

Don't Get Your Hopes Up: The Influence of Advice to Decrease Expectations on
Disappointment Following A Negative Outcome

by

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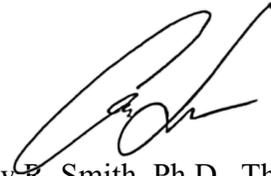
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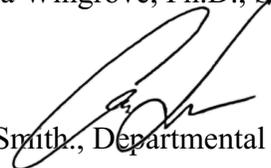
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Abstract

The phrase “don’t get your hopes up” is often given to a person by their friend or advisor in an attempt to lower their expectations to help mitigate any disappointment the person may feel if the outcome is not ideal. Research has found that people with overly high expectations tend to experience a great deal of disappointment following an undesirable outcome (Larsen et al., 2003, Sweeny & Andrews, 2017, Sweeny & Shepperd, 2010). Other research has found that our expectations are not static and often decrease to serve the purpose of reducing disappointment that may occur (van Dijk et al., 2003, Shepperd et al., 1996, Sweeny & Shepperd, 2007). The previous research warrants the assumption that this advice to not get your hopes up could potentially function as an effective way to minimize disappointment. The current study aimed to investigate this idea through the manipulation of advice to participants to not get their hopes up before experiencing an undesirable outcome. We predicted that participants who received the advice to lower their expectations would report lower disappointment following the undesirable outcome of not winning a gift card than participants who did not receive the advice. Contrary to our hypothesis, we found that participants who received advice to not get their hopes up and participants who did not receive the advice reported similar measures of disappointment. The results suggest that advice to not get your hopes up might not be effective at reducing disappointment. That being said, there is a lot of room for improvement in future studies that could eliminate some limitations to create a clearer picture of the impact of this advice.

**Don't Get Your Hopes Up: The Influence of Advice to Decrease Expectations on
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Imagine applying for a job you have been eyeing for a long time and you get an interview. After the interview, you think it went really well and are hopeful you will get offered the position. However, you might be afraid your expectations do not match reality. You ask some friends what they think about your odds of getting the job, and they advise you to not get your hopes up. They are likely trying to lower your expectations to limit your disappointment if you do not end up getting the job. The question of this thesis is whether advice to lower your expectations can effectively help to mitigate subsequent disappointment.

There is a lot of research that shows a correlation between expectations about a specific outcome and disappointment if that expectation is not met or a negative outcome occurs (Sweeny & Andrews, 2017, Sweeny & Shepperd, 2010). For example, Sweeny and Shepperd (2010) asked students to estimate how well they would do on an upcoming exam. After completing the exam and receiving their exam scores, the participants were then asked how disappointed they were with their score. Sweeney and Shepperd (2010) found that at the moment that participants learned their exam scores, positive expectations did not feel any better to the individual than negative expectations, meaning the preconceived idea that optimism is more beneficial to an individual was not exemplified. Researchers also found that participants who initially had lower expectations, meaning they estimated that they would perform worse on the exam, reported lower disappointment, and participants who had initially higher expectations, or those that estimated that they would do better on the exam, reported greater disappointment. This indicates that being overly optimistic could result in more disappointment, and that there may be benefits to having low expectations.

People's expectations about how positive or negative an outcome might appear to be influenced by counterfactual comparisons—that is, comparing what happened to what might have occurred. Larsen et al. (2003) explored this idea by examining situations where people might experience disappointing wins or relieving losses. To do so, the researchers had participants play a series of card gambles in which they could add or lose money to the amount they were given by the researchers. A disappointing win was when participants won \$5 but they could have won more (either \$6, \$9, or \$12), and a relieving loss was when participants lost the \$5 but they could have lost more (either \$6, \$9, or \$12). Researchers found that participants were indeed more disappointed when they had won \$5 when they could have won a higher value, but were happier when they had lost only \$5 when they could have had a greater net loss. Most importantly, the researchers found that participants' positive and negative affect was similar following a disappointing win (e.g., winning \$5 when they could have won \$12) as it was following a relieving loss (e.g., losing \$5 when they could have lost \$12). This finding demonstrates that the valence of the outcome (winning or losing money) is not the only factor that determines how happy or disappointed people feel. People's expectations about the alternative outcomes are instrumental in determining their affect following an outcome.

