

Living With Disappointment: How to Choose Powerful Outcomes in the Face of Unmet Expectations

by M. Parker Anderson

The everyday life

“Just get over it” seems to be a constant refrain to anyone living with a disappointment. We think or say “just get over it,” as if somehow these words in some way will provide comfort or support. It is as if we have forgotten how eerily unhelpful these very words can be when we experience our own disappointments. I bristle at the thought that anyone should say “just get over something” when they barely know the extent of what is going on. It sounds selfish, as though they want me to move on so they can feel more comfortable.

“Just get over being fired,” or “just get over breaking up with your loved one,” or “just get over the newcomer being promoted instead of you,” or “just get over my being late again, or calling in sick one more time this month.” No matter who is facing the disappointment, it seems that what is expected is for them to “get over it,” put it behind them, and move on to the next event in life. We want to wipe the slate clean and start over again. What are we really supposed to do when we struggle with unmet expectations?

When we have an expectation that isn't met this provokes a feeling of disappointment. We are disappointed when we are not invited to a party, or when we were not the one promoted into a new position, or the children in our classroom won't meet the standards, or when salaries remain low, or when our peers and colleagues disrespect us. We have an expectation that is not met, and we tend to think that it is “all about us.” “I wasn't invited to the party because I am the new kid on the block,” “I wasn't promoted because they weren't going to hire me anyhow,” “I was given all the children who weren't ready to learn.” The list goes on. The disappointment is personalized which leads us into a victim

mentality: “I'm not worthy” bringing on defeat symptoms and attitudes. What does one do with this other than spiral further into a place of despair and isolation? Perhaps our own internal voice will speak up and say “just get over it.” However, it is not that easy. We are getting over more than the disappointment; we now have to get over feelings and attitudes that may have influenced our lives for years.

As sure as we live, disappointments will show up in our lives. Sometimes they may be small, almost petty or seemingly trivial; and at other times they loom large, heartfelt, sometimes extremely painful, at least to our way of thinking. We can find ourselves in a place of being and feeling inconsolable. Regardless of how disappointments occur, they can affect us at the core of our being. Then when we are told to “just get over it,” the very phrase itself contributes to our feelings of disappointment.

Confronting personal battles

When confronted with disappointment it can feel like our very own personal battle, yet at the same time it can feel like the forces of evil are just coming down upon us. We can get caught in the duality feeling like “it is me against the world” or “me against me” that is in conflict. In the first instance of



M. Parker Anderson is a professional life coach who specializes in educational leadership coaching. She works with people and teams who find themselves at a crossroads in life and who want to move from a place of being stuck into a place of creating powerful results for themselves and others. Parker is bilingual and has a background in early childhood special education. She is a member of the International Coach Federation (ICF), a team leader for International Programs and Projects with the International Association of Coaches (IAC), and she also serves as an advisory board member for the IAC Board of Directors. Parker Anderson is president and founder of The Anderson Advantage Group which is based in Washington, DC. For more information, go to www.taagroup.org or to contact Parker directly please call (202) 726-3037 or e-mail Parker@taagroup.org.

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me against the world, there is a blaming of everyone, external to the situation, for all that has gone wrong. In the second instance of the me against me conflict, there is a feeling of being betrayed by your greatest and closest ally, yourself. Either way it feels as though the choices made lead us down a path of no return, or into despair and dissatisfaction. We sort of spiral downward and the spiraling can just keep getting tighter and tighter and deeper and deeper. All of which doesn't help us to move beyond the battle of self confrontation.

Disappointment is so highly personal. It becomes a very personal journey that often has to be faced alone. It is a battle where you can feel both so alone and so discouraged, all at the same time. Disappointment can make us feel as though our world has stopped. We can find that we don't know even what to do or where to turn. We can hardly think about "getting over it" because we are so caught up in being right in the middle of it.

We generally don't think or speak about past disappointments. We know we had them, we suffered through them; occasionally, we are even ashamed to share our disappointments. Actually, we may choose not even to think about our disappointments in wanting the feeling of hurt that accompanies disappointment to just disappear. Many of us have been told even when we do begin to try and share our disappointment over one thing or another, "no big deal," "get on with your life," and "just let it go." People might ask, "Why don't you just act like it didn't happen?" All of this shifts our focus from the unmet expectation that has led to the disappointment.

Releasing the old ways

Yes, disappointments can affect us in a place that is so personal, so private, that we can't even talk to others. Sometimes we can hardly hear our own self think through the situation logically. Hearing "just get over it" or "no big deal" moves us further into a place of trying to silence the hurt, the pain, and the discomfort. We are left to face our personal battles alone.

People say things because they want to be helpful and supportive. They may not realize how it may direct us downward and into burying our feelings. Inevitably, and all of us know this already, when we bury our feelings this can lead to frustration and despair. It also serves to reinforce

lifelong attitudes and beliefs of "I'm not good enough," "I'm undeserving," or "Woe is me," "Poor me."

Sometimes when people say things to support us through disappointment they are successful; but too often comments sound like judgments or advice that doesn't help in this particular instance. For example, there is the lady who shares

To move toward choosing powerfully in the face of unmet expectations, several specific steps should be considered:

■ **Get over "getting over it"** — There is absolutely nothing that you need to do to "just get over" the disappointment. Allow the disappointment to just be; and use it as an opportunity to learn about yourself, your desires, and your expectations. Ask questions, such as "Why am I disappointed?" or "What was the expectation that I had or expected?" When you hear your own silent voice or the voices of others echo the refrain "just get over it" gently acknowledge that it is meant to be helpful and that it is just one more contribution to your moving toward excellence.

■ **Face it your way** — Disappointments are uniquely personal, so create an atmosphere that will allow you to nurture your own needs. Some may like to be still, while others may want to talk. The caution here is to make sure that your silence is not supporting a pity party or that your sharing is not a veiled attempt to make others wrong. In either case there is the possibility of playing victim and that is not helpful.

■ **Focus on breathing** — The simple act of inhaling and exhaling will often do you much more good than any other possible remedy available. Remember that disappointments emerge from unmet expectations. They do not represent an indictment upon who you are or your value to society. It is good to remember that expectations denied are not desires unmet, because with time and patience what you really may have wanted will come into being. When you focus on the breathing, it becomes much easier to find that place to just be. Breathing allows you to be patient, to be still, to be loved.

■ **Look for the good** — So often, we can look at our disappointments as being a personal failure, a loss, a missed opportunity. On the contrary, they often provide us with a perfect opportunity to grow and develop. Our disappointments give us a chance to examine our personal contributions. We get to explore whether there is something more we could have done differently, or maybe even to learn that there is nothing that we should or could have done differently. Our task is to look for the good even inside of being disappointed.

■ **Create a new culture** — Disappointments will come and disappointments will go, and more than likely they will come back again. The question is not so much what to do when we are living with disappointments, but more how do we choose to live otherwise. We can break the cycle of living inside of a culture of disappointment. It becomes up to us to create a new culture. We can create a culture of joy and harmony for our lives and the lives of others as we move toward choosing powerful outcomes when our expectations are not met.

her great disappointment in her husband for never being willing to change his schedule to accommodate hers. Her good friend says in an effort to be supportive, "Well if he really loved you he would." In another example, a woman says, "I didn't get chosen for the new director's job"; and her colleague answers by saying, "They were never going to pick you anyway." In both examples the comments were shared to be supportive but really infuse a totally new and potentially different agenda into the conversation. In both instances the responses can perpetuate the spiraling downward feeling of the person who shared the disappointment.

What we need to do is find a place and a space to really allow ourselves, grant ourselves permission, to "go through" the disappointment. It is inside of this space of going through the disappointment that wonderful tools for learning and unlearning habitual patterns take place. It is in going through disappointments that we learn to build the muscle that can support us as we go through future disappointments. It is also in going through disappointments that we can learn how to break out of some downward spiraling that occurs when disappointment lands in our world.

Making powerful choices

We each have had our share of disappointments; some of us even more than others. Each and every day we can be confronted with not getting something we wanted or anticipated. When this happens, we are often left disappointed. We must somehow manage to move through each disappointment. We do this not as in pushing the loss or the sorrow away or acting like "Girl, I don't care that I didn't get that raise." These are not reasonable options for us to consider.

The purpose here is to generate an ongoing conversation about disappointments. We know already that most of us do not even want to talk about disappointments. Nonetheless, generating conversations about disappointments, including how we personally handle them, where are we in hiding our own disappointments, how we respond to others when they are disappointed, help us to re-learn effective ways to go through our disappointments rather than just getting over them. Beginning to examine our personal patterns in going through disappointments, would open us to have powerful conversations in the workplace around how disappointments are handled there. We would be speaking to what is working and not working within the work environment, from a place of power and possibility for creating change. Our listening would be attuned to hearing from a place of choice. A supervisor can say to an employee for example, "I am disappointed that you didn't make arrangements for all children on the field trip," and the employee could hear it from a place of high expectations being required and not being met. The conversation between the two changes substantially. Disappointment allows an opportunity to share both the feeling and the expectation and this becomes a powerful learning opportunity within the workplace.

Our goal here has been to expand your thinking and understanding around disappointments and to invite you to reflect on ways that you can influence young children and others in moving through their disappointments rather than just getting over them. What a difference it could make potentially on children if their teachers supported them in just being with their disappointments, however large or small.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Reflecting on Disappointment: Anderson talks about the very personal and individual ways in which we each react to disappointment and about changing the way we respond in order to create an opportunity to learn about yourself, your desires, and your expectations. Encourage teachers to journal about this topic as a personal learning experience.

A Discussion About Responding to Disappointments: Examining our personal and organizational responses to disappointments leads, according to Anderson, to an opportunity to generate a discussion about disappointments that might lead to change within individuals and/or organizations. Think of ways to get this discussion started at both the individual and organizational level. Begin the discussion by looking at how your organization responds to organizational disappointments. It will then undoubtedly lead to exploring personal responses. With facilitation, it can continue to a candid discussion of the five strategies for changing our responses to disappointment.