

Expectations

“What’s so hard about picking up your mess?” Martha asks her husband as she steps over his hoodie and socks that are strewn between the dresser and the bathroom. Mike shrugs his shoulders wondering if Martha will ever stop nagging him about leaving his clothes on the floor. He always picks them up eventually, but rarely in her time frame.

Martha’s frustration stems from her unmet expectations that Mike will suddenly realize his faulty habits and make a remarkable transformation that meets or exceeds her perceived behavior patterns. They’ve been married 17 years with no change in his habits on the horizon, however, perhaps if she nags him just one more time he will see the light, get on his knees and beg for more nagging.

Who needs self-help books when one has a know-it-all spouse, parent, or boss who offers constant reminders about your inadequacies? Assuming you are in the position of the know-it-all, what history or scientific research do you have on which to base the perception that someone will change their decades-old habits because you perceive you know better?

The environmentally conditioned habit of holding people accountable for our perceptions is a subtle way of offering unsolicited opinions and judging another’s behavior based on our filters. Expectations come in two forms. For purposes of simplicity, let’s label them Expectation A and Expectation B.

Expectation A is based on history, like a credit report. It is how this person has always acted; it is their habit base. Cheri and I have been married for over 31 years and around 6 pm for 31 years she almost always fixes dinner. One particular Saturday, she left the house to run errands around 2 pm. She indicated that her final stop was to visit her mother.

In the past her mother was a trigger for me. She is a human time vacuum. After kissing my bride goodbye I settled into my statistics homework. When I looked up it was 5:45 pm and I was very hungry. I walked upstairs to check on my son Samuel (11 yrs) and asked if he was hungry. He said “yes” but had a chimichanga being nuked in the microwave.

I assessed the situation, my son took care of himself and my wife was visiting her mother and may not return for hours, so being the gourmet cook that I am, I rustled up some cold cereal and toast. No sooner had I finished consuming my 2-course meal and Cheri walked in. It was precisely 6 pm. She greeted me with a smile and a kiss and indicated she was going to fix some dinner. Not wanting to disappoint her, I ate twice that evening.

Many years ago, I would have been triggered by the hunger and Cheri not being home in time to fix dinner, however, her history has always manifested the intent to

fix dinner and her behavior is always to provide that meal unless something was out of her control. Expectation A. I had no reason to believe she would not cook me dinner, but knowing her mother was involved, I figured she might not have control over her time. Another Expectation A handled, no triggers, no frustration, no fights, no nagging, and no blaming.

Contrast this with Expectation B, perception. Expectation B is a source of frustration, it is expecting people to read our minds, have proper manners, know what to say, and behave in such a way that is in harmony with our worldview.

Russ has been working outside all day performing acts of service for his bride. During one of his breaks he came in the house, went to the bathroom, washed his hands and face and went back outside. Russ and Shalise have been married for 9 years and she has constantly reminded him to put the toilet seat down and to clean his hands with soap and water, not the towel.

As they sat down to dinner, Shalise had a message for Russ, "When will you ever remember to put the toilet seat down? You know how frustrated that makes me. And pleeeeee wash your hands with soap and water. The towel is designed to dry your hands, not clean them."

Shalise is placing her view of how things should be on Russ. Russ was raised in a house of boys by a widower father and from his perspective, it is as much effort to raise the seat for the man as it is to lower the seat for the woman. It doesn't make sense that he is always wrong.

She is frustrated because she expects Russ to see life through her eyes and she is not aware that his habits are as ingrained to him as her habits are to her. How would it go if he were to respond back to Shalise about his expectations of bathroom etiquette?

The next time you are frustrated because of someone's behavior, pause a moment and ask if you are experiencing Expectation B and have rendered an unsolicited opinion on how they should behave based on your perceptions.

Marques wanted to scream; his mother was driving him up the wall. He has been working with me for the past 2 years to improve his potential for success at work, but the conversation often turns to family. During our chat I asked Marques if she (mother) had always acted this way. "Yes, and that's what make me so mad."

"How old is your mother," I asked?

"74," he responded.

"How old are you?"

"46, why do you ask?"

"How long has your mother acted this way?"

“Forever.”

“Uh, huh. How do you respond when people expect you to behave according to their perceptions, especially when you don’t see what’s wrong with how you behave?”

“But she knows it drives me nuts,” he complained.

“Are you the only person with whom she acts that way?”

“No way, she does this all the time,” now exacerbated.

“Is her intent to frustrate you?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“At what point will you choose to discontinue giving your perceptions permission to stop controlling your happiness,” I asked?

“I know, I know. It’s just that it gets me triggered and I don’t know what to do.”

“Is that true?”

“Okay, you’re right. I need to code it and then myelinate it.”

Coding and myelinating are the tools needed to modify behavior, actually transform it, and create new habits. When people are triggered, the only thing under their control is their reaction.

Years ago I read the quote, “It is a fool who is offended when no offense is intended.” That was powerful for me and has been a strong reminder of how often I’ve been triggered by Expectation B when I don’t understand why people act mean or foolishly when I clearly know better.

However, the second part of this quote stood me on end, “It is a greater fool that is offended when the offense is intended.”

Bring on the coding and the myelinating, I’ve got more work to do.