UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

How to set expectations

When we enter a new relationship, it can be helpful to set expectations. When we set expectations, we share our preferences and needs for interacting with each other, which helps to ensure we're on the same page and prevents conflict from arising.

We can set expectations in any type of relationship, whether we're at school, work or home. For example, we can set expectations with study groups, work groups, roommates and intimate partners.

Although it's ideal to set expectations at the beginning of a relationship, we can do it at any point. If we would like to add to or modify our expectations, or provide reminders about them, we can revisit them at any time.

While setting expectations, it can be helpful to ask each other the following question: "If conflict arises, how would you like me to address it with you?". We can use each other's answers as roadmaps for addressing conflict with each other. This is a particularly important question to ask when interacting with diverse groups because the answers can help us learn about and accommodate intercultural conflict styles.

Conversation starters

Below are examples of conversation starters we can use to bring up the topic of expectation-setting in various relationships.

Relationship	Conversation starter
Study groups	One of my instructors recently mentioned it can be helpful to set expectations in study groups. Is that something you would be open to doing?
Supervisors and colleagues	I want to succeed in my new role and build strong relationships in the workplace. During our next meeting, let's talk about our expectations for working well together.
Roommates	I've heard from friends it can be helpful for roommates to set expectations. When we have dinner on Friday, let's share what's important to us while living together.

Significant others	Although we can formally set expectations in intimate partner relationships, it might feel more natural to informally set them along the way. For example, we could casually ask questions ranging from "are you comfortable with public displays of affection?" to "what type of relationship are you looking for with me, and where do you see our relationship going?".

In addition to setting expectations for relationships, we can set expectations for activities. For example, we could set expectations when we travel with a friend. That might sound like, "I want us to have a great time on our vacation. Before we start planning, let's get together for coffee, and share what we need from the trip and each other to make that happen."

Making expectation setting a collaborative process

Here are tips we can use for making expectation-setting a collaborative process:

- Instead of talking about setting "expectations", we can talk about creating a "vision" for socializing, studying, working or living together.
- Instead of starting by sharing what's important to us, it can be helpful to start by asking the other person or people about what's important to them.
- If another person's expectations are vague or unclear (For example, "I just want us to get along."), we can ask them curious questions to better understand what they mean. For instance, we could say "Interesting, tell me more about that!" or "what does that look like for you?".
- If another person's expectations don't align with our own (For example, "Dirty dishes should be washed and put away immediately."), we can share our concerns in a non-judgemental way and see whether there's room to negotiate. For instance, we might say, "I would find that challenging because _____. Would _____ work for you instead?"
- When we share our expectations, we should check in with the other person or people to see what they think. For example, we might ask, "how does that sound?" or "is that ok with you?". Permission-seeking is a key part of expectation-setting because everyone in the relationship needs to agree on the expectations.
- Whenever possible, we should write the expectations down and provide everyone with a copy. For instance, we can summarize the conversation in a text or email.