

High Expectations, Low Outcomes: Exploring Coping Mechanisms and Psychological Adaptation

Madhvi Prasad^{1,*}

Abstract

This review paper explores the psychological impact of high expectations and low outcomes, focusing on coping mechanisms to manage the resulting emotional and mental challenges. The anticipation of a guaranteed future often elevates self-esteem and brings a state of emotional ecstasy. When individuals perceive the future in alignment with their personal terms and conditions, they experience heightened happiness and acceptance of life. This sense of assurance often influences risk-taking capacity, leading individuals to be less calculative and strategic in their decision-making processes. A study by Damen (2019) found that when outcomes are certain and not delayed, the tendency to take risks is higher. While both genders exhibit interest in future expectations, differences arise in how they handle outcomes. Setting high expectations for a goal is a positive psychological indicator of commitment. However, the adverse effects of unmet expectations must be studied to address the psychological distress they cause. Individuals must recognize that expectations do not always translate into desired results, and mental preparedness is essential for managing setbacks. A lack of such preparedness can lead to severe psychological consequences, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies. This study examines coping strategies for managing the psychological impact of unmet expectations in various high-stakes scenarios, such as academic performance, relationships, and career goals. Coping mechanisms are influenced by situational factors, environmental conditions, and available support systems. By analyzing these variables, the study aims to provide practical strategies for resilience-building. A key focus of this study is the concept of multiple expectation sources—a framework that encourages individuals to diversify their goals and aspirations. By generating multiple pathways for success, individuals can mitigate the psychological burden of a single failed expectation. This approach brings adaptability, it ensures that setbacks in one domain do not lead to complete emotional breakdowns. Overall, this research contributes to understanding the psychological resilience needed in high-risk, high-expectation environments. It offers insights into preventative measures for emotional distress, physical burnout, and mental exhaustion. By equipping individuals with strategic decision-making skills, clarity of thought and backup planning methods, this study aims to promote long-term psychological well-being and adaptive coping strategies.

Keywords: Trauma, coping mechanisms, expectations, resilience, psychological adaptations, self-esteem, risk analysis, gender perspectives

*Author for Correspondence

Madhvi Prasad
E-mail: madhvi.0407@gmail.com / p_madhvi@blr.amrita.edu

¹Assistant Professor, Department of engineering, Amrita School of Engineering, Amrita University, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India

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INTRODUCTION

Expectations are predictions and internal dialogues that individuals engage in to anticipate certain outcomes in the near future. According to different models, expectations function in distinct ways: the rational model assumes expectations are optimal, the adaptive model suggests they minimize previous errors, and the extrapolative model posits that they continue existing trends. The objective of this paper is to analyze expectations in a way that ensures unfulfilled

desires do not negatively impact one's willingness to live. Since human beings are interconnected through social relationships, expectations play an important role in interpersonal dynamics. When co-dependence is disrupted—meaning that if we do not receive what we expect from others, or if we fail to fulfill the expectations others have of us—it creates a cycle of unfulfilled expectations, which can be detrimental to mental health and daily performance. To effectively cope with unfulfilled expectations, individuals must raise their standards, recognize their values, and develop alternative choices to fall back on in case of failure. This concept applies to various aspects of life, including education, work, career, and relationships. The key questions that arise in this context include: on what basis should expectations be framed? Should risk analysis be conducted before setting high expectations? Should past trends be studied to predict future outcomes? By exploring these questions, it can lead to a deeper understanding of expectations and their consequences (Table 1).

Table 1. Inclusion/ exclusion criteria for study selection

Criteria type	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
A Study Type	Empirical studies, peer-reviewed journal articles, qualitative research	Opinion pieces, editorials, book reviews, unpublished theses
Language	Studies published in English	Non-English publications
Population	Human participants; adults and adolescents relevant to trauma, coping, and resilience	Studies focused solely on animals or irrelevant populations
Themes/Focus	Studies on trauma, resilience, coping, emotional disclosure, expectation management	Studies not related to psychological adjustment, perception, or agency
Accessibility	Full-text available online or through library access	Abstract-only access or paywalled with no institutional access
Relevance	Clearly related to psychological outcomes, mental health, or identity in trauma/coping	Irrelevant to core themes of review (e.g., unrelated neuroscience, pure linguistics)

