



## Write Yourself a Reality Check >>> The Technique

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***When we are emotionally bankrupt from too much stress or negativity, it helps to write ourselves a “reality check.”***

Unrealistic expectations can sink our emotional ship and create excess stress and negativity in our lives. In fact, one of my favorite definitions of stress is that “Stress is the gap between our expectations and reality”—which means that the more reality fails to meet our expectations, the more stress we will experience.

Think about it—we rarely get stressed when what happens to us is what we expect or hope will happen to us, right? If I am hired to do a project for someone and we agree that I will be paid \$200 for my work, then when I receive my payment of \$200, I am happy and don’t experience any stress at all. Why? Because it’s exactly what I expected to receive. There is no gap between my expectations and reality.

But what if I get a check for \$100 instead of the \$200 I was expecting? Then, there is stress and I will not be happy about it at all. Why? Because there is now a gap between my expectations (I will be paid \$200) and my reality (they only gave me \$100).

This example is fairly easy to understand because the expectations (that I will be paid \$200) are clear and reasonable and based on a prior agreement. However, in real life, the situation gets much more complicated because—in most stressful situations (like job problems, relationship issues, interpersonal conflicts, traffic jams and financial problems)—our expectations are not so clear and reasonable. In fact, they are usually downright unrealistic—and many times we are not even aware that we have expectations!

This brings us to a fundamental principle of stress mastery—“Stress is rarely, if ever, caused solely by external events or difficult people, but rather by our thoughts (attitudes, beliefs, fears or

expectations) about those events or people.” This principle is echoed in the writings of the famous Stoic Greek philosopher Epictetus, who stated over 2000 years ago, “We are disturbed not by what happens to us, but by our thoughts about what happens”—and managing our thoughts is what the science of positive thinking is all about.

The key is this—when too much stress causes us to feel emotionally or physically bankrupt, we can use a powerful writing technique (adapted from the work of Ken Keyes, Jr. in his book *Handbook to Higher Consciousness*) called “Write Yourself a Reality Check” and cash in on the remarkable health-enhancing benefits of breaking through our unrealistic expectations.

This technique reminds us that—though circumstances in the outer world may not always meet our expectations or demands—we can always maintain some level of control over our inner emotional experience. “Staying calm” when the world does not meet our expectations is the first step in learning how to—in the words of personal growth expert Jim Rohn—“discipline our disappointment.” Then, from a place of clarity and calm, we can approach the difficult people or situations in our life and learn how to 1) ask for what we want, 2) accept what we get and 3) work on the difference. Let me show you how this technique—which has two distinct steps—actually works.

Step 1 represents the “inner work” we must do to better refine our own unrealistic expectations—and it involves answering the four questions below. Step 2 is the “outer work” we must complete, where we take our new insights (gained from step 1) to those people and/or situations that are causing us emotional distress. Here’s how it works!

The next time you experience any conflict, stress, emotional upset or physical symptoms, ask yourself:

1. What am I feeling now—and why?
2. How do I wish things had gone?
3. If things had gone the way I wanted them to, what would I be feeling now?
4. Is there a way I can (internally) feel that way now, even though (externally) things didn’t turn out the way I hoped they would?

***Here’s an example:***

1. **What am I feeling now—and why?** I'm feeling frustrated and angry and disappointed because my wife and I just had a big blowout argument about money.

2. **How do I wish things had gone?** (This identifies your expectation—also called your “fantasy,” or what Ken Keyes calls your “addictive demand.”) My fantasy is that my wife would have agreed to cut back her spending for a while and that we would be able to work as a team to solve this problem.

3. **If things had gone the way I wanted them to—i.e., if I got my fantasy—what would I be feeling now?** (This step identifies, what is called our “positive intention”—the way we would feel inside if our fantasy was met.) If my wife had agreed to work with me (as a team) on a budget, then I would feel supported, loved, cared for and appreciated and like I was a strong and caring husband.

4. **Is there a way I can feel that way now even though things didn't turn out the way I hoped they would?** (In other words, “Is there a way I can feel supported, loved, cared for and appreciated for being a strong, financially responsible and caring husband, even though my wife can't give me that right now?” Another way to say this is, “Can I give myself (the inner feelings from question #3) even though my wife didn't meet my fantasy from question #2?”) This question is important because most of us think that we can only get our emotional strokes from other people, but it's not really true. It is true that we all want to feel loved, supported and appreciated by our friends and family, but we also have to understand that even when they can't give us the strokes we want (or need) when we want (or need) them—we can always give them to ourselves.

A big part of being a positive thinker is growing up enough—emotionally and spiritually—to be able to soothe our own hurts and disappointments. Life is difficult and in order to live a fulfilling and meaningful life, we must be able to, in the words of Martin Seligman Ph.D., “live heroically” by fighting uncomfortable feelings—and learning how to function well (by sticking to our values)—even in the face of extreme disappointment, negativity or hurt. When we can do that, we free ourselves to live a happier life by letting go of our unrealistic expectations of others.

