Understanding Expectations & Assumptions

How Unspoken Rules, Past Experiences, and the Stories We Tell Ourselves Can Affect Our Relationships

An In-Depth Educational Workbook & Self-Assessment

By Maria Shkreli, LMHC

Educational Disclaimer

This workbook is intended for educational, informational, and self-reflection purposes only. It is not a diagnostic tool and should not be used to diagnose a mental health condition or determine the health of a particular relationship.

The assessments and exercises throughout this workbook are designed to help you identify patterns in your expectations, assumptions, communication, and emotional reactions.

Completing this workbook does not establish a therapist-client relationship.

Some of the material may bring up difficult experiences or emotions. You are encouraged to move through the workbook at your own pace. If relationship difficulties, anxiety, trauma, conflict, or emotional distress are significantly affecting your daily life or well-being, consider seeking support from a qualified mental health professional.

Introduction

Most relationship problems don't begin with one enormous event.

They often begin with something much smaller.

A text wasn't answered.

Someone didn't call.

Your partner came home and seemed distant.

Your adult child didn't check in.

Your friend didn't invite you somewhere.

Your sibling didn't offer to help.

Your spouse didn't notice that you were overwhelmed.

Someone's tone sounded different.

And suddenly, something happens inside us.

We don't just notice what happened.

We begin **explaining it.**

"They're ignoring me."

"They don't care."

"They're angry."

"They're selfish."

"They should know better."

"I would never do that to them."

"They did that intentionally."

"If I mattered, they would have remembered."

And before we realize it, we are no longer responding only to what happened.

We are responding to the **meaning we gave to what happened.**

That distinction is incredibly important.

Because sometimes our interpretation is correct.

But sometimes it isn't.

And sometimes the biggest conflict in a relationship develops not from the original event, but from everything that happened **after we interpreted it.**

This workbook is about learning to recognize that process.

It isn't about telling you that your feelings are wrong.

It isn't about lowering every expectation you have.

And it certainly isn't about accepting disrespectful, abusive, dishonest, or harmful behavior.

It is about becoming more aware of three different things:

What actually happened.

What you expected to happen.

What you decided it meant when it didn't happen.

Those three things can become so intertwined that we stop recognizing the difference.

This workbook will help you separate them.

PART ONE

Understanding Expectations

What Is an Expectation?

An expectation is a belief about what we think should happen.

Some expectations are spoken.

Others aren't.

You may tell your partner:

"If you're going to be late, please text me."

That's a communicated expectation.

But you may also think:

"If my partner really respected me, they would automatically let me know they're running late."

That's different.

You may never have actually discussed it.

Yet when your partner doesn't text, you may experience the situation as disrespect.

This is where expectations become complicated.

The expectation may be completely reasonable.

The problem is that **reasonable does not automatically mean communicated.**

The Expectations We Never Say Out Loud

Consider these statements:

"My husband should know when I need help."

"My daughter should call me more often."

"My best friend should have known that would hurt me."

"My family should support me without me asking."

“My partner should know what makes me feel loved.”

“My siblings should help with our parents equally.”

There may be very understandable feelings underneath every one of these statements.

But there is an important question:

Does the other person know that this is what I expect?

Sometimes the answer is yes.

Sometimes we've discussed it repeatedly.

That changes the situation.

But sometimes the answer is:

“No, but they should know.”

That sentence—**“They should know”**—is one of the most common places where expectations and assumptions meet.

Where Do Expectations Come From?

We don't enter relationships as blank slates.

Long before we meet a partner, become a parent, enter a friendship, or begin working with someone, we have already developed ideas about how relationships are supposed to work.

Those ideas may come from:

- Our parents
- Our grandparents
- Culture
- Religion
- Gender roles
- Family traditions
- Previous relationships
- Trauma
- Abandonment
- Betrayal
- Attachment experiences
- Movies and social media
- What we witnessed growing up
- What we didn't receive growing up

- Our own personality and values

This matters because two people can love each other deeply and still enter a relationship carrying completely different rulebooks.

Neither person realizes the other person has a different book.