In a recent literature review, Sweeny and Andrews (2017) examined the impact of optimism on someone's affect following a surgery. In their review, they focused on studies that asked patients their pre-surgery expectations and then after the surgery, asked their feelings about the outcome of the procedure. Sweeny and Andrews found that, overall, people who were more optimistic tended to be more satisfied with the outcome of the surgery. However, people who had unrealistically optimistic expectations before the surgery tended to experience more negative affect, like depression, following the surgery. The researchers stressed the importance

of knowing all of the risks of surgery, as well as any potential outcomes or consequences to be able to set optimistic expectations that are also realistic. With an understanding of potential outcomes, realistic optimism is the best option to reduce negative affect if there is a negative outcome, but overoptimism can result in more disappointment following a negative outcome. For example, if Amy has realistic expectations about her surgery, that might cause her to be less disappointed following any complications because she understood the risks and formed her expectations with those risks in mind. If Max believes that there is no possibility of any complications during his surgery, his unrealistic expectations may cause him to be more disappointed or depressed if his surgery is not successful.

From the numerous studies examining the relationship between expectations and outcomes, it is clear that people's expectations have an impact on their feelings. However, it is worth pointing out that people's expectations are not static. For example, people's expectations often change over time as a way to mitigate potential disappointment if an unwanted outcome occurs. This phenomenon is known as bracing, and it describes the instances where people may lower their expectations about an outcome as the outcome draws near (Shepperd et al., 1996). For example, a month before taking an exam, a student might have high expectations for their performance on the exam. However, they might have much lower expectations the day before the exam. One reason for the lowered expectations is to help minimize disappointment if the student does not perform well on the exam (Sweeny & Krizan, 2013).

Van Dijk et al. (2003) conducted a study to understand the circumstances in which bracing occurs. In this study, participants took an exam that consisted of parts of an unrelated study. Participants were randomly assigned to have the test be either self-relevant, meaning the exam was important to their course of study (Psychology), or self-irrelevant meaning the exam

was important to a different course of study (Law). Furthermore, the participants were told they would either get their results on the test immediately or at a delayed time point. Participants answered questions regarding expectations about their test scores at two different time points throughout the study. The researchers found that participants lowered their expectations regarding their test scores when the outcome was self-relevant and close in proximity to the time of feedback. This study shows that people are likely to brace for a negative outcome, specifically under circumstances in which the outcome is important to the individual and the results are looming (van Dijk et al., 2003).

Sweeny et al. (2009) looked into whether or not individuals would brace for others the same way they do for themselves. To do this they conducted three studies, the first studying bracing for friends versus bracing for themselves. Researchers gathered pairs of participants that were self-defined friends, and had them take part in a mock interview where one person was the interviewer whose job was to read questions for the applicant, and one was the applicant who has to respond to those questions on camera. Following the interview, the applicant was told that their responses would be judged across different desirable traits (e.g., social skills, confidence) by a graduate student in which their performance could be scores from poor performance to excellent performance. Participants were then told that they would not receive their scores because the graduate student was unavailable at the time, thus creating a scenario in which participants believed that they would not receive feedback. Interviewers and applicants were then given a series of questions to answer revolving around their expectations for their partner's performance or their performance, respectively. Researchers then gave participants more questions to respond to, but ensured that the participants could hear a conversation outside of the room that explained that the graduate student would be able to judge the interviews. This created

a feedback scenario in which the researchers had participants respond again to the first set of questions that they had received. The researchers found that the participants that were predicting the outcome for their friend did not lower their expectations when the feedback was near, while participants that were predicting the scores for themselves lowered their expectations from when there would be no feedback to when feedback was near. This corroborates the findings from van Dijk et al. (2003) that people brace when the outcome is self-relevant, and close to being revealed.

