

What to do when You don't Get what You Want.

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John Lennon of the Beatles is reputed to have said, "Life is what happens while you're making other plans." We all have the experience of things not turning out the way we want. Sometimes, in fact, we get just the opposite of what we wanted, and perhaps even thought we deserved! For example, despite all our good work, our business colleagues view us with malice, or we don't get the promotion we're looking for, or worse yet, we get laid off. Or we devote infinite effort to doing right by our children, only to find that they can be ungrateful and rejecting, especially when they don't need us anymore. Or even though we try our best to be kind and considerate to our mate, that person seems to spend too much time picking on our faults, while ignoring their own. Or after fifteen years together, the romance is definitely gone from our marriage, and our partner just never seems to do the right thing.

What are these failed expectations about, and how can we best react to them? The Buddha recognized long ago that the problem with expectations is that they create attachment, and attachment inevitably causes pain. Life just doesn't fit neatly into our personal picture of reality, and what's happening is different from what we think. Life is, after all, much bigger than our narrow perceptions.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said something similar, but from a different angle, when he pronounced that life is a river. Like any river, it is subject to constant change, so you can never step into the same river twice. You can't pin a river (life) down, and expect it to meet your desires. It just keeps flowing, and carries you with it into ever-

changing scenarios. How can life respond to your needs if everything around you keeps on changing? Better for you to do your best and then adapt to the realities, rather than getting all worked up over what doesn't go your way.

So what should we do? Our failed expectations always bring pain and hurt, and sometimes anger. It seems so unfair that things don't work out the way we want them to. But there is an important message that underlies our failed expectations, and it's this: build inner strength.

Every time that life disappoints you offers an opportunity not to bitch and moan, but rather to see more clearly how you were dependent on external events to fill you up, to make things okay for you, to meet your need for self-esteem. Sometimes, of course, external events do make us happy. But when they don't, that's a chance to look to yourself, and to work on the inner serenity and personal power that will make you less vulnerable to upsets in the future.

Properly played, the game of life is a strength-building game. If you read the cards the right way, life makes you stronger, more self-loving and more autonomous. Reading the cards right means responding to events in a way that helps you instead of entangling you. For example, if you lose your job, you won't profit if you put your efforts into bitching about your former employer, or if you panic in your quest for new employment. But you will profit if you use upsetting events to work consciously on overcoming your fear and anger, and on building the inner resilience that will help you meet the next challenge with less anxiety. That inner resilience is a mark of your personal integrity, and in the end, personal integrity is the only possession we have that can give us an enduring sense of value.

If your children mistreat or ignore you, or your sweetheart puts you down, you can always doubt yourself or sit in a soup of self-pity and melancholy. But you'll be the worse for that. The better alternative is to remember that the people who disappoint you are struggling with their own issues, and they just may be incapable of seeing who you are or meeting your needs. They have so many fears and frustrations of their own! Perhaps if you considered their own hurts and fears, you would at least understand why your needs aren't first in their mind.

Once you learn not to let others' attitudes affect your core sense of self, you are on your way to true autonomy: the ability to stand for your own values. The more autonomous you are, the more compassionate you will be with others, because you won't need them to behave in a specific way. You'll also find that the more compassionate you are with them, the better you'll be treated in return. It's ironic but true that often we create our own disappointments by being too needy and demanding of the world around us.

It's hard to let go of needing life to fulfill our dreams and dramas, and learning to be okay with wherever life takes us. But doing this also makes life a lot lighter and more fun. We don't take ourselves—or others—so seriously. We can see that life is just play. We're all actors in a giant drama, whose parts keep on changing. It's not so heavy, after all. Let's allow ourselves to become more effortless!

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