

What do I want in my life?

How a person's expectations can make a difference to what happens

Introduction

It seems to be the case that when a person decides what they want, they are more likely to make progress in getting it. For example, there's already plenty of anecdotal evidence that people living with disability and their families who have spent time thinking about what they want and need, then do better at getting this in their NDIS plan.

Key to this is what a person expects of herself/himself; what s/he imagines might be possible in life.

This QuickGuide looks at how people set expectations of themselves and their family members, and the difference this can make.

It's a highly worthwhile discussion for a peer network, with an emphasis on affirmation and building self-belief.

Let's make it happen

How we behave is often influenced by the expectations of others in our lives. There is significant research to suggest that if other people have higher expectations of us, we rise to this in how we then behave, and we do better as a result. This has been referred to as the **Pygmalion** effect.

The reverse also seems to be true. If other people have lower expectations of us, this can lead to us performing less well. This has been called the **Golem** effect.

It is important to know about these effects, and what they say about how our behaviour is influenced by the expectations of others. Arguably, the Golem effect could at least in part explain the struggle of many people living with disability. Societies like ours typically have carried low expectations of what people living with disability are able to accomplish. This can then translate to people living with disability accomplishing less in their lives. It may go something like, "If people don't expect me to accomplish much, then it must mean that I

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don't have the capacity, so there may not be much point in me trying". This type of self-fulfilling prophecy can be catastrophic.

In the past, many families who learned they had a child living with disability were told by professionals not to expect much of their son or daughter. Based on being given these expectations, many families then spend most of their time fighting for their son or daughter to have opportunities to receive basic services, and less on opportunities to build a life. This isn't necessarily how families want things to be, but it's how their expectations can be shaped – *lowered* – by others, and then they can find themselves acting accordingly.

Many people living with disability can also develop lower expectations of themselves, based on what they are told. Fighting for basic services, being channelled into separate 'special' education, 'special' employment, 'special' housing, can all contribute to a person believing they are less deserving than non-disabled people, and to expect that their life will be marked by unemployment, low income, and living in services. When a person believes that is all they can have, they can start behaving accordingly, including *choosing* those things when asked, because they don't know they can imagine better, that they deserve better.

The first step for a person in moving towards a good life is for that person to believe that a good life is possible, and to expect the same good things in life that non-disabled people routinely expect: a proper paid job in a regular workplace, a home of their own in a regular street, being a good neighbour and having good neighbours, being a member of a local gym/club, opportunities to travel, having friends, having a family.

A peer network can help this by having a conversation about the expectations each member has for his/her own life, and how this has been influenced by people around them.

Here's a way to have the conversation in a peer network:

- 1) Start by talking about the Pygmalion and Golem effects; how expectations can affect how a person sees herself/himself
- 2) Ask peer network members to think about if they have high expectations of themselves; maybe then take it turns to talk about something important they want in their life
- 3) Ask peer network members to think about who has been the most positive voice in their life, who has helped them to have higher expectations of what is possible in their life.

NOTE TO FACILITATOR: it is possible a peer network member may get upset in this exercise, especially if they can't think of anyone in their life who is positive. The facilitator could say at the beginning of the conversation that this is not unusual and that no member should feel bad about it, and then, if it comes up, the facilitator could invite other peer network members to say something positive that they see
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about the person. The network could also talk about ways the person might find more positive voices in their life

- 4) Ask peer network members to think about if there are any less positive voices in their life, who give them lower expectations of what is possible in their life. Sometimes these voices might be from people in their family, or service providers, or the mainstream media, and so on. The group could then talk about ways the person could deal with this, for example “just because someone says that about you, or believes that about you, it doesn’t mean it’s true. And the most important person NOT to believe it is you. What could help you do that?”

NOTE TO FACILITATOR: it is again possible a peer network member may get upset in this exercise, especially if there are strong voices in the person’s life who think the person can’t achieve the same things as other people. So be ready to hand out contact information about advice services, advocacy services, complaints services, and even the police. Remember that it is not the peer network’s job to fix difficult problems, but to be a source of welcome, affirmation, support and solidarity.

- 5) Lastly, at the end of the discussion, invite peer network members to say if they think they should have higher expectations of themselves, and what they can do for this to happen. This could be a great list of ideas for the peer network to come back to at a future meeting.

Where you can find more information

To read more about the Pygmalion effect, start here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pygmalion_effect

To read more about the Golem effect, start here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golem_effect

For a model that can help peer network members think about how they can build their expectations in their own lives, take a look at the *Model of Citizenship Support*, and its focus on areas of capacity-building called the *Four Capitals*. The first of these, *Personal Capital*, includes a strong focus on self-belief. Contact Purple Orange (admin@purple.orange.org.au or 08 8373 8333) for a copy.

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