it sets us up for disappointment and frustrations. The expectation is bound to be unmet. There will be people that will not like us, for various reasons.

Not learning from our past lessons, we continue to operate in this thought pattern as an adult. So we hold the belief that 'My intentions are good and noble, my children or my employer should appreciate me.' We then find ourselves unable to accept the outcome of reality. 'Isn't that a reasonable expectation?' you may ask. Yes, there is nothing wrong with holding a reasonable expectation. The issue arises when we fail to maintain a healthy tension between being reasonable and being realistic.

How will this healthy tension look like? Let's use the case of Mr Tan. If he has taken into consideration the limitations of others and his inability to have control over how they behave towards him, he would think 'I have given all my years of service to this company. *It would be good* if they are fair to me. They have not been fair to me.' instead of 'I have given all my years of service to this company, they *should be* fair to me in return.'

The difference is essentially in shifting from holding rigidly to the 'MUSTs,' 'SHOULDs,' and 'OUGHT TOs' to relenting that 'It would be good'. In doing so, he shifts from unrelenting inflexibility to accepting the possibility that his expectation may not be met. In his case, it will help him to accept his current situation. This releases him from frustrations. It also enables him to release the other party from his judgement and grudge. It will certainly be better for his health.

This strategy for coping with expectations can be applied to ourselves as well. Among many things we do not know about ourselves, we have no idea how many strands of hair we have on our heads, we do not know how the piece of bread we have just eaten looks like now or where it is in our digestive system, we need to acknowledge that we are not our own master. Just as we have no control over others, there are areas within ourselves that are beyond our control as well. Why go into head-on collision clenching our unrealistic expectations, even of ourselves, when we can steer and navigate towards safer and healthier ground? Let go of 'I must ace all my examinations.' Adopt a more realistic approach, something within our control such as, 'I will do my utmost best and accept the consequence of my efforts.'

Albert Ellis, the American psychologist who started Rational Emotive Cognitive Therapy and who came up with this strategy of shifting from rigid unrealistic expectations, advises that '*being less demanding and more flexible in our belief system leads to healthy emotions and helpful behaviour.*'

So the next time we catch ourselves harbouring the 'MUST, SHOULD and OUGHT TO' beliefs of ourselves and others, remind ourselves of the need for a healthy tension. It is alright to have reasonable expectations, but keep in mind our limitations and others' too. Good for us if our expectations are met. If they are not, we are free to release them. We are free to accept whatever comes along.

**fictitious name*



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