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Expectations shape our perceptions of reality by influencing how we interpret sensory inputs and construct meaning from experiences. These perceptions are derived from past experiences and ongoing life events, which collectively contribute to the formulation of expectations. Once an expectation is formed, it often manifests as a suppressed emotion, persisting until the anticipated outcome is realized. During this period, cognitive processes become heavily engaged in planning and executing strategies to fulfill these expectations or emotional baggage. Expectations initiate a cycle of wish fulfillment, belief formation, and reality construction, enabling individuals to process local details (from everyday experiences) more effectively and stabilize their future outlook. The human brain interprets perceptual data in varied ways, integrating both direct sensory input and unperceived yet expected information. Even when certain data remains beyond conscious perception, the mere anticipation of it influences cognitive and emotional states, assigning meaning to potential future events. When we try to process the new sensory information, it seems difficult to align with it. But when we try to process already considered factors (that is assumed and expected realities), it helps achieve a sense of assurance and preparedness for future events (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of studies taken for review

Author(s) & Year	Culture/Population Studied	Focus of Study	Key Findings	Relevance to Trauma/Resilience/Disclosure
de Lange et al. (2018)	General	Expectations in perception	Expectations influence sensory processing and perception	Insight into how trauma shapes perception and response patterns
Damen (2019)	General	Sense of agency and risk-taking	Stronger agency predicts more risk-taking behavior	Agency affects decision-making under distress or trauma

Geen (1989)	General	Social facilitation	Group settings alter performance depending on task difficulty	Social context's effect on coping mechanisms
Crisson et al. (1995)	General	Performance and expectations	Audience presence interacts with expectations to affect outcomes	Relevant in understanding disclosure settings and support systems
Millgram et al. (2019)	General	Emotion regulation goals	Goal-focused regulation shapes emotional experience and behavior	Emotion regulation strategies in resilience and trauma management
Prentice & Carranza (2002)	US college students	Gender stereotypes	Gender norms include "should" and "should not" expectations	Gendered expectations can shape coping responses and disclosure
Rudman & Glick (2001)	General (Western culture)	Gender roles and backlash	Agentic women face backlash due to prescriptive stereotypes	Gender biases impact disclosure and perceived support
Schwarzer & Taubert (2002)	General	Proactive coping	Proactive coping linked to long-term well-being and growth	Framework for building resilience in anticipation of stress
Ślebarska & Soucek (2020)	Organizational employees	Unmet expectations, coping	Proactive coping reduces unmet expectation stress in new roles	Coping under adjustment-related stress
Taylor & Stanton (2007) [15]	General	Coping processes and mental health	Effective coping depends on available resources and strategies	Core contribution to understanding resilience and trauma response
Bailey (2021) [1]	UK learners	Lived experience in education	Empathy and voice are central to learner identity formation	Empathy as a tool for post-trauma recovery
Hubbard (1998) [8]	Philosophical/Holistic perspective	Conscious evolution	Awareness and growth potential are integral to transformation	Perspective on growth through adversity
Bergson (2022) [2]	Philosophical	Creative evolution	Evolution as driven by internal creative force	Influences philosophical interpretations of resilience
Feenberg (2007) [6]	Philosophical	Technology and experience	Technology mediates human experience and social transformation	Links between environment and recovery experiences
Hoffman et al. (2004) [16]	Clinical patients	Pain modulation using VR	Virtual reality can reduce pain perception in fMRI studies	Innovative method to ease trauma-related pain or stress
Kasl & Yorks (2015) [17]	Adult learners	Empathy across diversity	Empathic connection enables deeper learning and relationship	Importance of empathy in trauma-informed settings

			building	
Licorish (1912) [18]	Philosophical/Biological	Nervous system in evolution	Evolution and nervous system as interlinked	Early biological roots of emotional response
Sharron (1985) [13]	Phenomenological	Consciousness analysis	Interaction patterns shape understanding of consciousness	Grounding subjective trauma experiences
van Manen (2018) [20]	Qualitative researchers	IPA method defense	Clarifies interpretive approach in psychological studies	Methodological support for trauma/disclosure studies
Kung et al. (1988)	Philosophical	Intentionality and meaning	Language and meaning as central to understanding mind	Explores meaning-making after trauma

