

The Deep River Within: Taming Self-Expectations

by Abby Seixas

Beneath the busyness of our daily lives flows a deep river of creativity, passion, silence, and a place of contact with our own wisdom and clarity. This “deep river within” is a powerful antidote to the stress, frenzy, and sheer pace of daily life in our 24/7 culture, if we can find our way to these rich inner resources. In my women’s groups and in my book, Finding the Deep River Within: A Woman’s Guide to Recovering Balance and Meaning in Everyday Life, (Jossey-Bass, 2007), I offer six core practices for bringing more sanity and soul to women’s lives. Practice number four is about working with the inner voice of perfectionism to tame our self-expectations:

Although it was probably ten years ago, I still remember vividly an image shared by a woman in a Deep River group* whose life was feeling unmanageable. She said she was bothered that her daily life seemed to her like a quilt with random squares missing, especially at the edges. She wanted her life to look like the quilts she made for a hobby: no missing squares, beautifully designed, everything lined up and symmetrical.

We may not all carry such a clear image of how we want our lives to look, but most of us, whether we’re aware of it or not, are measuring ourselves and our lives according to some picture we have of “how it’s supposed to be.” These idealized images, standards or expectations can be helpful in defining and reaching our goals, gaining skills and mastery in our chosen endeavors, and making choices that match our values. But expectations can also get us into trouble. When our expectations are too high or are held too tightly, the resulting pressure can make us feel driven, fragmented, and cut off from ourselves and others, not to mention unhappy. This is not an atmosphere that invites the Deep

River to flow into our lives! Instead, when we have too many expectations of who we should be or what we should do, we chain ourselves to the treadmill of endless striving and doing. By lightening up on demands we put on ourselves, we not only allow for a more flexible, creative approach to life, but we begin to create an inner environment that is more friendly toward balance, depth and ease.

Holding expectations more loosely doesn't mean giving them up altogether. It means letting go of urgency, rigidity and the need for things to be "just so" *when those qualities are not warranted*. This is a key to slowing down and having less stress in our lives.

The first step in loosening up is becoming *aware* of tightly-held expectations. Look for "shoulds" or "have-to's" that have a sense of life-or-death urgency but actually aren't matters of life or death. (For example, "I *have to* clean the oven before the in-laws arrive!!") Once you are aware of holding an expectation tightly, try some of the following suggestions for how to lighten up. You can figure out what works for you by trial and error.

- *Try humor:* Exaggerate your expectation to the point of absurdity. Make a caricature of yourself. Imagine how you would look or what you would say if you were a character in a cartoon, sitcom, comic strip.

- *Try compassion:* See your self-expectation from the perspective of a very trusted and loving friend, teacher or family member. What does this compassionate person say to you? Try saying it to yourself.

Or try seeing your expectation as if it was someone else's--someone you care about. What would you say to that person? Try saying it to yourself.

Or have a compassionate conversation with the part of you that is holding on so tightly. Lovingly acknowledge it for *trying so hard* to...be more this, less that, etc.

- *Try expanding time:* Ask yourself, "Will this matter 10 years from now?"

- *Try expanding space:* Look, even briefly, at a star-filled night sky, or the vastness of an ocean or prairie or clear blue sky. See if your expectation loosens.

- *Try breathing :* Feel where and how you are holding this expectation in your body. Imagine breathing into it, around it. Let your breath make space around the tightness, helping it to soften. Or just take three slow, deep breaths.

- *Try coming up with a reminder phrase that you can say to yourself:* You might tell yourself, for example, “Don’t sweat the small stuff--and it’s all small stuff.” Or you might say, “Que sera sera; whatever will be will be.” If you can sing your phrase, all the better! Or, if you prefer more Buddhist phrasing, try these: “Things are as they are,” or “This is what is.”

- *Try telling yourself “I’ll still be a good person if...I don’t get the oven cleaned before the in-laws arrive or “if I go to bed and read instead of cleaning up the kitchen...”*

Have a friend remind you that you’re still a good person even if

_____ (fill in the blank) when you forget it or doubt it.

- *Try asking yourself “Who says?”* With a little introspection, you might trace your self-expectation to someone else (Mom? Dad? The religious or other belief system you grew up with?) or simply to one of your own internal voices. Even if you can’t identify the source of your expectation, asking the question provides a pause and the possibility of *choice* about how and whether to meet that expectation.