Example: "Family Should Always Help Family"

Imagine two people get married.

One grew up in a family where everyone helped everyone.

Someone moved?

Ten relatives showed up.

Someone needed money?

Family helped.

Someone was sick?

People came over with food.

To this person:

Love means showing up.

Their spouse grew up differently.

Their family valued independence.

You didn't ask for help unless you truly needed it.

Offering unsolicited help could even feel intrusive.

To this person:

Love means respecting someone's independence.

Now imagine the first person's mother becomes ill.

The spouse doesn't immediately offer to take over responsibilities.

The first person thinks:

“How can you just sit there? Don't you care about my family?”

The spouse thinks:

“If you need something, tell me. I'm trying not to interfere.”

Same situation.

Two completely different meanings.

Neither person's behavior can be understood without understanding the expectations underneath it.

The Invisible Rulebook

Most of us carry an invisible relationship rulebook.

We rarely sit down and write it.

But it's there.

It may contain rules like:

If you love someone, you call every day.

A husband should provide.

A wife should know what her husband needs.

Children should always respect their parents.

Parents should sacrifice for their children.

Family problems stay within the family.

Good friends don't need to be asked.

If someone hurts you, they should apologize first.

If someone cares, they make time.

Some of these beliefs may be deeply important to you.

The goal isn't to throw them away.

The goal is to recognize:

“This is one of my rules.”

Because once you recognize the rule, you can ask:

Where did I learn it?

Do I still believe it?

Is it reasonable?

Have I communicated it?

Does the other person share it?

EXERCISE: My Invisible Rulebook

Complete these sentences without overthinking them.

A good partner should...

A good husband/wife should...

A good parent should...

A good adult child should...

A good friend should...

Family should always...

Someone who loves me should never...

When someone hurts me, they should...

Now go back through your answers.

Ask yourself:

Where did I learn each rule?

Have I actually communicated it?

Would everyone agree with it?

What happens emotionally when someone breaks it?

This exercise can reveal expectations you didn't even realize you had.

PART TWO

Understanding Assumptions

An assumption is different from an expectation.

An expectation says:

“I thought this would happen.”

An assumption says:

“I know why this happened.”

That's a major difference.

The Mind Hates Missing Information

Human beings don't particularly like uncertainty.

When information is missing, our minds try to create an explanation.

Someone doesn't respond.

We wonder why.

Someone looks upset.

We wonder what's wrong.

Someone cancels plans.

We wonder what it means.

That process itself isn't abnormal.

The problem begins when:

A possibility becomes a conclusion.

You move from:

“Maybe they're upset.”

to:

“They're upset with me.”

Then:

“They're upset with me because I did something.”

And perhaps eventually:

“They're pulling away from me.”

Notice how much information was added without actually receiving any new information.

The Story We Create

Try separating an event into three parts.

EVENT

My partner hasn't responded for four hours.

FEELING

I feel anxious and hurt.

STORY

They're ignoring me because they're angry and don't care enough to respond.

The **event** is observable.

The **feeling** is real.

The **story** may or may not be accurate.

This is an extremely important distinction:

A feeling can be completely real even when the interpretation causing it isn't completely accurate.

You don't need to argue with your feelings.

You need to become curious about the story attached to them.

Example: The Unanswered Text

You text your partner at 1:00 PM.

By 4:30 PM, no response.

Your mind starts:

"They always have their phone."

"They saw it."

"They're ignoring me."

"They're probably annoyed about this morning."

"Why can't they just communicate?"

By the time they call at 5:00 PM, you're angry.

You answer:

"Nice of you to finally call."

Your partner immediately becomes defensive.

Now you're arguing.

Twenty minutes later, you learn they spent the afternoon in a meeting.

What created the argument?

The unanswered text?

Partially.

But a large part of the conflict developed from the **story created during those four hours.**

PART THREE

When the Past Enters the Present

This is where expectations and assumptions become much deeper.

Sometimes we aren't only responding to the person in front of us.

We are responding to what similar situations have meant before.

If you grew up with an unpredictable parent, silence may feel threatening.

If a previous partner cheated, changes in someone's routine may immediately get your attention.

If you were frequently criticized, a neutral comment may sound judgmental.

If affection was inconsistent growing up, emotional distance may feel like abandonment.

If you had to anticipate other people's moods to stay emotionally or physically safe, you may have become extremely skilled at watching:

- Facial expressions
- Tone
- Silence
- Body language
- Changes in routine
- Changes in texting
- Changes in affection

Those skills may once have protected you.

But later, they can also cause you to interpret uncertainty as danger.

Example: "What's Wrong?"

Your partner comes home tired.

They're quieter than usual.

You ask:

"What's wrong?"

They say:

"Nothing. I'm exhausted."

You hear:

“I don't want to talk to you.”

You ask again.

They become irritated.

Now you think:

“I knew something was wrong.”

But notice what happened.

Their irritation came **after repeated questioning.**

The final reaction may now appear to confirm the original assumption.

This is how assumptions can sometimes create the very reaction we're afraid of.

PART FOUR

The Expectation–Assumption Cycle

A common relationship cycle looks like this:

1. I have an expectation.

"You should check in with me."

2. The expectation isn't met.

No call.

3. I create meaning.

"You don't care."

4. I experience emotion.

Hurt. Anger. Anxiety.

5. I react to the meaning.

"You're selfish. You never think about anyone but yourself."

6. The other person becomes defensive.

"I can't do anything right with you."

7. Their reaction reinforces my original belief.

"See? You really don't care."

And the cycle continues.

The goal isn't to eliminate emotion.

The goal is learning where you may have an opportunity to interrupt the cycle.

PART FIVE

Deep Expectations & Assumptions Assessment

Instructions

Rate each statement based on how accurately it describes you, particularly during emotionally difficult situations.

0 = Never

1 = Rarely

2 = Sometimes

3 = Often

4 = Always

Section A: Unspoken Expectations

1. I expect people close to me to recognize what I need without being told. _____
2. I become frustrated when I have to ask for something I believe should be obvious. _____
3. I believe certain relationship responsibilities should not need to be discussed. _____
4. I sometimes think, "If they cared, they would know." _____
5. I expect others to show care in ways similar to how I show care. _____
6. I become disappointed when people don't respond the way I would have responded. _____
7. I have strong ideas about what partners, family members, or friends "should" do. _____
8. I sometimes realize after a conflict that I never clearly communicated what I expected. _____

Section A Total: _____ /32

Section B: Assumption-Making

9. When someone's behavior changes, I quickly try to determine why. _____
10. I sometimes believe I know what someone is thinking without asking. _____
11. I interpret changes in tone, texting, or communication as signs that something is wrong. _____
12. When someone disappoints me, I may assume their behavior was intentional. _____
13. I sometimes react before checking whether my interpretation is accurate. _____
14. I find uncertainty in relationships difficult to tolerate. _____
15. When I don't have enough information, my mind tends to fill in the missing pieces. _____
16. Once I believe I understand someone's intention, it can be difficult for me to consider another explanation. _____

Section B Total: _____ /32

Section C: Past Experiences

17. Past betrayals affect how I interpret people's behavior today. _____
18. Previous relationship experiences influence what I expect from current relationships. _____
19. Certain behaviors quickly remind me of things that have happened in my past. _____
20. I sometimes prepare myself for disappointment before I know what is actually happening. _____
21. I watch closely for signs that someone's feelings toward me have changed. _____
22. I sometimes expect people to behave like others who have hurt me before. _____
23. Uncertainty can make me feel emotionally unsafe. _____
24. I sometimes recognize that my reaction is larger than the current situation itself. _____

Section C Total: _____ /32

Section D: Communication & Conflict

25. I sometimes communicate frustration before clearly explaining what I need. _____
26. I expect people to understand why I'm upset without me explaining it. _____
27. When I feel hurt, I may accuse rather than ask questions. _____
28. I sometimes use words such as "always" or "never" during conflict. _____
29. I find it difficult to ask directly for reassurance or clarification. _____
30. I sometimes enter conversations already convinced I know the other person's intentions. _____
31. I become defensive when someone tells me my interpretation is incorrect. _____
32. I sometimes focus more on proving my interpretation than understanding what happened. _____

Section D Total: _____ /32

Understanding Your Assessment

Rather than focusing only on one total score, compare your four sections.