Self-Esteem, Motivation, and Goal-Setting

Expectations play an important role in self-esteem, motivation, and goal-setting. As the brain processes anticipated versions of reality, it constantly compares them with actual experiences. This comparison mechanism helps individuals align their goals with perceived achievements, reinforcing motivation. The integration of prior knowledge with expected outcomes allows individuals to assess their progress and make necessary adjustments. Expectations also inculcate an intrinsic drive toward goal achievement. Emotional states become increasingly aligned with the pursuit of future objectives, reinforcing commitment and perseverance. However, expectations introduce an element of cognitive uncertainty, as the anticipated outcome remains uncertain. Despite this uncertainty, factors like “hope” act as a stabilizing factor, ensuring continued effort toward goal fulfillment. To get unaffected from emotional distress caused by unfulfilled desires, there should be a balance between effort and expectations.

The Role of Perceived Control and Future Certainty

Perceived control plays a significant role in the formation and regulation of expectations. When individuals feel a high degree of control over their future, expectations become more structured and goal-oriented. Conversely, when perceived control is low, expectations may become volatile, leading to emotional instability and cognitive dissonance. The brain's predictive mechanisms rely on the integration of prior experiences with anticipated future events. By constructing a coherent narrative of expected outcomes, individuals gain a sense of certainty, which contributes to overall psychological well-being. Thus, discrepancies between expectations and reality can lead to cognitive distress, necessitating adaptive coping strategies.

Risk-Taking Behavior and Strategic Decision-Making

With increased expectations, individuals often engage in risk-taking behaviors characterized by heightened intent and determination. The pursuit of expected outcomes develops a proactive mindset, reducing hesitancy and promoting decisive action. However, this heightened sense of purpose may also diminish critical anticipation of potential setbacks. As expectations rise, individuals become more willing to take calculated risks, often underestimating the uncertainties associated with future outcomes. This risk behavior is driven by an intense emotional investment in the expected results, leading to a stronger commitment to goal-directed actions. While such an approach can enhance clarity and motivation, it may also result in cognitive biases, where individuals selectively focus on confirming information while neglecting potential challenges towards conversion of expectations into reality. To sum up, expectations influence cognitive processing, emotional regulation, and decision-making. They serve as a driving force behind motivation and risk-taking while also introducing uncertainties that require effective coping mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

To study review and comparative analysis between gender and expectations, we are going to look into three assumptions- first, the underlying psychological similarities in both genders in the expectations settings. Second, differences in coping with unmet expectations and third, how society influences expectations management. Gender roles are defined by shared responsibilities assigned to individuals based on socially identified sex. Men are often classified as the agents of events, while women are identified as doers. Men's roles are predominantly associated with policymaking and lawgiving, whereas women are typically expected to follow these rules. To explain the nature of gender roles, they are both descriptive and prescriptive. The descriptive aspect is primarily linked to men, while the prescriptive aspect is connected with women. The prescriptive aspect dictates what is expected or considered desirable (Rudman & Glick, 2001) [11]. It is mainly with women that things are expected. Also, violations of gender role expectations are often met with criticism and penalties (Prentice & Carranza, 2002) [10]. Prescriptive gender norms are internalized and self-imposed, requiring the so-called "subordinate" gender to follow them without forming independent opinions. Social expectations reinforce these gender roles, compelling the subordinate gender to adhere to instructions without questioning stereotypes.