In another study examining how expectations might change, Shepperd et al. (1996) had college seniors estimate what their starting salary would be after finishing college. The participant's estimations were taken at two different time points with the second one closer to graduation. The researchers found that the seniors became more conservative in their estimates of their starting salary at the second time point, or as graduation neared. This study further supports the finding that expectations become more realistic through bracing in anticipation of a nearing outcome.

A study published by Sweeny and Shepperd (2007) looked to understand more about when people brace, and if people brace sensibly. They define bracing sensibly as bracing more for rare negative outcomes rather than common negative outcomes. A rare negative outcome describes an outcome that usually turns out well for the individual, or where the possibility of a negative outcome is slim. For example, a student in class may brace sensibly when anticipating being asked by a teacher to answer a question for the class. The student is bracing for the unlikely event of being the student that the teacher chooses to answer a question, but they are bracing to ensure that they are not surprised if the teacher ends up calling on them. People tend to brace more for rare negative outcomes because it would be surprising to them if it were to

occur, and it allows them to either be correct in their estimations (if the unlikely event occurs), or to not have to experience the negative outcome at all. Sweeney and Shepperd (2007) found that participants were more pessimistic for rare events as compared to common events which validates the concept of bracing sensibly. The idea of bracing sensibly suggests that people may alter their expectations according to what they realistically believe their chances are of getting the desired outcome (Sweeney and Shepperd, 2007). They also found that participants did not brace when the event was perceived as happening to someone else. This concurs prior research that suggests that bracing occurs when the information is self-relevant (Van Dijk et al., 2003). This research establishes the idea that expectations can change overtime through bracing or sobering up, but there are unanswered questions regarding other ways to change expectations to mitigate disappointment.

Current Study

Prior research suggests that expectations influence disappointment following an undesirable outcome. It is also understood that people tend to lower their expectations as an attempt to reduce subsequent disappointment. However, there has been no research to test whether expectations can be actively changed through advice to lower expectations in preparation for a potentially undesirable outcome in order to lower their subsequent disappointment.

As described earlier, there are many situations where people might receive the advice to lower their expectations. For example, you might be a big sports fan, and your favorite team is in the championship. You may hear people advise you to not get your hopes up to try to mitigate any disappointment you may feel if your team loses. The tactic of giving advice to lower

expectations is often well-intentioned, but no research has been done to explore its effectiveness on reducing disappointment.

We conducted this experiment to test the hypothesis that advice to lower expectations would reduce post-outcome disappointment. To test this, participants were told that they would have a small chance of winning one of two \$100 Amazon gift cards. Participants were randomly assigned to either the condition to receive advice to lower their expectations and “not get their hopes up”, or they were assigned to the condition to not receive any advice. After learning that they did not win the gift card, participants were then asked how disappointed they were that they lost. Our hypothesis was that the participants who receive advice to lower their expectations would report lower disappointment following an undesirable outcome compared to participants that did not receive advice.

Method

Participants

Participants were 169 undergraduate students from a southeastern university. Of the participants, 44 were men (26.0%), 124 were women (73.4%), 1 was nonbinary (0.6%). The average age of participants was 19.64 years of age ($SD = 2.22$). All participants were compensated with course credit for their participation.

Design and Procedure

In this online survey, participants were first shown an informed consent document explaining the risks and benefits of participating in the study. After agreeing to participate in the study, participants were told that they had a chance to win one of two \$100 Amazon gift cards. After participants were told about the possibility of winning a gift card, they completed an unrelated study before responding to the questions from this study. After completing the

unrelated study, participants were given the Life Orientation Test - Revised (LOT-R; Scheier et al., 1994). The LOT-R is a measure of dispositional optimism and asks participants to indicate their agreement with the different statements (e.g., “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best) on a five-point scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree).

Participants were then told that after answering a few more questions, they would find out if they won a gift card. Participants were asked about their perceived likelihood of winning a gift card and recorded their responses on a seven-point response scale (1= not at all likely, to 7=extremely likely). They were then asked how optimistic they were that they will win a gift card, how happy they would be if they were to win, and responded to those questions on a seven-point scale (1 = not at all, to 7 = extremely). We then asked participants how disappointed they would be if they did not win a gift card, to which they responded on a seven-point response scale (1= not at all, to 7= extremely). Participants were then asked to write down some things they would like to purchase if they were to win the gift card. They were given a free-response box to respond to the question.

