Have you ever heard about how another couple does things in their relationship and thought—wow, that’s just not for me? For instance, some couples maintain separate checking accounts after marriage, yet many might consider this odd. Some walk in and out of the bathroom while the other person is using it, while others would feel this was a nightmare! And then there’s the issue of talking about the relationship with parents and friends—yea or nay?

Three Major Expectation Areas

These particular examples are all about the boundaries we set in relationships. According to relationship experts Donald Baucom and Norman Epstein, boundaries tend to be one of our three major relationship expectation areas—that is, the three big topics we tend to hold expectations about. The other two are investments in the relationship and control and power within the relationship.

Defined briefly, boundaries mark what is and isn’t acceptable behavior within a relationship. Investments are the time and effort we put into a relationship. And control and power are just what they sound like: the ability to make decisions and control the situation within a relationship.

So for instances, our expectations regarding boundaries might relate to:

- How we act when we get in a fight
- How we spend and divide our money
- Privacy and disclosure between the two of us
- And so on
And our expectations regarding investment may relate to:

- Who plans and executes time the two of you spend together as a couple
- Who does the “emotional work” of the relationship—checking in with the other partner about his or her feelings, etc.
- Who is “supposed to” create romance
- And so on

While expectations regarding control and power could be related to:

- Who sets the tone of interactions
- Who gets to make major decisions regarding activities, the home, parenting, vacations, etc.
- Who apologizes first
- And so on

Establishing an equilibrium between you and your spouse on these matters can be a tricky balancing act, and it’s part of why the first few years of marriage can often be hard. We need to figure out our own expectations in these areas and try to get them met, while also learning what our spouse’s expectations are and trying to meet those as well.

Meanwhile, those outside your relationship, such as parents and in-laws, will have expectations of you and your relationship too! And they may also behave in ways that trip your triggers regarding these issues.

**In Real Life**

When thinking about all these expectations and what they are, it’s often helpful to talk about them openly. But where to start? Here are five common practical examples of expectation areas that may trip couples up:

- **Time Spent Together**
How are you deciding what you do and enjoy together as a couple? Who and what influences these decisions? Note the power and control and investment issues here. If one person always plans, they may feel like the other isn’t investing enough. On the other hand, the other partner might also feel overly controlled.

- **Personal Needs and Interests**

How does each of you pursue your own interests and hobbies? Does someone’s hobby cost a lot of money, and if so, are power issues at play here?

- **Household Tasks**

This is a big one for many couples. Who does the work, and how is it divided? How did you decide about all this? One partner can easily feel like they are investing too much here. Control and power often come up too, whether it’s about how chores are done or who does them.

- **Money**

Are big purchases talked over between you? Does each of you get an “allowance”? Who decides about the budget? Boundaries can be a big issue here, as well as struggles over power and control.

- **Intimacy**

This can be a tricky but important one. If someone always feels they’re “in charge” of initiating intimacy, that may feel like they’re the one investing all the time. However, there are definitely boundaries to negotiate here as well. Communication is key!

- **Religion and Spirituality**
Each of you may have expectations about this based on family and personal background and traditions. Do those expectations match up? Are there discussions or beliefs you expect to impart or have that may not be the same from your spouse’s point of view? Boundaries alert!

Once you start thinking more deeply about feelings on these important subjects, you may discover that you have a lot to talk about with your spouse. This is great! Opening the conversation and discovering what you expect will help you avoid hidden landmines and work out clearer lines of communication. It may not always be easy to have these discussions, but it’s much better to talk about them than to leave them unsaid and struggle with the fall-out when someone is frustrated or disappointed.

For more on handling expectations in your marriage, check out “But I Wanted...”: The Five B’s of Managing Relationship Expectations (http://smartcouples.ifas.ufl.edu/married/communicating-with-your-partner/but-i-wanted-the-five-bs-of-managi/).

References: