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SECRET #2

Set Realistic Expectations

I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.

—BILL COSBY, ACTOR AND COMEDIAN

A Tale of Two Expectations

TABLE 5.1 *Realistic Daily Expectations*

THE SITUATION	REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS	NOT-SO-REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
Getting up	I know that I like to hit “Snooze” a couple of times each morning. So that I’m not rushed and still have time to enjoy my coffee, I’ll set my alarm for an hour before I need to walk out the door. I’ll also pack my lunch, wash the dishes in the sink, and lay out my clothes the night before because these activities cause me stress in the morning.	I set my alarm for 20 minutes before I need to leave the house so that I should have exactly enough time to grab coffee, get dressed, pack my lunch, and leave. <i>Why am I so stressed in the morning, running late all the time, and always needing to buy a lunch? Oh yeah, and the house is a mess.</i>

(continued)

TABLE 5.1 *Realistic Daily Expectations (continued)*

THE SITUATION	REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS	NOT-SO-REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
Commute	I know that it technically only takes a little over an hour for me to get to work. But when I have an 8 a.m. meeting and it's really essential that I make it to work exactly on time, I give myself one and a half hours. That way, if I'm running a bit late, I hit some traffic, it's raining, or something else comes up to slow me down, I'm not stressed. I know I'll be at work on time, and if everything goes smoothly, I can even knock something off my to-do list.	If I hit every green light, find a close parking spot, and don't have people in front of me in line, it takes 11 minutes for me to get to the train station, park, buy a ticket, and board the train. Then, once I get off the 41-minute train ride, if I walk really quickly and don't have to wait for the elevator, it takes me 13 minutes to get from the train to my office. I'll leave the house at 6:55 a.m. when I have an 8 a.m. meeting. <i>Shoot! I'm late again. What's wrong with me?!</i>
Planning and processing	I know that planning plays an essential role in my feeling in control and on top of my daily activities and in being proactive about my big goals. I set aside time at the start of each day to review my calendar and my to-do list and to set priorities. I also anticipate anything that might come up in the next couple of days and proactively take action to avoid potential problems. Each day, I also set aside a focused amount of time to respond to all of my new e-mails and to record any corresponding tasks that I need to do in relation to the e-mails. That way I'm on top of what's in my inbox, and I can focus on executing on projects the rest of the day.	I've got so much to do that I couldn't possibly waste time on such activities as answering my e-mails or planning. I'll just plunge into the first activity that captures my attention and work as hard as I can. Then, when I have a few minutes between meetings, on the train, or after dinner, I'll catch up on e-mails. <i>I hate that I'm always afraid I will forget something and that I'm always getting things done at the last minute. My anxiety rises with my ever-growing e-mail inbox, and sometimes I even forget about meetings . . . that's so embarrassing. Why can't I feel like I have it together?</i>

THE SITUATION	REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS	NOT-SO-REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
Getting tasks done	<p>I carefully map out when I will work on certain activities throughout my week to ensure that I have enough time for what's most important. If I have a deadline, I make a personal deadline a day or two before the actual one so that I have some wiggle room in case of unexpected technical problems or meetings that run long. When people ask me to do something new, I evaluate whether I have time to help them now. If I don't, I let them know who else could assist them immediately, or I tell them when I will have the ability to assist them.</p>	<p>I've always been a "can do" type of person, so I figure if I throw myself hard enough at tasks, anything is possible. I also really like to help other people, so if anyone has a question at any time, I try to help them immediately. I'm more or less the go-to person for everything.</p> <p><i>Why do I feel like I never have enough time to get things done and like I'm taking care of everyone else's priorities but not my own?</i></p>
Wrapping up	<p>I set up a pop-up alarm on my computer for one hour before I want to leave to remind myself to start wrapping up my current tasks. I also avoid scheduling any meetings for the last hour of the day or starting on any completely new tasks. I assess and review how the day went, adding any new action items to my to-do list. I do a quick scan of my e-mails to make sure that nothing urgent has come up, and I also listen and, if necessary, respond to my voicemails. I start to save and to close down the different documents on my computer and then look around my desk to see if I need to toss or file anything. I also do a quick mental check to make sure that I have everything I need to bring home with me before I step away from my desk.</p>	<p>The end of the day always catches me off guard. Usually what happens is that I glance at the clock on my computer and realize that it's 6:30 p.m., and if I don't leave soon, I'm going to need to wait a long time for the next train. I quickly save my documents (but still leave them open), grab my coat, and run for the station.</p> <p><i>Why do I always feel like I need to check my e-mail at night to make sure that something important hasn't come up? Why is my office a disaster? Why do I always feel like I have a bunch of unfinished work that I need to sort out in the morning? Oh . . . and it's so irritating when I leave something at the office, such as my phone or keys, or I miss the train and need to eat dinner really late.</i></p>

(continued)

TABLE 5.1 *Realistic Daily Expectations (continued)*

THE SITUATION	REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS	NOT-SO-REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
Dinner	<p>I like to occasionally splurge on a nice dinner out, but usually I cook dinner at home either for just myself or for a small group of friends. To make grocery shopping easier, I keep a running list on my phone that includes the basics, such as toilet paper, milk, and bread, and then I add to it throughout the week when I run out of something. Before I head to the grocery store, I take a quick look through my cupboards to see what I have and then sketch out a rough meal plan for the week, making sure that I have fruits, vegetables, protein sources, and starches. On a daily basis, I make something simple according to my mood and try to cook a little extra so that I have enough for leftovers.</p>	<p>I spend hours on the weekend salivating over four-course meals that magically appear before my eyes on the Food Network and savoring recipes on organic-food-cooking blogs. I know exactly which superfoods I should eat, such as wheatgrass and bee pollen, and how to make dairy-free, gluten-free anything. But knowing so much makes me very particular, so I don't want to grocery shop unless I can go to Whole Foods. Also, I feel overwhelmed by the thought of just whipping something up because it might not have just the right combination of essential nutrients and nuanced flavors.</p> <p><i>Why do I end up ordering pizza more nights than I would like to admit while the meager ingredients I do have in my fridge grow mold?</i></p>
Exercise	<p>I try to go on a walk twice a week during lunch with one of my coworkers. It's a nice chance for us to catch up, get outside, and reenergize for the afternoon. I have some Pilates and yoga workout DVDs, so I try to do those a couple of nights during the week and once on the weekend. I enjoy dancing, so that's also something I do about once or twice a month for some fun and some great aerobic exercise. I'm no triathlete, but I feel healthy, energized, and pain-free most of the time.</p>	<p>I haven't done any exercise in the past year, but I would really like to train for a marathon. I admire people in great shape, and running clubs seem like a good bonding experience. I am going to get started as soon as I buy the perfect running outfit, find a running club in my area, contact its organizer, see if its practice times fit with my schedule, sign up, figure out how I can best get to and from the club meetings, and know that I can really stick with a consistent running schedule.</p> <p><i>Why can I never find time to exercise? I feel like I'm getting so out of shape!</i></p>

THE SITUATION	REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS	NOT-SO-REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
Evening plans	<p>On nights when I have some sort of event, I can really only eat dinner, clean up after dinner, do a bit of exercise, and check e-mail quickly before heading to bed. On evenings when I don't have a planned activity, I can usually get one or two other items done after work, such as going to the grocery store or making some progress on a home project, but not much else.</p>	<p>On the way home from work, I always make a mental checklist of all I will accomplish in an evening: three loads of laundry, cleaning the bathroom, sorting the mail, cooking something from scratch, sending a thoughtful reply to a friend's e-mail, hanging up my clothes, watching my favorite TV show, calling my mom, and reading a chapter of a new book.</p> <p><i>Why do I always end up sitting on the couch and doing nothing because I'm completely overwhelmed?</i></p>
Sleep	<p>I know how much sleep I need to be my best self, so I make it a priority to leave events early enough for my brain to calm down before I go to bed. Once I'm home, I start shutting down my computer, TV set, and other electronic items at least a half an hour before bedtime. Then I go through each room, shutting off overhead lights, straightening anything out of place, and generally reassuring myself that all will be well until the next morning. After that, I brush my teeth, wash my face, change into my pajamas, and get myself into bed so that I can turn out the lights at a reasonable hour.</p>	<p>When I'm out at events, I don't notice the time until everyone starts to leave, and I realize that—once again—I've stayed out too late. When I've spent the evening at home and the 10 o'clock news flashes on the screen, I go into a bit of a panic. That's the point where I realize that I just spent the last few hours watching television and got nothing done that I meant to do. Instead of starting to wind down for the night, I frantically attempt to check some items off of my to-do list so that I feel like I "deserve" to go to sleep. This late-night burst of productivity often leads to a half-cleaned kitchen and laundry sitting in the washer overnight so that it has a bit of a dank smell in the morning. I then drop into bed a few hours past my bedtime, but I often can't fall asleep because my mind still buzzes from the late-night surge of activity.</p> <p><i>Why do I feel so tired all the time, and why do I struggle soooooo much to get up in the morning?</i></p>