Next, the participants were reminded that they would find out if they were one of two winners of a \$100 amazon gift card on the next screen. At this point, participants were randomly assigned to either the advice condition where they received advice to “please make sure you are realistic in your expectations and don’t get your hopes up too high,” or in the condition where they did not receive any advice. Following this screen, we implemented a loading screen that showed a loading dial for 2-seconds to ensure the participant felt as though they were finding out the results live, and that their win or loss was not premeditated. The two winners were decided through random assignment. Each participant was given a randomly assigned number from 1 to 400. If the randomly generated winning number happened to be the number 1, that participant

won the gift card. If the participants' number was not 1, they did not win the gift card. If the participant won, they were asked for their email address as a way to receive the gift card. If the participant had not won, they continued to answer the rest of the survey questions.

Participants were then told that they had either won or did not win the gift card. The participants who did not win a gift card were told that they were not one of the randomly selected people to win a gift card. Participants were then asked how disappointed they were now that they knew that they did not win, and they responded on a seven-point scale (1= not at all disappointed, to 7= extremely disappointed). Participants were then given a modified version of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS, Watson et al., 1988). The PANAS contains a series of questions measuring positive and negative affect participants are experiencing at that moment, in which they recorded their responses on a five-point scale (1= not at all, 5= extremely). Participants were then asked to reflect back on their expectations and respond regarding how realistic their initial expectations were. Participants responded on a seven-point scale (1= not at all realistic, 7= extremely realistic). Participants were then asked their age and their gender, debriefed, and given credit for their participation.

Results

In order to test whether advice to reduce expectations can influence disappointment after a disappointing outcome, we compared participants' pre-outcome estimates of how disappointed they thought they would be if they did not win the gift card with how disappointed they actually felt after learning they did not win the gift card (i.e., their post-outcome disappointment). We tested the hypothesis that participants in the advice and no advice conditions would have similar pre-outcome expectations, but participants' post-outcome disappointment would be higher in the

no advice condition relative to the advice condition. Specifically, we predicted there would be a time X advice interaction.

To test the hypothesis, we conducted a 2 (time: pre-outcome vs. post-outcome) X 2 (advice: advice vs. no advice) analysis of variance on participants' average judgments of their disappointment (see Figure 1). This analysis revealed a main effect of time on disappointment, $F(1, 167) = 4.04, p = .046$; participants' actual disappointment after learning they did not win the gift card was higher than what they expected their disappointment to be when making the judgment before learning the outcome. There was not a main effect of advice on disappointment, $F(1, 167) = .12, p = .733$. Most importantly, there was not a significant interaction, $F(1, 167) = .02, p = .889$. This does not support my hypothesis, and shows that advice to lower one's expectations does not have an impact on disappointment following an undesirable outcome.

Discussion

Advice to lower expectations is often given under the assumption that it is effective in mitigating disappointment if a negative outcome occurs. The intention of this study was to see if that assumption carries any weight, specifically, to test whether there is a method to successfully curb disappointment that an individual may experience after an undesirable outcome. We hypothesized that participants who received advice to lower their expectations would report less disappointment following an undesirable outcome. The results show that following the undesirable outcome of not winning a gift card, there was no difference in reported disappointment between the participants who received advice to not get their hopes up and the participants who did not receive advice. This suggests that the advice to lower expectations did not impact disappointment. This is contrary to our hypothesis that the participants that received advice would report lower measures of disappointment following an undesirable outcome. We

did find that participants anticipated that they would experience less disappointment than they reported they felt after learning they did not win the gift card, although this effect did not differ between participants who received advice to lower their expectations and participants who did not receive advice.

