

Wynne Leon (00:01)

As a kid, I had many schemes and ideas that involved my mom buying me something. One of the things I lobbied for excessively was a pair of shoes that had a pocket built so that you could carry things. I vividly remember they were called kangaroo shoes, and even though you could only carry things no bigger than a key, and I didn't need to carry a key at age 10, I was sure I needed those shoes. My mom often responded with something that I now see like a riddle. She'd say,

If you press me to answer now, my answer will be no. So it was a maybe, but only if I backed off. As a kid, I had no idea what to do in that situation. Let's be real, I don't really have an idea as an adult either. In the case where I'm trying something, how do I deal with my expectations? And what happens to them as I wait? Do they grow bigger or smaller? Fortunately, our spiritual

traditions address the problem of expectations as does psychology and research. In Christianity, it's bowing to God's will. In Buddhism, it's non-attachment. In her book *Atlas of the Heart*, researcher and author, Brene Brown, talks about the feeling of disappointment. She defines it as, disappointment is unmet expectations. The more significant the expectations, the more significant the disappointment.

And she explains that often we both have named and unnamed expectations. Since disappointment is one of the most frequently experienced emotions, according to her research, it's a significant inhibitor to trying. As Brene sums up, there are too many people in the world today who decided to live disappointed rather than risk feeling disappointed.

So with that backdrop, my case study for this particular aspect of the life of TRY is bacteriologist and inventor of penicillin, Alexander Fleming.

About 100 years ago, when Alexander Fleming did the research that led to penicillin, he wasn't searching for a miracle cure. He wasn't even trying to discover a new drug. In the late 1920s, Fleming was a bacteriologist at St. Mary's Hospital in London, deeply focused on a practical frustrating problem, how bacteria grow and how to stop them without harming human tissue.

His earlier experiences treating infected wounds during World War I had made him skeptical of harsh chemical antiseptics, which often damaged healthy tissue and still failed to stop infection. He wanted safer, more selective ways to fight bacteria. By 1928, Fleming was routinely culturing

bacteria.

the kind that cause boils, sore throats, and abscesses, to understand their behavior and test antibacterial substances in the lab. At the time, he was also working on influenza research using bacterial cultures as a part of broader studies on infection and immunity.

When Fleming left for a late summer holiday, he expected to return to his usual routine, sorting plates, discarding failures, and continuing his carefully planned experiments. Instead, he came back to something that looked on the surface like a ruined experiment. One of his Staphylococcus plates had been contaminated by mold. Normally, enough reason to throw it away. The outcome he was aiming for

Clean, controlled bacterial growth was gone. But Fleming noticed something odd. Around the mold was a clear bacteria free circle. The bacteria hadn't just been displaced, they'd stopped growing entirely near the mold. And instead of just throwing away the experiment because it didn't meet his expectations, he asked, why does this fail so differently than the others?

Fleming had already a long-standing interest in natural antibacterial substances.

He had previously discovered lysozyme an enzyme found in tears and mucus that breaks down a certain bacteria. He was prepared to see contamination not as noise, but information. He tested the mold. He diluted it. He observed that the mold secretions could inhibit bacterial growth even when weakened a hundred times over. Only later did he name the active substance penicillin. Crucially,

Fleming did not immediately grasp the full impact of what he'd found. He struggled to purify penicillin and publish it in a form others could use. For years, it remained a laboratory curiosity until other scientists took the work further. But the try, the moment of discovery only happened because Fleming was willing to let go of the experiment he planned and pay attention to the one that showed up. And from his example,

He shows that openness and curiosity are two great ways to let go of an attachment to an outcome.

from Brene Brown. There's research that shows that one way to minimize disappointment is to lower our expectations. True, optimism can sometimes lead to increased disappointment, and I believe these finds are accurate, but there is a middle path, a way to maintain expectations and stay optimistic that requires more courage and vulnerability. Examine

and express our expectations.

Cognitive scientist Maya Shankar has some powerful personal examples of letting go of outcomes. As a teenager, she was an aspiring concert violinist studying under Itzhak Perlman. One morning, she overstretched her hand and permanently damaged the tendons. That injury ended her dreams to pursue a path as a violinist. Instead, she became a cognitive scientist and has had an amazing and impactful career, studying

self-identity and connection, among other things. Maya suggests that another way we can manage disappointment, especially when it threatens our identity, is... You can still find your why in other places when the world takes away your what from you.

I think that everyone should ask themselves what is their why? What is the thing that lights them up? Maybe it's a desire to help people. Maybe it's desire to keep learning things.

In her example playing the violin, she found that she loved connecting on an emotional level with others. And she's been able to do that with her research book, roles in the Obama administration, podcast and more.

In another approach to the question of expectations and outcome, my mom has consistently quoted Romans 8:28 as being so helpful to her, especially in the wake of my dad's sudden death.

And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.

And that's where I finally landed when it comes to how to manage expectations that come with trying. A faith that trying will get me somewhere, even it isn't the destination I had in mind. That openness has made all the difference to helping me not press for the answer right away. So those are my takeaways from diving deep into how to manage our expectations and handle the disappointment that comes with trying. Be open and curious to what you learn.

even if it's not what you were looking for, like Alexander Fleming. Name your expectations from Brene Brown. Understand your why from Maya Shankar and have faith that trying will lead you somewhere. Which brings me back to my kangaroo shoes. My parents didn't buy them for me. But the funny thing is that I bought a different kind of kangaroo shoes when I was in my thirties. I developed

plantar fasciitis in my left foot and the doctor recommended this orthopedic tennis shoe that had a spring underneath the heel. I believe the theory was that the spring would take some of the pressure off, but it also made me feel like I was hopping like a kangaroo. The first time I tried to walk my dog while wearing these ridiculous and expensive shoes, I realized that if they alleviated the plantar fasciitis, it might only be because I broke my ankle trying to walk in them.

Not wanting to wear those shoes led me to finding on Amazon a \$20 splint to wear at night. And that eventually did solve the fasciitis every time it flares up. And I got there one step at a time. No pun intended, First, the doctor gave me a name for the pain in my heel. Secondly, I discovered what not to wear. And that helped me narrow down the search for what actually worked. Maybe that's taking a long way around.

But enjoying the twists and turns helps me to keep me motivated to keep trying.