Section A — Unspoken Expectations

Section B — Assumption-Making

Section C — Past Experiences

Section D — Communication & Conflict

Your highest section may help identify **where your cycle tends to begin.**

Someone with a high Section A score may need to work primarily on communicating expectations.

Someone with a high Section B score may benefit from slowing down interpretations and checking facts.

Someone with a high Section C score may recognize that old experiences are influencing present relationships.

Someone with a high Section D score may understand the expectation or assumption only after conflict has already begun.

And many people will score high in more than one area.

That's important too.

PART SIX

Relationship-Specific Assessment

Expectations aren't always the same in every relationship.

Rate each area from:

0 = Rarely creates difficulty

1 = Occasionally

2 = Sometimes

3 = Frequently

4 = Major source of difficulty

Romantic Relationships

I expect my partner to know what I need. _____

I interpret emotional distance personally. _____

I become concerned by changes in communication. _____

I compare what my partner does with what I would do. _____

Total: _____ /16

Family

I have strong beliefs about what family members should do for one another. _____

I feel hurt when relatives don't show up in ways I expect. _____

I believe certain family responsibilities should be understood without discussion. _____

I interpret family members' choices as statements about how much they care. _____

Total: _____ /16

Friendships

I expect close friends to recognize when I need support. _____

I feel hurt when friends don't initiate contact. _____

I may interpret not being included as rejection. _____

I compare the effort I give with the effort I receive. _____

Total: _____ /16

Work

I sometimes assume I know what a supervisor or coworker's tone means. _____

I take certain workplace interactions personally. _____

I expect others to communicate or work the way I do. _____

I sometimes create explanations when I don't receive feedback or information. _____

Total: _____ /16

Now compare the categories.

You may discover that you are relatively flexible in friendships but carry strong expectations in family relationships.

Or perhaps you feel secure with family but make more assumptions in romantic relationships.

Patterns are often **relationship-specific**.

PART SEVEN

Are My Expectations Reasonable?

This is an important distinction.

This workbook is **not** teaching you to lower every expectation.

There are reasonable expectations within healthy relationships.

You can reasonably expect:

- Basic respect
- Emotional and physical safety
- Honesty
- Respect for established boundaries
- Accountability
- Communication about important matters
- Agreements to be honored
- Freedom from intimidation or abuse

The question isn't:

"Am I allowed to expect anything?"

The better questions are:

Was this expectation communicated?

Was it mutually agreed upon?

Is the expectation realistic?

Does it allow the other person to be different from me?

Am I expecting consistency—or mind-reading?

EXERCISE: Expectation Audit

Choose one expectation that frequently causes disappointment.

My expectation:

Who do I expect this from?

Where did I learn this expectation?

Have I clearly communicated it?

Yes / No / I'm not sure

Has the other person agreed to it?

Yes / No / We have never discussed it

What do I believe it means when they don't meet it?

Is that meaning a fact or an interpretation?

What could I communicate more directly?

PART EIGHT

Assumption Audit

Think about a recent situation that upset you.

What actually happened?

Write only what could be observed.

What did I immediately think it meant?

What emotion did that interpretation create?

What did I do next?

What evidence supported my interpretation?

What information was I missing?

What are three other possible explanations?

1. ---
2. ---
3. ---

What could I ask instead of assuming?

This does not mean your original interpretation is wrong.

It means you're giving yourself more than one possible explanation before deciding which one is true.

PART NINE

When "I Would Never Do That" Becomes the Standard

One of the easiest ways to create an expectation is to use ourselves as the measuring stick.

"I would have called."

"I would have remembered."

"I would have offered."

"I would never speak that way."

Sometimes that comparison reveals a genuine difference in values.

That matters.

But sometimes it simply reveals a difference between two people.

Your way of showing love isn't automatically the universal definition of love.

Your way of communicating isn't automatically the only healthy way to communicate.