There are a number of possible explanations for why the advice did not impact participants' levels of disappointment. One possible explanation, for example, has to do with the source of the advice. Participants received the advice in the form of a bolded line within the survey. In the real world, advice to "not get your hopes up" is often given by someone that is perceived to have the individuals best interest in mind, as it is normally done with the intent of potentially helping the individual by mitigating disappointment that they may feel if the outcome were to not be ideal. It is possible that advice to lower expectations could be effective if that advice had been given by a friend or someone important in the participant's life.

Another explanation for our results could be that the advice was not substantial enough. It is possible that the single line of advice we provided was not enough, but if we had provided either a longer description of advice, or a further explanation about why it would be good to lower their expectations, that advice would be more effective for participants. In a real-world context, it is likely that people give additional information after giving advice to not get one's hopes up. For example, the advice giver might talk about the likelihood of the negative outcome and the desire to brace against potential disappointment.

It is also possible that participants simply did not pay attention to the advice. The advice line was obvious to a certain extent, but it is difficult to ensure that the participant had fully read it and took it into account. If participants did not read the advice, then they could not have taken it into consideration for it to be able to have an impact on their expectations.

Another possible explanation has to do with the relatively low disappointment levels experienced by the participants. On average, participants' disappointment was less than a 2.5 on the 1-to-7-point scale. This suggests that a very small possibility of winning a \$100 gift card was not desirable enough for participants to be largely disappointed after losing it. In other words, perhaps the participants were already fairly realistic in their expectations. Therefore, advice to not get their hopes up had no effect because participants already did not have their hopes up.

It is also worth noting that some of the research that highlights expectations being linked to disappointment are examined in performance-based contexts where people have some control over the outcomes (e.g., a student taking an exam). The effects of advice could be different if we were to look at it under the scope of a performance-based outcome, as compared to the current context in which participants had no control over whether they won the gift card or not.

Our study does have limitations, one being the delivery method. Given that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it had to be conducted online. This could have affected the data and does not give us the full picture as to how this situation would play out realistically. The structure of the study being conducted online could have affected the data because it is not representative of a real-world scenario that would usually occur in person. The desirability of the gift card may have been affected by this. Participants may have felt more desire to win the gift card if it had been tangible, or they may have felt as if they had a better chance of winning a gift card if it was not conducted virtually. We attempted to address the assumption that the computer had automatically decided if they had won the gift card by including a loading screen before presenting the outcome that they had loss. Though we attempted to mitigate any consequences of this, the loading screen may not have been sufficient enough to ensure that the participant believed that they actually had a chance to win. We also

were unable to give the advice in a way that could replicate how an individual may receive advice in person (i.e., within a conversation). This could have affected the way the participants who received the advice perceived and considered that advice while setting their expectations. It is possible that the advice needed to be given in a conversational way to carry the same effect that it does in the real world.

This is the first study that explores the influence of advice to lower expectations on disappointment, and an interesting future direction would be to look at it in the context of a performance-based outcome. I think that this will allow researchers to see the impact of advice to lower expectations of achievement-based scenarios such as expectations for getting a job after a job interview, or doing well on your SAT exam. The goal would be to see if advice to lower your expectations can successfully mitigate any disappointment following an outcome other than ideal when the outcome holds personal importance to the individual. Future research should also be aimed to replicate the experience of advice through an in-person interaction. This could help mitigate any limitations that arose from this study being conducted online. Future research could also look at the variance of influence of advice depending on the person giving the advice. This study only looks at advice given as a written line, but with future research looking into the impact of a person physically giving advice might yield different results.

With previous research finding that expectations are not static, and that there are circumstances in which we tend to lower our own expectations to try and reduce any disappointment, the assumption that advice to lower expectations would mitigate disappointment was warranted. However, the current study's findings do not support this assumption. As previously mentioned, this study was the first to explore the influence of advice to lower expectations on disappointment, and additional research is needed to further understand the

relationship and its circumstances. The limitations of the current study may be addressed in future studies to paint a better picture of the effectiveness of advice to lower expectations disappointment.

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Figure 1

Participants' measures of anticipated disappointment before, and actual disappointment after finding out that they had not won, split by the advice and no advice condition.