In society, gender roles are often shaped by expectations, where one gender is required to adapt and conform to established norms. When individuals from a subordinate gender fulfill their expected roles and responsibilities, they naturally anticipate reciprocity. But, when their expectations are ignored or unmet, it weakens their motivation and discourages continued participation. Over time, this imbalance can lead to a shift where the active participant (agent) begins to feel like a passive recipient (object), whose needs and desires are overlooked. This lack of reciprocity creates deep emotional distress that may be difficult to repair. To address this issue, awareness must be raised about the importance of mutual respect and shared responsibilities in social relationships. If someone imposes expectations on others, they must also be willing to fulfill the expectations placed upon them to ensure fairness and emotional well-being.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

High expectations with low outcomes can have serious emotional, psychological, and physical effects. People often feel disappointed, frustrated, and lose confidence, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and exhaustion. Over time, this stress may cause burnout, health problems, and avoidance of challenges, sometimes resulting in extreme reactions like self-harm or suicidal thoughts. The impact of unmet expectations depends on several factors, such as lack of motivation, clarity and commitment. A person's dedication to a goal, the influence of others, and personal beliefs about success affect how they handle setbacks. People with low confidence in their abilities often struggle to face setbacks, while those with high confidence keep improving. The effort required, time needed, and personal attitudes toward success also shape how people respond to failure. Research suggests that expectations and being judged by others affect effort and anxiety. Having an audience can push people to try harder, but failing in public can feel much worse than failing privately. While both confident and less confident individuals work harder when being evaluated, those with low confidence tend to struggle more under pressure. By understanding these factors, it becomes important that an individual adopt coping strategies by being more confident, clear and strategic in the approach to face the distress of unmet expectations.

Coping Mechanisms for Managing Unmet Expectations

The difference between initial expectations and actual experiences creates unmet expectations. Expectations often arise due to unclear information about how things work, who a person truly is, or how a situation may unfold under varied conditions. When high expectations lead to low outcomes—i.e., unmet expectations—a person's coping mechanism and working efficiency begins to decline. Unmet expectations result from a lack of consistency between prior experiences (or perceptions of experiences) and reality. Due to intrinsic demotivation, an individual may start feeling unappreciated

and discouraged despite making equal contributions and efforts. This leads to emotional distress, making one feel incapable and unprepared to complete remaining tasks. Unresolved internal conflicts create difficulties in external performance (Crissan et al. 1995) [3], causing a decline in productivity and loss of interest in tasks. Setbacks can further diminish an individual's self-confidence and competence, leading to difficulty adapting to environmental demands. To manage these setbacks, proactive coping mechanisms (Ślebarska & Soucek, 2020) [14] should be implemented to reduce strain on individual performance. Proactive coping involves actions that enhance one's ability to deal with unexpected future outcomes. It helps individuals cope with stress and prevent future stressors (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002) [12]. Engaging in multiple options and preparing for future uncertainties is key. For example, if a person faces the risk of unexpected job loss, they should start searching for alternative employment to strengthen their proactive coping mechanism (Geen, 1989) [7]. Proactive coping helps prevent emotional trauma (de Lange et al., 2018) [4] and offers individuals a sense of hope for better opportunities. It also mitigates the impact of "reality shock." Studies indicate that individuals with low levels of proactive coping experience higher levels of unmet expectations, whereas those with high levels of proactive coping report lower levels of unmet expectations (Ślebarska & Soucek, 2020) [14].

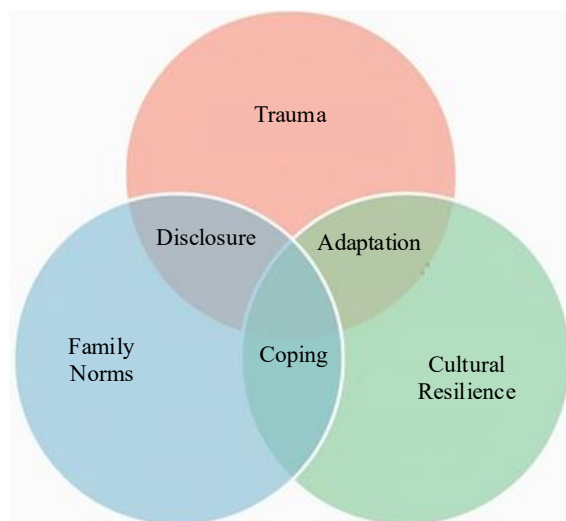


Figure 1. Conceptual framework on trauma and resilience.