And your instinctive response isn't necessarily what another person would instinctively do.

A useful question is:

"Am I asking this person to treat me well, or am I asking this person to be me?"

There is an important difference.

PART TEN

Expectations, Boundaries & Control

These concepts are often confused.

Expectation

“I expect you not to yell at me.”

Request

“Please don't yell at me when we're arguing.”

Boundary

“If yelling begins, I'm going to end the conversation and return to it when we can speak calmly.”

Control

“You're not allowed to become angry.”

A boundary focuses primarily on **what you will do**.

Control attempts to determine what another person is allowed to feel, think, or do.

Recognizing the difference can completely change the way conflict is approached.

PART ELEVEN

The Cultural & Family Layer

Expectations can become especially powerful within families and cultures because they aren't always viewed as expectations.

They may be viewed as simply:

"The way things are done."

Ideas about:

- Marriage
- Parenting
- Adult children
- Caring for aging parents
- Gender
- Loyalty
- Privacy
- Respect
- Family involvement
- Independence
- Money
- Divorce
- Dating
- Household responsibilities

may be deeply connected to family and cultural traditions.

When someone challenges one of these expectations, it can feel like they're rejecting much more than a rule.

It may feel like they're rejecting the family, the culture, or even you.

That's why these conversations can become so emotionally intense.

Understanding where an expectation came from doesn't mean you must keep it.

And questioning an expectation doesn't mean rejecting your culture or family.

It means deciding intentionally which values you want to carry forward.

PART TWELVE

Deeper Self-Reflection

Take your time with these.

What do I expect people who love me to automatically know about me?

Which expectation causes me the most disappointment?

Whose voice do I hear behind the word "should"?

What did love look like in my childhood home?

What did respect look like?

What happened when someone disappointed someone else?

Was direct communication encouraged, or were people expected to "just know"?

What behavior makes me immediately assume something is wrong?

What am I most afraid that behavior means?

Is that fear connected only to the present relationship—or have I felt this before?

What expectation have I repeatedly had that other people repeatedly fail to meet?

Have I communicated it clearly?

What would happen if I asked instead of assumed?

PART THIRTEEN

A New Way to Respond

When something happens and you notice yourself becoming emotionally activated, try this sequence:

1. What happened?

Stick to the facts.

2. What did I expect?

Identify the expectation.

3. What am I telling myself this means?

Identify the assumption.

4. What am I feeling?

Name the emotion.

5. What information don't I have?

Identify what's missing.

6. What else could possibly explain this?

Create alternatives.

7. What do I need to ask or communicate?

Move toward communication.

This isn't about suppressing your instinct.

It's about giving yourself enough time to determine whether your instinct is responding to **the present situation, an unspoken expectation, an old experience, or a combination of all three.**

Final Thoughts

Expectations aren't the enemy.

Assumptions aren't evidence that something is wrong with you.

Both are part of how human beings understand relationships.

The difficulty begins when we stop recognizing them for what they are.

An expectation can quietly become:

"This is what you should do."

An assumption can quietly become:

"This is why you did it."

And eventually both can become:

"This is the truth."

That's where relationships can get stuck.

Greater awareness gives you another option.

Instead of:

"You don't care."

You might say:

"When I didn't hear from you, I noticed I started telling myself that I wasn't important to you. Can we talk about what happened?"

Instead of:

"You should have known."

You might recognize:

“I realize I expected you to know what I needed, but I never actually told you.”

And there will also be times when you communicate clearly and the other person still doesn't listen.

There will be times when your assumption turns out to be correct.

There will be people who repeatedly break agreements.

There will be relationships where your expectations are reasonable and still aren't being met.

Self-awareness does **not** mean explaining away another person's unhealthy behavior.

It means becoming clearer about **your part, their part, and the difference between the two.**

The goal isn't to stop expecting.

It isn't to stop trusting your instincts.

And it isn't to question every feeling you have.

The goal is to create enough space to ask:

What do I know?

What do I expect?

What am I assuming?

What do I need?

And what needs to be communicated?

Sometimes one honest question can prevent an entire argument built around an answer we never actually had.