

Our Expectations Are Making Us Miserable

HBO's [*Curb Your Enthusiasm*](#) offers a hilarious look at an ego on steroids. In each episode Larry David (co-creator of *Seinfeld*), playing himself, tries to make himself more comfortable by making the world go his way. In the process he steps over other people while hoping they still see him as a nice guy. He causes difficulties for himself and others; and at the end of every episode, he fails to get what he wants. Through Larry, we get to reflect on the machinations of our own ego.

Larry wants to justify his bad behavior, and so he has an intricate set of ever-changing rules and expectations. He waits for others to violate his rules, and when they do, he claims he is a victim. In one episode, his wife Cheryl says in exasperation, "Not everyone knows your rules, Larry. You have your own set of rules and you think everyone is going to adhere to them but they are not because nobody knows them."

Larry's efforts to enforce his rules end in comedic futility. In his book, [*Forgive for Good*](#), Dr. Frederic Luskin explains how our minds are clogged by unenforceable rules: "Often when trying to enforce unenforceable rules we write mental tickets to 'punish' the one who has acted wrongly. Unfortunately, if our rule is unenforceable, the only person we end up hurting with our ticket is ourselves. We clog up our minds with these tickets."

While laughing at Larry we can ask, *Where have our expectations led?*

Sometimes our expectations are met; often they're not. The

more we live life in the force field of our expectations, the more disappointment, frustration, anxiety, and anger we experience when things don't go our way. Are our expectations making us miserable?

Larry thinks he is upset because the world is not going his way. But is "the world" really the cause of his distress?

Like all of us, Larry's actions are purposeful: He wants to end his suffering. Larry's ego, like ours, believes that the way to end suffering is to get more of what he wants and less of what he doesn't want. Is that a simple formula for happiness?

Even when Larry triumphs, we see his angst quickly returns. His efforts are counterproductive. The more he seeks what his ego wants, the more he suffers. We laugh with Larry because our own life experience is consistent with his.

Identifying with his ego, Larry keeps searching for happiness where it can't be found. In his seminal book [Man's Search for Meaning](#), Victor Frankl instructs that happiness must be obtained indirectly, and it is only obtained when we rise above our ego's expectations:

Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it.

Psychology professor Sonja Lyubomirsky reports her research findings in her books [*The How of Happiness*](#) and [*The Myths of Happiness*](#). Studies reveal that statements that begin “I’ll be happy when ...” or “I can’t be happy when...” are based on false beliefs. Changes in life circumstances have negligible effects on our happiness. The research is clear: Our ego’s guidance never works beyond occasional, fleeting pleasure; it will never bring us happiness.

Lyubomirsky quotes an old maxim: “Nothing in life is as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it.” She adds, “In other words, we exaggerate the effect a life change will have upon our happiness because we can’t perceive that we won’t always be thinking about it.”

Do you find yourself frequently ruminating over the actions of others who fail to meet your expectations? If so, stop being an actor in your own sitcom. Laughing at your own expectations, just as we laugh at Larry’s, will yield huge benefits.

—

Barry Brownstein is professor emeritus of economics and leadership at the University of Baltimore. He is the author of [*The Inner-Work of Leadership*](#). He delivers leadership workshops to organizations and blogs at BarryBrownstein.com, and [*Giving up Control*](#).

[Image Credit: By Mstyslav Chernov/Unframe/<http://www.unframe.com/> (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0>)], via Wikimedia Commons]