Coping is the process of attempting to manage the demands created by stressful situations. The actions for coping can be both external and internal—either a direct approach or an indirect approach through mental attributes. Coping resources vary from person to person and depend on an individual's mechanism for managing external demands. Most healthy individuals can recognize risks from external situations and develop strategies (or coping mechanisms) to deal with them. The real challenge arises for individuals with unhealthy systems affected by disorders like stress, anxiety, and depression, which make it difficult to handle challenging situations. Naturally, non-fulfilment of high expectations can lead to anxiety, mental health risks, and disorders such as loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, and excessive daydreaming. In such cases, the most effective coping resources include optimism, psychological control or mastery, self-esteem, and social support. Optimism helps balance the risks of high expectations by reinforcing the belief that good things will happen, even in difficult situations. It focuses on finding the positive aspects within negative experiences. Psychological or personal control refers to an individual's ability to manage negative outcomes arising from risky situations. A positive sense of self or high self-esteem also acts as a protective factor against adverse mental and physical health outcomes. Higher self-esteem is often linked to better psychological well-being. Another coping mechanism is social acceptance, which involves the perception that, regardless of whether a person succeeds or fails in meeting high expectations, they will always be morally and socially accepted and appreciated. High level of social support provides effective coping with stress

and provides a sense of self and high self esteem. Even support from family and their acceptance towards trauma brings emotional reliefs to individuals. This enhances the coping mechanism and builds a cultural understanding towards dealing with stressful conditions and trauma.

The Concept of Multiple Strategies for Emotion regulation

In Figure 1, Emotion regulation involves changing one's current emotional state into a desired one by selecting and using appropriate emotional strategies. These strategies help individuals gain the emotional experiences they need. Emotional dysfunction arises when people have fewer strategies or limited resources to deal with emotional failure. Having multiple strategies to manage emotional conflict strengthens coping mechanisms. People often struggle to regulate emotions in situations where they are highly invested. For emotional investments, individuals should generally have long-term goals. In cases of short-term commitments, such as uncertain relationships, a high level of emotional investment can lead to difficulties in coping. Thus, emotional flexibility is essential so that individuals do not feel restricted in pursuing their multiple goals while managing emotions effectively. As a precautionary measure, those who are highly motivated in life and have high expectations from their goals and conducts should be mindful of their emotional investments to minimize potential conflicts in the future.

Research Gap

Many studies have looked at expectations, emotions, and coping methods separately, but not enough research has explored how they are all connected. In real life, people often face situations where their expectations don't match the results, and this can cause stress or disappointment. However, there is little research on how people adjust to these situations using both emotional and practical coping strategies. Also, not much has been done to understand how social and gender-based expectations affect how people deal with failure or unmet goals. This study aims to fill these gaps by looking at how expectations are formed, how people react when things don't go as planned, and how different coping strategies help them manage these challenges.

CONCLUSION

Life is inherently unpredictable, and individuals often face emotional crises that can overwhelm their coping mechanisms. In such situations, one may feel broken, experience a decline in self-esteem, and struggle with a sense of direction lessness, unsure of what steps to take next. To solve these challenges, it is essential to cultivate inner strength, which enables individuals to reflect on external circumstances with greater clarity and resilience (Millgram et al., 2019) [9]. Internal clarity is a prerequisite for effectively managing external challenges, and this clarity emerges through intentional action and engagement in life's processes. Inner strength and the willingness to persevere are not innate but are developed through consistent effort and intentionality (Kung et al., 1988) [19]. This process involves forming a deliberate intention to engage with life's ongoing challenges and discovering one's purpose and the conditions necessary for personal fulfillment. Trauma, one of the most debilitating experiences an individual can endure, often disrupts this process. To overcome trauma, structured guidelines and meaningful strategies are essential to identify affected individuals and support them in recognizing and addressing their unmet needs and wish-fulfillment patterns. By categorizing problems according to their nature—such as emotional, psychological, or situational—we can develop a more nuanced understanding of the underlying disorders. This approach brings greater maturity in addressing these issues and shifts the focus toward solution-oriented strategies. Scientific research emphasizes the importance of structured interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindfulness practices, and resilience-building exercises, in helping individuals regain control over their lives. These methods not only address the symptoms of emotional distress but also empower individuals to rebuild their self-esteem, regain direction, and develop the internal strength needed to face life's uncertainties.

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