In other words, when I can I accept—about myself—that I am a strong and caring husband, deserving of love, support and appreciation even though—in this moment and in this particular situation—my wife is not ready, able or willing to give me that support or appreciation (or

cooperate on making a new budget together), then I am on my way to true personal growth and emotional freedom.

When we look back at the situation in order to analyze where my stress is actually coming from, we can see that it is not coming so much from the fact that my wife is upset with me and not willing to work on a budget, but rather from my unrealistic expectation that “if my wife really loved me, she wouldn’t fight me on this and would cooperate instead!” Do you see how unreasonable this expectation (“addictive demand”) is? It basically says that if my wife ever gets upset with me or chooses not to cooperate or agree with me on some issue, then she doesn’t love me. That’s an irrational belief and an unrealistic expectation that will cause a lot of stress and pain in life!

That’s not to say that we shouldn’t have appropriate and reasonable expectations of others to behave kindly, morally and responsibly—but in truth, most of us walk around with a remarkable repository of unrealistic expectations that create a wealth of unnecessary stress in our lives.

When I can let go of my anger and disappointment and realize that—though I cannot control my wife’s response to me—I can still control my response to the situation, I have freed myself from the prison of my own unrealistic expectations.

Once we have completed the “inner work” of Step 1, by answering the four questions above, we now must complete Step 2—our “outer work”—by taking our new insights and refined expectations back to the people involved. Since most stress in life occurs in relationship to others, we cannot complete Step 2 on our own—we have to approach the person(s) involved and directly address the situation with them. The three activities that make up Step 2 are:

**1) Ask for what we want:** In this step, I would have to set up a time to talk with my wife again and be able to ask her for what I want from her. It’s probably best—before going to the party involved—to take a few moments and write down on a piece of paper exactly what it is you want from the other person. Just write down different answers to the following sentence stem, “What I want from you is . . .” Write as many things as you can think of and then go talk with the person involved.

In my situation above, I might say the following to my wife: “Honey, what I want from you is to think about what I said and be willing to sit with me and address this issue again, in hopes of finding some compromises we can both make before we hit a financial crisis. What

I want from you is to know that you are at least willing to try and find a solution. What I want from you is to be more understanding that this is not easy for me either, but we have to face the reality that we are headed for financial trouble. What I want from you is some appreciation that I am trying to do the responsible thing here and I don't like it any more than you do. What I want from you is for you to realize that I'm not going to force you or demand that you cooperate, but I need to let you know that if we don't come to some agreement, we will reach a time when things will be much worse than they are now.

**2) Accept what we get:** In this step, I must listen to what my wife's response is, try to better understand her feelings and needs and then accept what is true for her, without making her wrong. After we speak, I may want to write down some answers to the following sentence stem, "I accept that ..."

For example, I accept that my wife is upset and angry and wishes that we made more money than we do. I accept that my wife is not ready to address things yet, because she is still too emotionally upset right now. (Note that if I were not willing to accept these things, I would be tempted to yell or get angry or try to convince her that I was right and she was wrong and it would only lead to an escalation of the conflict rather than move us closer to a solution.)

**3) Work on the difference:** In this step, I would write down all the things I need to work on to improve both the situation at hand as well as my own character (by building inner strength, wisdom, patience, compassion, hope, resilience, etc.). Working on the difference can take hours, days, years or even a lifetime—depending on how big the issue is. I would first start by writing down answers to the following sentence stem, "I want (need) to work on . . ."

For example, I need to work on forgiving myself for partially getting us into this financial mess. I need to work on appreciating how hurt and scared my wife is right now. I need to work on being more assertive in setting a budget and sticking to it. I need to work on appreciating all the areas of our relationship we do agree on and be grateful for how wonderful our life together is in other areas. I need to work on helping my wife to better see that this is really the right thing to do and in the end—even though it will take some cutting back for a while—we will be much better off in a few years. I need to work on finding another temporary job where I can make some more money to help us through this crunch.

So, that's the process in full! Do you see how powerful it is? We can "live heroically" when we respond to emotionally challenging stresses by doing our "inner work" first—refining our unrealistic expectations and building our character strengths—and then taking those new insights and understandings back into the relationship. The key point is this—most all stress provides us with an opportunity to grow in character, wisdom, contribution and goodness—if we will only take that opportunity. As long as we don't get stuck in blaming others (for what we feel, do or say) or beating ourselves up in self-blame, we can come to appreciate stress—not as an enemy, but rather—as a powerful teacher.

*~ When we are no longer able to change our situation, we are challenged to change ourselves. Viktor Frankl ~*